

## Eating Pap at Rosebank Mall amidst the Global Middle Class

**Melissa Tandiwe Myambo**

At first, no-one even knew where we could find pap in one of Jozi's largest malls. At least half a dozen shoppers of all shapes, sizes and skin color responded with apologetic head shakes when we inquired as to where we might find some steaming hot pap to fill our empty bellies. Finally, a saleslady in one of the shops overheard us and duly informed us that we could find it at the elegant Stuttafords department store in the not-yet-refurbished Rosebank Mall in Johannesburg's sylvan northern suburbs.

The story I recount here happened one day not so very long ago when me and my childhood friend Stacey tried to eat lunch at that cozy little restaurant nestled inside Stuttafords. Trying to order the everyday food of South Africa's majority population turned into a fiasco which revealed the invisible architecture of exclusion designed to keep the working classes in their places.

Overjoyed, we practically ran down The Zone's escalator and then rushed inside past the shops and then into Stuttafords passing the elegant clothes in silky fabrics with nary a glance. Our goal was clear and our object was in sight. We entered the little restaurant and half-fainted with hunger into a comfortable booth. At the table next to ours, some elderly white ladies with lilac hair were putting dollops of cream on crumbly scones. Our mouths watered but when the black waiter brought the menu, we didn't bother opening it. We just wanted pap which we had grown up eating although we call it sadza in Zimbabwe. In Malawi it is nsima, in Kenya it is ugali. Millions and millions of people eat it! However, the waiter informed us that if we wanted to order pap we would not be able to eat it *in* the restaurant.

"Sorry?" said Stacey, confused.

Apparently, pap was only served as a take-away.

I said, "Why? I want to eat my pap here."

The waiter shrugged in defeat.

"Sorry Madame, it's not allowed."

\*%?????%\*

Around the world in what are called “globalizing” or “emerging” cities, there is a flurry of construction everywhere you look. Delhi is beset by ditches at every turn; Cairo is a network of half-finished buildings topped by spiky steel rods jutting into the open sky. Cairo’s deserts are temporarily recreated in Beijing where whole neighborhoods are bulldozed into rubble to make way for so-called “modern/world-class/global” city development. But as usual, one woman’s development is another woman’s displacement.

As poor and working-class people are displaced to make room for upscale real estate, the resulting fast food chains selling greasy fries, cappuccino-serving cafes, craft beer-sipping hipster bars, gated residential communities boasting manicured green lawns and malls carrying designer brands manufacture a network of spaces I call transnational Cultural Time Zones. Today, these transnational CTZS are springing up like mushrooms in geographically-disparate cities but they are so similar in terms of consumption and lifestyle practices that they link us together in a singular globe where we can all wear skinny jeans and play with our iPads, spatially separated but culturally close together.

However, when I say “us” I mean that privileged percentage of the world population who sit around writing and reading essays like this one, surfing the inter webs on our tablets whilst slurping down a salted caramel latte with a red velvet cupcake. World-class Jo’burg as the city slogan goes does not mean working class Jo’burg. It’s all about us!

The thing of the thing is this. The lifestyle of the global middle class requires a global architecture of privilege to sustain itself. It is not only that the “right” cultural commodities need to be consumed such as the right technological accessories (the smartest smart phone), the “trending” books, films, music, memes, video clips and of course, food (and pap is not one of them) – but this must happen in “globally appropriate” spaces too. Hence this consumption often happens in those transnational Cultural Time Zones which are very “modern,” very “classy” and often air-conditioned.

But whilst the privileged middle class finds sanctuary in global malls, there are so many ways in which the local people, the everyday woman, is made to feel as if she doesn’t belong, not only unwelcome but unwanted.

\*%?????%\*

Exerting my middle class privilege, I insisted on seeing the manager. A well-dressed white man, old enough to have grown up during apartheid, came out of a back office. He met my irritation, fast turning into outrage, with unflappable courtesy. He simply explained to me that the patrons of Stuttafords’ upscale restaurant would not feel comfortable with the black masses in the form of the nearby Pick n’ Pay supermarket workers eating their pap – the local “traditional” fare - in such close proximity to their ingestion of fried Halloumi. So instead of excluding them through high prices, they were sold affordable food but could not eat it on the premises.

As a naturally bossy and self-righteous person, I gave him a whole lecture about this being the New South Africa in which apartheid-like social segregation was anathema but throughout he exuded an implacable calm, as if my rant required no different a response than the type of apologetic appeasement that a client whose soup was cold would receive. He betrayed no surprise that Stacey who is white and Jewish was also trying to eat pap and turned his expressionless customer service gaze towards her when she finally enquired where we could eat our pap if not in the restaurant. He said with aplomb, “May I suggest the car park, Ladies?”

So we went to the car park and sat in the blazing sun right on the hot filthy concrete next to a line of luxury vehicles because really who cares if the workers who keep the mall running don't have a nice place to eat their lunch? Or maybe in the new refurbished Rosebank, there is some secret, backroom cafeteria they are allowed to go to far from the mall's middle class patrons and their refined sensibilities?

In the New South Africa, discrimination on the basis of race is frowned upon but constantly overlooked are all the little ways that the working class is shut out. In a country in which public space was for so long racialized, it is now privatized by the existence of myriad invisible gates which make sure that the “lower” classes are barred access. Lack of access is intensified by the poor public transport options. Like so many other globalizing cities, Johannesburg's upscale locales are made for people with cars. As the built environment in so many cities is experiencing what is known by its advocates as urban renewal and its critics as gentrification, we should begin by asking if public space is even possible without truly functional public transport? But maybe the place to truly begin is to consider the definition of public.

Public is supposed to mean “open to common or general enjoyment” but in such class-divided societies, public does not mean open to the common man or his common food but wait! Malls are just pretending to be public space. They are in fact just private property in drag, providing the illusion of public space...

Zakes Mda's exquisite novel, *Ways of Dying*, set during the transition from apartheid to democracy, recounts the story of Toloki, a sometimes homeless, sometimes shanty-dwelling man considered a “squatter” or a “vagrant” by the patrons of the fancy stores where he liked to window shop, coveting new clothes which he could not afford. Just as in real life, the business owners would chase him away because, of course, he was “bad for business.” So he would only come to the city on public holidays when the shops were closed because then he could “strut like a king” because when it was empty, the “whole city belong[ed] to him.”

2015 marks 21 years since the so-called end of apartheid and the beginning of majority rule. But real democracy requires overcoming so much more than the obvious when there are invisible gates everywhere we look. Except we insist on not seeing them. Because we don't have to. We're too busy eating our fig and brie French toast.