Dispossessed Vigils
Mourning and Regeneration in Inner-City Johannesburg

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“Only the conscious horror of destruction creates the correct relationship with the dead: unity with them because we, like them, are the victims of the same condition and the same disappointed hope.”
– Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno.

“Home is an appropriated space. It does not exist objectively in reality. The notion of “home” is a fiction we create out of a need to belong. Home is a place where most people have never been to and never will arrive at.”
– Santu Mofokeng

“‘Good’ death not only promises a rebirth for the individual but also a renewal of the world of the living; while ‘bad’ death represents a loss of regenerative potential”
– Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry

ON A MORNING IN MARCH 2012, firemen searched the rubble of End Street for bodies. The sky was off-white, the fallen stones ashen brown. A palm tree stood over the waste, a funereal umbrella. A hushed crowd waited for the further revelations of this wreckage. Two bodies had already been disinterred: these young men were to begin their long journey, with their bags of clothes and few possessions, back to Zimbabwe.

The stones of the collapsed building were themselves itinerant: they had travelled from Scotland in the early 20th century to the end their journey burnt and broken, surrounded by barbed wire, on the eastern periphery of inner city Johannesburg. The Caledonian Hall was built in 1905 after the South African War by the Johannesburg Caledonian Society, a club of Scottish migrants that had organised militias to fight with the British.2 Gables had adorned the roof alongside an ornate and ostentatious turret. During the 20th century it had housed a theatre, a warehouse, a carpet business and a dance club from which drugged up middle-class whites had flowed into the streets of Doornfontein.

By the 2000s the Hall had become of the dark (isinyama) buildings of the city, as they are called in street language – decaying, without electricity, filled with detritus and stagnant water, and appropriated by the city’s poorest migrant populations attempting to lay claim to the city’s promise. Isinyama in isiZulu and isiNdebele can mean both the absence of light or misfortune. These buildings are sites in which city lights are subsumed. They are places in which terror and intimacy, sorrow and song, co-exist. They are inhabited by both the living and the dead.

These buildings are also called the bad buildings of Johannesburg by municipal policy makers. They are considered by state officials, the media and the middle classes as a blight on the city’s well being and economy: places of criminality and dirt. And yet they are home to thousands of migrants, both South African and from elsewhere, trying to find a decent and dignified life in the city.

I first visited Caledonian Hall several weeks before its collapse, after it had been wrecked by a fire. Its interior was blackened. Groups of men stood around the threshold guarding the path to its inner belly. During the fire a group of Rastafarians, who had a carpentry workshop in the building, built a large structure of beds onto which those fleeing the fire could leap to safety.

Various rumours circulated around the cause of the fire: one was that it was a xenophobic attack against the migrants who lived there; another that it was arson by the owner to claim insurance; and the more prosaic was that a woman had fallen asleep in her room and spilled her paraffin lamp.

A few nights before the fire a man had been found with his throat slit in one of the rooms. Neighbours had found his body when the smell became rank. One possible reason for the fire and the subsequent collapse and deaths, explained to me by several former residents, was that it been vengeance for the murder carried out by the murdered man’s ghost. A related theory had been that the man’s Venda relatives had caused the fire through magic, or muthi, to avenge their relative’s loss.

The murdered man, whom I shall call Ezekiel, had lived in the building only a few month. Ezekiel had been evicted from a nearby building, known as Chambers, only weeks prior to his death. He had lived with the evictees on the street for a while, before finding shelter in the Hall which was to be his last dwelling.

In the early hours of a morning in January 2012, the Red Ants, an infamous private security company adorned in red gear and armed with batons and whips, had raided the building Chambers, another of Doornfontein’s dark buildings, forcing its residents onto the street. The eviction came only a month after the Constitutional Court had ruled that evictions, even by private owners, could not be carried out unless the City ensured against homelessness. Yet, in-fighting in the building had led to its residents losing their legal representation.  

I witnessed the aftermath of the eviction. As I arrived groups were stripping their mattresses so they could sell the wire – many had been evicted before and this was one more displacement. Mattress fluff puffed like pollen through air, failing to seed in the infertile paving. Groups huddled around coal stoves surrounded by buckets and bags wondering about their futures. A security guard in a Father Christmas hat wandered off at the end of his shift. A gasping woman in a Springbok rugby t-shirt looked for her asthma pump and children fought and played in the streets. A man sat on the paving in furious tears threatening to go and rob somebody.

Families created rooms made of mattresses in the streets, moved into abandoned cars, and waited for the coming summer rains. A few days after the eviction the Metro police came with a municipal truck and carted off many of the group’s remaining possessions, including blankets and mattresses. Those who had remained on the street scattered to other unlawfully occupied buildings, or dark buildings in the area, including The Caledonian Hall.

Life for many residents in the inner-city is characterised by long periods of waiting and searching for work or housing, punctuated by moments of crisis that incite new dispossession and journeys. The murdered man, the alleged spectral arsonist, had been among those on the pavement, though his story of dispossession was not to continue much longer. He was to leave one haunted place to haunt another: Chambers, as I will discuss below, was also a haunted place, with its own histories of dispossession and violence.

After the fire at The Caledonian Hall many of its residents found themselves homeless again. Some continued to shelter in the burnt enclave. Others set to work on a project that would bring renewed destruction: some of the young men in the building began recycling the inner skeleton of the building. They piled floor-high steel beams on small steel trolleys rolling them off to nearby recycling yards where they could get nearly R1,000 for the steel. They were to extract from the city what the city had stolen from them. The walls began to sway and eventually the structure imploded.

3. I have documented the social and legal history of Chambers in an article under peer review at the time of writing, entitled “Removing the Blind: Urban Regeneration, Territorialized Stigma and Divergent Dispossession”
Dispossessed Vigils
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I met one of the men who had been taking the beams, whom I will call Samuel, and who had been living inside the building. After the Hall collapsed, I was sitting in the End Street Park, a block away, when an unknown man came up to me. Samuel wore a grey jacket and green hat and torn sneakers. He looked ill and spoke quietly and slowly as if through language he could reconstruct a demolished world. He did not know who I was – I was merely a figure from outside the borders of his speech and thoughts – but he asked if he could tell me his story.

Samuel was from the Eastern Cape. He had wanted to be an artist and had come to the city to be trained. He believed in reincarnation – his own idea of regeneration – and claimed to once have reproduced a Picasso painting without ever having seen it. In the city he worked several jobs, including one at the Emperor’s Palace, a casino near the airport. He had an eight-year-old child in the Eastern Cape: “All the work I do is for him,” he said, “I do nothing for myself.” Eventually he found himself jobless and homeless.

Samuel then moved into the Caledonian Hall. It was called the Green House by its residents because its olive green walls. He paid R5 per night to an illegal landlord to share a room, and lived from money collected from recycling. The Hall was a space of shelter, but also of terror. There was den in the building called the Burma Room from where mandrax and heroin were sold. Knife fights often broke out. The basement, according to Samuel, was flooded and there were rumours that newly born children, aborted foetuses and bodies were thrown into the water. It was said that the building was haunted by the ghost of a white girl, who had been killed when the hall was a dance club. These impressions of The Caledonian Hall are those of a man in deep distress perhaps mingling memory, fantasy and trauma, but they were echoed by others. Throughout the city I’ve found stories of violence and trauma alongside stories of haunting.

After the fire, Samuel had remained sleeping inside Caledonian Hall, huddled beside a friend. One night a rock fall had killed the friend sleeping next to him. Then, a few days after I had first met Samuel, the building collapsed again, killing two young men who had been trying to remove a remaining beam. Samuel had been inside the building helping them when a wall fell. He had escaped with a large gash on his head. I asked him why he returned to the building and he replied, that in addition to needing money, “When it is your time, you must go. God decides.”

It is in these moments that “God’s time” is evoked. “God’s Time” conveys not simply a religious fatalism, but an acknowledgement that loss, dislocation and death might come at any moment. It is about faith in a higher being and also reveals a common experience of life in the city, where deportation, eviction, infrastructural collapse can come suddenly. Survival in the city is as much about good fortune as about economics. After the building had collapsed, some of the young Rastafarian carpenters came to me and asked me to take their photographs saluting the dead: “We are the survivors”, they said.

The journeys of Samuel and Ezekiel are among those easily forgotten. They are stories of continual dislocation. Samuel had not painted or drawn for a while, lacking materials and space. His inability to paint is perhaps a motif for so many lives the city – it becomes a site that subsumes visions.

The story of Caledonian Hall too, like so many spaces in Johannesburg, is a story of continual renewal and inhabitation, but also a reminder of the imminent possibility of death and presence of death in the city. It is a place where the failed visions of a future were recycled with catastrophic consequences. As the city’s government, along with its private sector partners, push the rhetoric of urban regeneration, we might pause a moment to reflect the term regeneration – its etymological roots are to “create again”, inferring both reclamation and renewal. But what is being reclaimed and what is being born?

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4. Oxford Dictionary
The city of Johannesburg emerged in 1886 as a vast mining settlement in the area of Doornfontein; End Street marked its eastern periphery. The subsequent century elicited the massive and rapacious transformation of the settlement into a vast, modern metropolis ringed with highways and mine-dumps.

Throughout its history Johannesburg has undergone successive periods of intense migration and often brutal attempts to control its population. The first mass slum clearances in 1904 involved burning down the location of Indian labour in the city, supposedly justified by the threat of bubonic plague. The 1923 Natives (Urban Areas) Act regulated black migration and residency in Johannesburg, laying the basis for Apartheid-era urban segregation. Following the Act, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, mass clearances of urban slums and the evictions of black residents were the norm. They were removed to Orlando in what was later to become the township of Soweto. The 1950s saw the mass removals of black communities in Sophiatown in the northwest of the city, and again in the 1970s there were municipal clearances in Doornfontein. The city has gone through phases of intense construction followed by periods of decay and intense inward migration followed violent evictions and exclusions.\(^5\)

During the Apartheid years, the inner city was the centre of White commerce: large office blocks and luxury hotels created the skyline. However, in the 1980s, as racial segregation began to breakdown, the character of the city became more mixed and informal. In the immediate post-Apartheid era, the old industries, in particular the textile industry, declined and the city experienced a flight of capital investment leading to many abandoned and unused buildings – the bad buildings of the inner city: buildings like Chambers and Caledonian Hall.

The response of the City of Johannesburg (COJ) to the transformations and crises of the inner city has been to look to the private sector for solutions: a series of urban regeneration policies have been founded on the assumption, one might say myth, of regeneration based on market logics. The COJ’s website claims that “The goal of the City government’s Inner City Regeneration Strategy is to raise and sustain private investment in the inner city, leading to a rise in property values.” It views the bad buildings of the inner-city as “sinkholes” that discourage inner-city investment. In the language of city policymakers, the lives of those living in these places are erased; they are reduced to an economic blight, sites of criminality and waste, and sinkholes of economic value.

The inner city of Johannesburg is gradually being transformed through speculative capital investment. Former slums are being converted into formal housing. It is misleading to see these developments as driven primarily by middle-class developments, which have promoted loft-style living targeted at the so-called creative class and encroached the poorer areas of the inner city. The bulk of residential investment has been driven by providing so-called affordable housing catering to relatively low-income groups. Thousands of units in this end of the market have been created, mainly by the private sector, but also through public-private partnerships. These buildings are large-scale apartment blocks, often protected with fingerprint security and requiring identification to enter. However, there is a chronic shortage of decent formal accommodation for households earning below R3200 a month, which include, among others, informal traders, cleaners, sub-contracted workers, the unemployed and beggars – the majority of those living in the bad buildings.

The paradox of these developments is that securing lower cost housing in the city requires the further displacement and dispossession of thousands living in precarious positions. The residents of Chambers were, ironically, evicted to make way for a low-cost housing development built by a company called the Affordable Housing Company and funded by the Agence Française de Developement.

Representations of Johannesburg, in the mainstream media and in the rhetoric of urban policy, have been schizophrenic: One perspective, as discussed, is a view of the city as an apocalyptic space filled with violence, crime and dirt: a no-go area. In contrast is a celebratory vision of urban regeneration: the city as a wellspring of potential, vibrant, full of life and opportunity. Mainstream and contemporary visions of the city vacillate between these two perspectives, which in fact have an affinity: they share the myth of collapse and ruin, in contrast to which urban regeneration brings new life into the city. Waste violence and decay are a kind of ground zero for reconstruction.

These views erase the violence of regeneration policies themselves: the displacements, evictions, and further exclusions necessary to secure higher real estate values. More than this, they erase local histories and memory in the march towards urban transformation. They occlude the ways in which residents of the inner city, many living on the margins of the law, create order and seek security under conditions of...
adversity. In particular, dominant representations of urban regeneration erase a consciousness of violence and death and of the widespread need not only for security, but also to deal with the experiences of dislocation and trauma.

My proposition here is that urban regeneration is not something to dismiss out of hand: the desire for order, security and hygiene are not simply fantasies of the paranoid and propertied middle class, but widely shared particularly among the poorest in the city. But the question of regeneration cannot be reduced to the views of property developers, the popular media and state officials. Residents through the city, including those seen as its blight – squatters, informal traders, undocumented migrants – seek their own regeneration, their own ways to revitalise hope, in the face of dispossession, loss and death.

The stories I tell here are not the grand narratives of urban rebirth. They are, rather, the lines of lives that criss-cross the inner city, and the stories of people who are continually dislocated by the processes of urban change. They are stories of the experiences of death and violence, loss and haunting. I tell them as, they seem to me, to point towards a different notion of regeneration, one in which mourning is integral to renewal and memory is integral to revival.

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Naledi is thin and radiant, laughing constantly. She is partially sighted and can only see blurs of light and dark. Naledi once lived with her children, one disabled, and her blind husband in a small room on top of a furniture factory and panel-beater shop in Marshalltown. On the second floor of the factory, an intricate hive of sky-blue boards formed the walls of the rooms and the noise of DVDs and hip-hop echoed everywhere. In the building, small rooms – barely the size of a double bed – cost R1,000 a month. To enter, one has to pass through biometric security (these border technologies are entering even the poorest areas). Outside there is security guard with white, wolvish-looking dog.

Her own journeying through the city has involved a continual evasion of violence. Naledi came to Johannesburg with her husband as survival in Zimbabwe was no longer possible. She had first moved into the Chambers building in Doornfontein with her family. Chambers was extremely dark, lit only by paraffin lamps, candles and cellphones. Yet, it provided a refuge for many of the blind living in the city, who could navigate its darkness with relative ease.

In the city the blind, particularly those who are foreign, face many forms of stigma, but Naledi is proud to be blind. “When someone is meant to be blind, you are blind for life.” I ask her about her blindness. “Some believe that maybe you did wrong with the ancestors,” Naledi continues, “They will tell you to do something, and if that’s not done then your grandfather could be angry and make you have a blind child to punish you.” She continues, “The umthakathi (witch) can also make you blind for business. In rural areas they say they can make you blind to use in business (begging). Some believe that blindness comes from God”.

However, the disability was to become a form of protection. In May 2008, Johannesburg was struck by unprecedented anti-immigrant violence, which spread from the townships surrounding the city and across the country. Sixty-two people were killed and more than 100,000 displaced. The inner city also experienced violence, particularly as groups of men came into the area from the southern outskirts. Chambers, where many non-nationals lived, was a target for violence. Naledi and her family only escaped because of their blindness. She explains: “It was on a Monday when Zulu people, I should say South Africans, were carrying kieries (wooden clubs). When they saw you they would greet you. If you greeted them in Zulu they would ask how you say this [she held up her thumb, and then pointed to her elbow]. I met them many times. Some didn’t believe I was blind, but when they found it, they would release you. I was not beaten.

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13. As argued, for instance, by Martin Murray in his Cities of Extremes, which views the investment in housing narrowly in terms of a neoliberal logic.
“They came to our flat. They were using torches and knocked next door. My next door neighbour was a Malawian. They spoke in Zulu and he answered in Malawian. They beat him until he died. Then they came to our room. The first thing we said was that we were blind. They argued whether I was blind, but then the others came out and they saw we were all blind. When we were outside a woman came down the passage with her baby and they killed her. I heard them saying they had killed her”.

However, they let the blind leave the building. Naledi believes that it was “because we are abnormal” and the killers would be afraid of the supernatural punishments that might come to them if they killed them. The blind went to stay in Jeppe Station, and after that they went to a building in Marshall Street, but were later evicted.

“Then we went to a building in Commissioner Street, but it was so expensive so we went back to Chambers. When we went back the security welcomed us nicely, so we stayed.”

Chambers like other buildings in the inner-city was experienced by many residents as a haunted space. Those who died prematurely, from AIDS, accident or violence, and whose funeral rites were not performed by their families were thought to remain in the buildings, as Naledi explained: “Where we stayed there were many things happening. A certain lady lit a paraffin stove and threw it over her husband. The husband was burning, and he died... After a month you could hear footsteps, and you ask someone to go outside but they can’t see anyone, and can hear voices. I was staying next to the room where the husband was burnt. I saw the ghost. The whole passage was only bright. You only see a fire, and then you see nothing. You smell dagga [marijuana] burning, and you ask someone to look who is smoking but there is no one, or you see a tallness, but don’t know where that height is ending... You can hear people on top of the roof, but you can’t see this person, you can only hear the footsteps, or someone speaking from nowhere or your hear the words but the voice is not familiar”. In a sense, haunting can be viewed as a form of memory of deaths that are not recognised or mourned. Social regeneration in these places requires coming to terms with unmourned death.

One day in 2012, I visited Naledi where she was begging outside a fast food restaurant in Noord Street. In the period since I had last seen her, her young child had died. Bishop Paul Verryn, the well-known and controversial leader of the Central Methodist Mission in downtown Johannesburg, had paid for the child’s funeral and burial in Soweto. I asked her if there was any meaning in what had happened.

“It is God’s gift,” she told me, “To remind us he cares for us.”

Again the suffering of life in the city, its daily deaths, was surrendered to the will of God. This gives the pain meaning. Regeneration requires a way to turn a bad death into good death, to make sense of the pervasive sense of loss.

Later, in 2013, Naledi fell pregnant again. She had a difficult pregnancy (the baby was breech) and she struggled to get treatment at the local clinic – she thought it was stigma of being blind and foreign. Eventually with the help of Medicins Sans Frontieres she got a referral to the Charlotte Maxeke Hospital, or as it’s commonly known, the Jo’burg Gen.

I visited Naledi in hospital passing through the long empty wards, which form an intricate maze. I was born in the Jo’burg Gen more than 30 years ago. The hospital is a grey, geometric and concrete structure and red lines painted on its exterior lead to a large chimney. It looks like a factory for life and death: a place in which sorrows and hopes are ground up and exhaled into the orange evening sky.

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I wondered, walking through those passages, whether there was any affinity between lives who come into being at the same point in space as those who depart? How do places bear our traces? Why do mourners in the city go to the sites of death – the ward, the roadside or the bedrooms to gather the souls of the dead to take them home?

In the ward I found Naledi looking very thin and frail, her large sightless eyes like moons against her gaunt skin. She was on a drip and had been vomiting all night. She couldn’t breathe the night before and they had put her on oxygen. She told me that her child had died shortly after birth.

“It is time,” she told me.
“Time for what?” I asked.
“It is God’s will,” she said.

She spoke about being with her child while he was still alive: “his heart was beating slowly, slowly, slowly, too slowly” she said, “The only question I have,” she told me, staring into the emptiness, “is why he took the child after I had struggled so much? This has been so hard for me. I’ve really tried.”

Grey light gleamed off her skin and some machine, out of sight, hummed incessantly. “What do you listen to when you lie awake at night here?” I asked her.

“I listen to the rain. Last night, it was raining, I think” she said smiling, “I like that very much. But now there is just the sound of the machine, it confuses things”. She recalled listening to the rain even as a child: “There were many trees, so the leaves would catch the rain.” She told me that during the fruit season the children were very happy. “The rain would wash the mangos to the ground.”

Naledi survived, but her child received no burial and was cremated. The family do not know where the ashes were spread. They wondered, when I met them later – gathered in the small room in the south of the city, sitting on buckets beside the bed with a floral cover – what happens to the spirit of children who die so young? They had no answer. The riddles of living and dying, of why some children survive and others do not, are the more intimate questions of social regeneration in the city

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August 2013 in Johannesburg was the time of wind – the time when “fishy things” were going on because the “spirits were in”, according to Chihera, a fiery and garrulous Zimbabwean woman. There had been several uncanny deaths in the city. A woman and a man had drunk poison killing themselves in separate incidents. A woman had been stabbed to death by her husband in a building. There had been a fire on the upper floors of a large tenement killing a woman and her child. Chihera had spent much of the month at funerals.

Chihera was the committee member of an appropriated building in the inner city, known as Diamond Exchange. Residents of Diamond Exchange were under a High Court Order to be evicted, as rent payments had lapsed because of disputes over building maintenance. In spite of Constitutional protections against such evictions, they continue to take place throughout the city and many buildings, Diamond Exchange included, fail to maintain legal protection. This particular eviction was ordered by the High Court for health and safety reasons. The interior passages of the building were often filled with stagnant water and large piles of refuse had accumulated on its roof and outside its windows.

The residents of Diamond Exchange lived under the knowledge that at any moment they could end up on the street. The threat of eviction was always present, though the residents had no idea of when it might happen. Inside Diamond Exchange lived cleaners, prophets, traders, shebeen owners, beggars, musicians, sex workers – all surviving through fragile alliances with each other, with the gangs, with churches and with the state. In the eyes of the law they were criminals: squatters, hijackers, illegal migrants and gangsters.
The irony of the inner city is that communities living informally are often seeking the same goal as those in the city government: work, security and healthy living conditions. They are also negotiating the threats of violence and waste, searching for their own regeneration in the face of adversity. Surviving in Diamond Exchange, for Chihera, often required forming tenuous alliances with both criminals and the police.

Two deaths in the previous year had shaken the community, causing both celebration, terror and social division. The first was a well-known criminal, not a resident of the building, but someone who regularly robbed its residents outside the local tavern, ran into the building to evade the police. He climbed out one of the windows, trying to hide from the police, but fell to his death on the balcony several floors below. As news of the death spread, a crowd gathered around the building, including members of the man’s family, singing and ululating at his death. As Chihera explained, “We had never seen anything like. People celebrating at a death!”

The corpse was collected to be taken to the mortuary, but the man’s family did not undertake the physical and ritualistic cleansing at the site of death. The stains of blood remained on the balcony for several weeks. The balcony was one of the access points to one of the two taps in the building, serving several hundred people, but the residents stopped using the tap. An air of anxiety set in and residents reported feeling the hair on their heads prickling when passing that floor. The residents only started using the tap again once the rains had come and washed away the blood stains.

Two months later another incident took place. A fight broke out between two lovers. A man, Bhekha, estranged from Patience, his girlfriend and the mother of his child, tried to stab her. Several of the residents restrained him and locked him inside the room with his young son. When they returned to the room the man was gone. He too had fallen to his death on the balcony below. The recurrence of this death by falling led to rumours that the spirit of the dead thief had possessed and caused the death of the man.

In this case Bheka’s family performed the death rites, cleansing the area of death with white cloth and coming to call the spirit home with the body. The man’s body was taken away in a car, which subsequently broke down. The man’s family circled the car telling the spirit he must leave the building, that his wife had left with his child and he must return home. The car started again after that and the body was taken away, eventually to Zimbabwe. Nonetheless, it was considered a violation of funeral rites that the mother of the man’s child and the child did not attend the rituals.

Still, the residents of Diamond Exchange felt the building required cleansing of its aura of death, and Bishop Verryn was brought in to cleanse the building with holy water, while members of the congregation carried palm leaves. After the cleansing, according to residents, the experiences of haunting quietened. These are some of the rituals of regeneration required to survive in the city.

Chihera has learnt the funeral rites required to bring peace to the dead: the gathering of dust from the rooms where the dead lie and the calling of the spirits back home. Her journey in the city, like so many others, has also been one of mourning and death. Chihera came to Johannesburg from Zimbabwe with her husband, who was a driver. They lived well until Chihera’s husband died in a car accident and she could no longer pay rent and was evicted from her flat. She moved into Chambers, the same building in which Ezekiel and Naledi had lived, but was also evicted from there before moving to Diamond Exchange.

Chihera survived in the city through begging at traffic lights. She would travel out to the peripheries of the city, to Midrand and other areas “where rich bastards live”. She helped start an organisation of street beggars, which arranges yearly Christmas parties and mobilises around basic rights, in particularly against the practice, by social welfare authorities, of taking the children of beggars into state care.
Chihera managed to save enough money to start life as a trader, selling cellphone starter packs and funeral insurance. For R30 a month paid via cellphone, migrants can ensure that their bodies are returned home after death. Large companies are using new technologies to encroach on the terrain of the old burial societies. Death is big business in the inner city.

Chihera’s social network extends throughout the city; it is an intricate web linking the dark buildings: lines of connection have formed among those whose paths have crossed on their sojourns through the city, who have experienced, together and apart, their continual displacements. Many of these networks come together in times of mourning and Chihera often presides over the funeral rites: “the songs are sung according to what you used to do when you were alive. If you took drugs, they will say so. If you were a prostitute, they will say so. If you told lies they would say so. If you were a womanizer or a thief they will say so. They also sing to sympathise with the family, to look after your kids or property. The songs are to tell stories, to have mercy on a dead person.” Funeral rites become a way of articulating the troubles and failures of life in the city, of giving them meaning and recognition.

During August 2013 a grey fog came over the city and at night the wind battered the windows of my room. I was staying on the 13th floor of an inner-city apartment block. From this viewpoint the city spreads out below and easily becomes an aesthetic analgesic, allowing the suffering to dissolve in the expansive seduction of lights. Watching over the city it occurred to me that each evening, hidden in the darkness, lit by paraffin lamps or illegal electricity connections, are a multitude of hidden rituals, songs circling in the stairwells, gatherings in the darkness of those who, at any moment, could be thrown onto the street, those who live in the shadows of urban change, who are engaged in their projects of private and collective regeneration, and who mourn and celebrate nonetheless.

Chihera has been struck deeply by her own losses – of her husband and her young daughter, who died from electrocution. The child was buried in a cemetery in Johannesburg; Chihera explained that the souls of children could not return to Zimbabwe as they might be lost or drowned crossing the Limpopo River. Chihera learned the funeral rites when her own husband died. She went with his family to the ward in which he died to call the spirit back home with a branch. The spirit was called to the mortuary and then to travel home to Zimbabwe. Regularly they would stop the cars to let the spirit rest and to explain where they were going. Once home, in the Zimbabwean midlands, the woman in the family washed Chihera while she was wracked with grief. After the funeral, she had a dream that he came to her in his family’s house. He stood over her and said, “My house is built, yours in not yet built, now stop crying.”

It seems to me that urban regeneration is as much about the rebuilding of meaning in the face of loss, learning to live with violence and hauntings, as it is about the construction of walls and tenements. A renewed city, in my view, would be when the one was not at the cost of the other; when the mourning and memory of so many in the city was not erased or consigned to the shadow by police, property developers and municipal officials; and when people and their histories were not evicted into the streets to wander, like lost spirits, in the cold glare of the city lights.
Epilogue

On December 5, 2013, after the writing of the body of this piece, Nelson Mandela died. Throughout the country mass memorials and grieving took place. Vigils were held at Mandela’s home in the wealthy suburb of Houghton and at his house in Orlando, Soweto, where those evicted from Doornfontein in the early slum clearances were almost a century ago. Candles, flowers and numerous cards were laid at these sights.

On Friday 13 December, leading into the weekend of Mandela’s funeral, the residents of Diamond Exchange were brutally evicted onto the streets by a private security organisation calling itself the Black Bees. The eviction took place across the road from the Drill Hall, where Mandela was tried for high treason in 1956. Three people were hospitalised, including a blind man, having been beaten by the security. After the eviction, hundreds of people, including families and children, were left to live on the street in shelters made of mattresses. Many lost most of their possessions in the process.

During the nights after the eviction and prior to the burial, the women of the Diamond Exchange stayed up all night singing hymns and tributes to Mandela. Unlike the other vigils around the city, these tributes received no public acknowledgement or television coverage, although Chihera and her friends watched the burial on a public screen in nearby Joubert Park. Their vigils, as usual, were dispossessed. Chihera does not understand why South Africans treat foreigners so badly, even those who are naturalised citizens. Mandela, she commented, “was also a border jumper”.