

## **Etched into the landscape**

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We are sitting in the back of a bright white BMW convertible gunning its souped-up engine. The top is down and the punishing sun is only bearable because of the sea breeze. The driver's gold tooth gleams in the rearview mirror along with a flash of his royal blue T-shirt bearing the logo of the Dodgers, LA's baseball team.

But we are not in Los Angeles.

Even though the panoramic view from our hotel offers vistas of the American transplants of McDonald's, KFC and Holiday Inn Express nestled between the rolling green hills; even though we pass strip malls and the Beverly Hills hotel on our way to the crested waves of the Indian Ocean the next day; even though there are so many time-space-smashing markers of a North American urbanscape, we are not in California.

The driver pulls off his Detroit Pistons cap to wipe the sweat from his brow. He hails from Wentworth, a "coloured" area on the opposite side of the city where he and his fellow Beemer Boyz try and dissuade disenfranchised Wentworth youth from pursuing a life of crime and drugs by making a hobby of "spinning" and "drifting" refurbished BMWs instead. Now he graciously cranks up the volume and Old School Kwaito hits from fifteen years ago blare out across the hilly roads. The soundscape, like the urbanscape, similarly reminds us of and removes us from our physical location. Hip Hop-laced Boomshaka and TKZee's first House-influenced album accompany us on our journey to KwaMashu in a cavalcade of a dozen BMWs carrying journalists, TV presenters and media celebs towards the famous township to the north of this tropical city which, according to popular lore, boasts the highest number of people of Indian descent outside of the Indian subcontinent.

But when we get to KwaMashu we don't see any Indians except for the ones who came with us from Newlands where the TV studio is located. It seems every colonized city has a suburb named Newlands, the land being new for the colonizer of course and often described for posterity as "empty." Whole tracts of land were stolen like that and then renamed as New York, New Haven, New England, in an attempt to erase the indigenous past and plant little bits of England and the Netherlands and France in new places, in new lands. The jittery media types are anxious about leaving Newlands' power points behind. What if their devices should die of lack of electricity? How will they keep ping-ponging all those tweets into cyberspace?

But we have to go to KwaMashu to see the location where the action of a new Zulu-language telenovela is set. The jittery media types are here to cover the show's launch and that's why we're all heading to a humble township in this cavalcade of

German luxury vehicles - a clever media stunt but won't the poor people be insulted by this tacky display of conspicuous consumption, we wonder aloud? No. We are told that these *gutshetshes* are the most popular cars for township denizens even though most of them could never afford one. This is a country where 54% of the population lives beneath the poverty line but instead of resenting wealth, it seems everyone just wants a piece of the pie, including those barely nibbling at the crumbs. During the split second transition from one pulsating song to the other, I hear one curbside sitter say with a mixture of envy, desire, admiration: "Uzalo," the isiZulu vowels long and honeyed.

Why else would a dozen *gutshetshes* be winding their way through the township on a Wednesday afternoon except if we were there in connection with "Uzalo: Blood is Forever." According to the crew, this is the first time a TV show has ever been filmed in dozy KwaZulu-Natal. There have been other dramas set in KZN but there has never been a production of this size in Durban even though it is South Africa's third largest city.

It was named in 1835 after Sir Benjamin D'Urban who roamed far and wide over the British colonial empire from South America to South Africa where he became governor of the Cape Colony before being dismissed for his vicious treatment of the amaXhosa and amaZulu peoples. Despite this history and the half-hearted post-apartheid revival of the isiZulu name eThekweni, most locals call this place "Dehbun." It was once a multicultural melting pot but is currently a fractured landscape of class-based privilege and racialized poverty like the rest of the country. The ugly history of apartheid's separate and unequal segregation is etched into the landscape right here in KwaMashu - named for the Glasgow-born colonizer, Sir Marshall Campbell, who arrived on the western coast of South Africa in 1850 on a ship named *The Conquering Hero*. One hundred years later, the Group Areas Act would remove the Africans and Indians living side by side in the centrally-located Cato Manor/uMkhumbane to make way for more whites-only areas and separate the Indians and Africans into separate and unequal areas divided by buffer zones.

In 2015, sixty-five years later and twenty-one years after the end of apartheid, we don't see any white people or Indians roaming around because KwaMashu is still 99% black. So we're greeted with fervor by the jobless black youth hanging out on the street curb. As we walk through the sloping streets admiring the picturesque colors and the marvelous vistas - us privileged middle-class people - four young men loll on reed mats in the sparse shade of a stunted tree, picking at their teeth with stalks of grass. What else do they have to do on a Wednesday afternoon? The country's unemployment rate is estimated to be between 24.3 and 34.6% including those who have given up looking for jobs. But it is much higher than that, especially for township youth, and this has a lot to do with the ruling party's failure to create jobs.

And now the children in their school uniforms are returning from underfunded schools where they are receiving an education that may or may not open the doors

of opportunity for them in the future but no matter, they wave at us, friendly and excited. They jump up and down. Have they learned in school that this Place of Marshall they live in is the result of the 1950 Group Areas Act? Do they consider the relationship between their physical location warehoused on the northern edge of the city and the arrival of the European colonizers which in turn paved the way for this Americanized, globalized landscape of western world-class brands jostling incongruously with the modest houses of KwaMashu? Are they excited about Durban's 2022 bid to host the Commonwealth Games? Or do they suspect that the type of "world-class" infrastructure that will be built in conjunction with the games will not much benefit them just like World Cup 2010? Do they marvel at why there will likely be more new high-end developments in uMhlanga for wealthy tourists rather than sanitation, transport and new houses for people like them?

Who is looking out for people like them? Do they know, for example, that the two attractive young women in Uzalo's production team who speak private-school-accented English and mellifluous Zulu are their country's first daughters? President Zuma's offspring are not surrounded by security like Obama's daughters would be but the journalists and bloggers chirp the fact of their famous father like baby birds whenever they are near in case someone does not know. Their presence adds cultural cache to the telenovela that will feature KwaMashu, this renowned place, as one of the central characters.

I am interested in the choice to set this drama here, far away from most of the black elite who have decamped to the formerly whites-only suburbs where there is a growing black middle class increasingly staking a claim, myself very much included. Ironically the increasingly multiracial suburbs, though still largely white, are used in the sense of "Oh look how much has changed since the end of apartheid" as if this somehow eradicates the growing income inequality and increasing impoverishment of the black majority trapped in informal settlements and townships with poor infrastructure and limited opportunity. If under apartheid, 20% of the population owned 87% of the land leaving 13% for the black majority, now conservative estimates put the figure of white-owned private property at between 40 and 50%. This despite the fact that whites are now only 8% of the population.

But that other half has not been redistributed to the black majority still languishing in poverty. I pull out my book. I turn to page 95. There it is written, "Above all, we black people should all the time keep in mind that South Africa is our country and all of it belongs to us." These words were written in the early 1970s by a man using the pseudonym of Frank Talk.

But how his words have been forgotten. That morning as we waited in Jo'burg to board the plane to Durban, one of the black middle-class bloggers looked at my book and said offhandedly, "You know I never really experienced racism myself but the more I read, the more I see how bad it was." He passingly glanced at *I write what I like* by Steve Biko, the father of the Black Consciousness Movement who was clubbed to death by the apartheid security forces in 1977, eager to symbolically and

literally destroy his powerful brain. Now this all too-thin collection of his writings lay between us silently, a book that can talk a thousand truths despite his brief life tragically cut short at the age of thirty. But it is not read enough in this contemporary South Africa... Although I know there is a lot of amnesia, I am stunned by his comment. Is he one of the younger generation of black South Africans who like the “born-frees” seem to think that apartheid is something that happened “way back then” and now it’s all over?

Can he not see that everywhere in this splintered South African topography is evidence of a long line of thefts that began with the colonizers like D’Urban and Marshall and continue with the globalizers and President Zuma himself, accused of stealing tax payer money to build his homestead Nkandla, a medieval mansion deep in the heart of KwaZulu-Natal?

Is it not obvious that postcolonial African politics has consistently failed because it maintains that colonial paradigm of Winner-Takes-All, we will eat everything while the rest of you starve?

Can he not see that the politics of race and class are seared into the South African landscape like a brand?

Can he not see that every time we move from the Indian to the “Coloured” to the black township to the white suburb, we’re simultaneously reinscribing and being reinscribed by the spatial segregation that was racial apartheid and continues now as class apartheid?

Can he not see that every possible trajectory is constantly delimited by the politics of segregation that are so deeply etched into this landscape that they appear natural and God-given?