

Welcome to El Dorado

South Africa's New Urban Landscape

South Africa's new rich are living it up, and unapologetic. The old white elite, they argue, were far more extravagant—"Why is owning four or five cars considered bling and owning four or five houses not?" **MICHELA WRONG** reports from Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg on the big national debate about class and money



Soweto, the gritty Johannesburg township once at the symbolic center of the anti-apartheid struggle, now feels positively bourgeois. In addition to its new state-of-the-art Soweto Theatre, you'll find shopping malls, nightclubs, and even wine-tasting festivals.

By **MICHELA WRONG** **LISA LIMER** FEBRUARY 2013 ISSUE

LAST JUNE, A CROWD OUTSIDE DURBAN'S Regional court was treated to a moment that illuminates an era. It involved none of the ingredients usually recognized as newsworthy in Africa's Rainbow Nation. No Mandelas attended, President Jacob Zuma was absent, and neither AIDS nor apartheid got a mention. Yet, curiously, it touched on almost all these elements.

The crowd had gathered for the arrival of local businesswoman Shauwn Mpisane, who is facing multiple charges of tax evasion on the state contracts won by her cleaning and housing company. The flamboyant lifestyle of Shauwn and S'bu, her husband, features regularly in South Africa's tabloid press, so some sort of show was expected. As she strode toward the courtroom, all eyes immediately zeroed in on her heel-less, gravity-defying platform shoes, deconstructionist follies in a startling shade of turquoise. Lady Gaga, the media reported, has an identical pair, and they cost a cool \$3,750.

I drove past the couple's villa in the northern suburb of La Lucia shortly before that fashion parade—and can testify that it is in keeping with her shoes. Dwarfing its neighbors in Durban's version of Beverly Hills, the villa is an idiosyncratic, tusked construction that had leapt from drawing board to street, the architect's vision unclouded by any "Hang on, couldn't we go for something a bit cheaper?" queries. Black-clad security guards, semiautomatics at the ready, were perched at the front gate and at the back. One had to assume that the white Maserati Shauwn had given S'bu on his fortieth birthday—license plate sbu—was parked safely inside, with the pair of matching Lamborghinis South Africa's revenue service had seized but later returned.

Whatever the eventual outcome of the trial, Durban's blingiest couple personify a chapter in South Africa's development that, depending on your race, social class, and experience, triggers either a rush of blood to the temples, a sad shake of the head, or the righteous burn of vindication.

Apartheid ended in 1990. To universal relief, Africa's pariah state averted civil war, established itself as a respected regional peacemaker, and joined the BRICS group of emerging economies (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). Nearly half of the population was born in a free country, with no direct experience of the Group Areas Act, pass laws, or the other legislation that prompted Nelson Mandela (now ninety-four and in fragile health) to take on a racist state. But despite the end of white rule, despite the vast investment in infrastructure and state benefits by the ANC (African National Congress), South Africa remains one of the world's most unequal societies. A prosperous black upper and middle class have emerged but

remain small and umbilically linked to the ruling party.



Cape Town is in many ways South Africa's great coastal playground—Bloubaai Beach, just across the bay, is a superb windsurfing spot and comes with dramatic vistas of Table Mountain. But to many black South Africans who leave the city at the end of the working day, it still comes with a "whites only" stamp.

In the days of apartheid, travelers to South Africa tended to stick to certain well-worn grooves—the Kruger National Park, the Garden Route, the Blue Train. Today visitors, like the locals, enjoy the freedom to wander more widely and to ponder questions that transcend race. Such as: How does a society whose revolutionary heroes championed economic redistribution as they shivered in Robben Island's gray prison cells cope with the new elite's flamboyant displays of wealth?

My trip to Durban, part of a three-city tour of the country, was prompted by curiosity at the flashy hedonism I'd seen portrayed on South African Web sites. The designer-suited former comrades, the soap opera stars showing off their Louboutins, the guests flown in by private jet for champagne receptions—coupled with constant exposés of financial scandals—call to mind another Socialist system grappling with the temptations of unfettered capitalism: Putin's Russia.

Government critics—not only press and opposition politicians but longstanding members of the ANC—blame Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), a post-apartheid affirmative action policy that obliges South African companies to offer equity stakes to members of the country's black majority. It was vital to draw the excluded into an economy dominated by whites and Indians, they agree. But BEE also created a class of parasitic operators whose wealth is leveraged on political connections, and who neither create nor innovate but certainly know how to party.

Once hailed as "black diamonds," the emerging black elite are now labeled "tenderpreneurs"—a less respectful pun on the tenders, or state contracts, that have enriched so many. When Willie Hofmeyr, former head of the Special Investigating Unit, revealed in 2011 that \$3.4 billion goes missing each year from the government's procurement budget, many considered it an indictment of tenderpreneurs, although bureaucratic incompetence was also cited as a factor.

The president is widely seen as the phenomenon's personification. It isn't only that Zuma was facing major corruption charges until shortly before he took the job in 2009. "Six wives, more than twenty children—that's self-indulgence," snorted Moeletsi Mbeki, businessman and political economist. "Zuma is the acme of bling, and the message he sends out is one of total excess."

Some South Africans take the long view, seeing the flash and cash as a stage a young society must inevitably go through. "Look, every country has its nouveau riche— just look at British footballers," says Thebe Ikalafeng, the founder of Brand Africa and many other prominent marketing initiatives. Others sense an administration that has lost its way. For them, the August showdown at a platinum mine in Marikana—where police killed thirty-four miners striking for better pay—was an inevitable explosion, a warning of what will come if the divide between this new group of black haves and the perennial have-nots continues to widen.

DURBAN, THE CHIEF PORT and largest city of KwaZulu-Natal Province, seemed a natural place to start my trip. While South Africa's first two black presidents belonged to the Xhosa aristocracy, Zuma, a former goatherd, is a Zulu. I was curious to see what reward the province had claimed in exchange for the political support that powered its local hero to the summit. My arrival coincided with a newspaper feature detailing just how many government contracts were being channeled Durban's way.

King Shaka International Airport sits in a wind-ruffled green sea of cane, the sugar plantations Mahatma Gandhi's Indian ancestors were brought in by the British colonialists to harvest. It seemed strangely empty. This, I was told, is normal. Locals regard the airport as one of several white elephant projects approved ahead of the World Cup South Africa hosted in 2010. Another was Durban's stunning sports stadium, which resembles, with its unfurled white sails, a schooner about to set off across the Indian Ocean.

Benedict Xolani Dube—who runs Xubera, a local think tank—had offered to show me around. But when I said my mission was to watch Durbanites at play, he was dismayed. "Zulu culture is conservative, very churchgoing and family-oriented. Durban is a sleepy city. People who make it big here go to Jozi"—Johannesburg—"to play."

Dube had a habit I have learned to associate with South African drivers. Braced for possible carjackers, they never come to a complete stop at traffic lights, slowing instead to an imperceptible crawl—creating a sense of hovering indecision. The tactic may be warranted. Vibrant in daytime, downtown Durban turns as threatening as Gotham City at night. In the morning, I wove my way through schoolchildren and students flirting and chatting on the baroque steps of City Hall as I headed into the museum, which tracks the history of local resistance to colonial rule. There was no sign of them come sunset. Light streamed from the occasional metal-barred liquor shop, but it did nothing to dispel the skittering shadows. Once-chic hotels and apartments were peeling and shuttered; the clothes in shop windows were reminiscent of the 1970s. With the exception of one hatchet-faced white woman, the only people on the litter-strewn street were black.

"It used to be so nice here," said Dube, sighing. "But since the end of apartheid, thousands of blacks flock to the public beach each December, and there's a lot of sleeping rough. The white businesses abandoned their premises for the mall in Umhlanga and luxury suburbs like Ballito." Congestion and a shortage of parking probably played a part in the exodus, but locals complain bitterly about the broken bottles and the crime that come with the surge of Christmas revelers.

We fled in our turn—to Florida Road in the Morningside suburb, which has some of Durban's oldest colonial buildings, their delicate white wooden verandas framed by palms. The bars were heaving, and refreshingly, it was a mixed crowd. "This is where people who don't think of themselves as black, just as members of the elite, hang out," said Dube. A bevy of white girls tottered down the street in the familiar crouch caused by a combination of nine-inch heels and skintight minidresses. At the Spiga d'Oro, famously patronized by Zuma's jailed business partner Schabir Shaik, every table was taken.

But any sense of aspirational integration ended here. That night, Dube drove me to my hotel at the Zimbali Resort. Whenever a Durban party makes it into the tabloids, it always seems to have been thrown at the Zimbali, which has also served as the setting for many a controversial business deal. Hence my choice. The grounds are so extensive that after negotiating the most rigorous checkpoint I'd encountered outside a war zone, we immediately got lost. As Dube sought directions from a passing deliveryman, I sat in the car, breathing in a bouquet garni of scents from the bushes, rustling with night creatures.

I had expected the resort to be plush. The Zimbali's cathedral-tall front hall was no surprise, nor was a bedroom so large I actually needed its miniature flashlight to locate the bathroom. What I hadn't anticipated was how aseptically distant this five-story pile, forty minutes from Durban, keeps residents of the hotel and golf course villas from the hoi polloi. Apartheid established a topography of inequality—and here it was again, only this time founded on class rather than skin color, which seemed to mean it needed no apology or explanation.

The following morning was more cheering. I got an uplifting sense of just how hard many South Africans are working to prevent this divide from becoming ever more ingrained. Linda Mbonambi, a local government planner, drove me away from the coast and up into KwaMashu, a 250,000-strong township that sprawls across the breezy hills above central Durban. Named after Marshall Campell, a nineteenth-century sugar planter, KwaMashu ("Marshall's place") is where blacks from the working class district of Cato Manor were forced to settle in the 1950s and '60s.

Accustomed to the grim ghettos of east Africa, I was surprised at how pleasant KwaMashu felt. Most of that impression boiled down to the greenery. The houses are tiny, but most have a mango tree or a lawn or a back garden bursting with flowers, and that made all the difference.

Articulate and impassioned, Mbonambi pointed out a freshly paved highway linking previously marginalized areas, a new minivan taxi stand, new houses with running water and electricity, and a shopping center, part of a planned hub that offers blacks with only modest savings a chance to try their hand at running a retail business.

Back down in the valley, Mbonambi told me—gesturing across the billowing sugarcane, a pelt of emerald fur—that this stretch is destined to become a \$2.7 billion mixed-income residential and industrial area dubbed Cornubia. A public-private partnership between the local municipality and agri-processor Tongaat Hulett, it will be an experiment in eliminating class

difference. "It will be the only area in Africa where you'll get middle-, low-, and high-income people living side by side," he said. If the authorities can pull this off, they will have defied what is surely one of the most fundamental human tendencies: the instinct to self-segregate. In fifteen years' time, I told myself, I will return to see if it worked.



The restaurant at Protea Hotel Fire & Ice in Johannesburg.

MY NEXT STOP WAS JOHANNESBURG. Born of the gold industry, it is South Africa's biggest, pushiest, and most dynamic city, where anyone on the move feels he or she has a decent chance of making it big. Landing in the morning, I shivered as I registered the temperature difference between the muggy Indian Ocean and the crisp chill of this scrubby, scraped plateau. The air on the Highveld, 5,700 feet above sea level, is so thin and dry that my skin immediately started to flake, lips to chap.

I remembered when it was best to be met on arrival at this airport: One BBC colleague who had waived the precaution found herself deposited by a "taxi" on the side of the freeway, minus laptop and wallet. This time, the information desk pointed me to the entrance for the new Gautrain, another World Cup innovation, and I sailed painlessly over the multi-lane frenzy, gazing down on the snaking tarmac ribbons with a sense of superiority—how smart of me!—and relief.

Surfacing in the Melrose Arch mall, I was immediately sure I had come to the right place. When apartheid ended, Johannesburg's central business district was transformed—but not in a good way. An onion rotting from its core, the city saw its moneyed folk flee to the periphery, where they lived in gated communities and shopped in malls like the Rosebank and Sandton City. There the parking was safe and the street hawkers and prostitutes could be kept at bay. But Melrose Arch, where the scaffolding had only just come down, takes this mall phenomenon to a whole new level.

With its cobbled alleys, redbrick buildings, and open-air cafés, Melrose Arch has something self-consciously Mediterranean about it—as long as you ignore the giant plasma screens. The impression is heightened by the fact that in a city designed around cars, the pedestrian is king here. I checked into the eponymous hotel and sank into a deep armchair in the bar. The decor is old-fashioned men's club, complete with snooker table and shelves of leather-bound books. At the low tables, contracts were being examined and terms hammered out. I once interviewed the late Zairean kleptocrat Mobutu Sese Seko's son-in-law, who always traveled in first class—not for the extra comfort but because that was where you met people with money and power. He would have loved it here, in this altar to BEE.

The stores on the alleys that radiate off the piazza sell Italian shirts and Swedish designer jackets, Chanel eyewear and Estée Lauder cosmetics. Outside a jewelry shop with a \$114,000 diamond-studded Piaget ladies' watch in the window, I spotted three security guards in long black coats, earpieces, and sunglasses. "Is Melrose Arch a good place to be based?" I asked the saleswoman. "Oh, yes," she said, nodding energetically. "This is definitely the right venue for us."

She seemed friendly, so I asked her the price of a men's Breitling. A Breitling features prominently in *An Inconvenient Youth*, Irish journalist Fiona Forde's recent biography of Julius Malema, the former ANC youth leader whose denunciations of the ruling establishment have won him a big following among the poor. Malema sees no contradiction between his self-appointed role as firebrand revolutionary, a burgeoning personal business empire, and a designer wardrobe. The kind of chunky Breitling I'd expect him to favor cost \$15,358.

A day later, I was looking at another Breitling, this one on the wrist of a Malema pal: Kenny Kunene, convicted-fraudster-made-good, the King of Bling, a.k.a. Sushi King, a man who stands for everything the old intellectual elite, both black and white, hates about the new South Africa.

A doorman in top hat and tails showed me into the apartment block Kunene uses as his Sandton base. He wore jeans bought at Harrods, Lamborghini shoes (and there I was thinking they only made cars), a Versace blouson. His T-shirt read the mind is a wonderful thing to waste. Not prone to understatement, he's a two-watch man: the Breitling on one wrist, a Rolex Oyster on the other. "It's my signature."

Kunene came to fame thanks to Zar, a string of nightclubs named after the national currency. Johannesburg's Zar recently closed, but Kunene, who now stars in his own reality TV show ("You know, like Kim Kardashian"), said this was part of the plan. Use the nightclubs to build the brand, then move on to more interesting things, including events management.

A man who claims to relish a contest, he has a face nicked with scars from knife fights in the Zulu township where he grew up. Like many controversial figures, Kunene proved surprisingly thin-skinned. He kept returning to his denunciation by Zwelinzima Vavi, the leader of the COSATU trade union federation, who accused him of "spitting in the face of the poor" after the infamous 2010 birthday party he threw at which guests ate sushi off models' bodies.

"There's this view that if you make money you have to be discreet, you have to be understated. But I did not fight [for] freedom to hide my money under the table. These people are the worst kind of hypocrites," he said, then slammed individuals like mining magnate

Patrice Motsepe and trade unionist turned businessman Cyril Ramaphosa, early beneficiaries of BEE, for maintaining the outward appearance of moderation while drinking the same whiskey and driving the same luxury German cars as he. "I was brought up dead poor, and I know that the one thing poor people don't want to talk about is poverty. They want to talk about where they want to be. BEE, affirmative action, land redistribution, were all very necessary because they gave people hope, and the absence of hope is the most dangerous thing."

The argument that ostentatious spending offers those at the bottom role models may seem shockingly self-serving, but when I asked taxi drivers and hotel staff whom they most admired, Kunene's name kept coming up. "Why?" I asked one assistant manager. "Because he's encouraging."

It's not a view Moeletsi Mbeki—who has been a consistent critic of post-apartheid government, including the one led by his brother, Thabo—shares. He keeps warning South Africans that one of the most unequal societies in the world cannot afford its consumerist splurge, either economically or politically—a violent uprising is a real possibility.

Isn't a "robber baron" phase a common characteristic of developing economies? I asked. Don't those robber barons go on to be regarded as founding fathers of successful economies, pillars of respectable communities? Mbeki rejects the comparison. "The difference with America's robber barons was that they were actually producers. Ford and his assembly lines, Carnegie with his steel. In nineteenth-century Britain, success was first tied to becoming an industrialist or an investor; later it meant becoming a scientist or an engineer. That is not what's happening here."

But as in Durban, it would be misleading to suggest that ANC officials are simply content to knock away the ladder they climbed. Feeling in need of some grounding after my Melrose Arch experience, I arranged to spend the night in Soweto.

"We're in Africa now," my Tanzanian taxi driver said with a chuckle as we drove into the township, his adopted home, to a hotel that overlooks the vegetable hawkers of Kliptown on one side and the stretch of land where the famous Freedom Charter was signed on the other.

Despite its status as a symbol of gritty black resistance, Soweto, if truth be told, was never Johannesburg's most desperate township. Now much of it feels positively bourgeois. The houses may be single-story, but many are trimmed with Ionic columns and decorative sculptures, and their metal gates suggest there's something worth stealing inside. The iconic Vilakazi Street, the only road in the world to claim not one but two Nobel Prize winners (Mandela and Tutu) is dotted with memorial artwork, benches, and trees. And then there's the stadium where the World Cup kicked off, a state-of-the-art hospital, the new Maponya mall ("Soweto's it place," as one resident excitedly described it), and the even newer, funky Soweto Theatre, whose main auditorium was sold out the night I visited.

Soweto not only throws annual wine-tasting festivals, but it now boasts its first fitness club, complete with Internet café, pool, and beauty spa. The giant Virgin Active Health Club sits at the junction of Chris Hani and Mohoka streets, and its parking lot was full. "We opened in 2011 and have four thousand members," said acting manager Phumzile Ngema. Persuading staff to take up posts can be a problem, she acknowledged. "They have these preconceptions. But Soweto has changed." So much so that Virgin is considering opening a second gym in Soweto this year.

THE CORNER LOUNGE had everything you'd expect to find in a slick urban drinking spot: eyelash-batting girls sipping fizzy rosé, giant plasma screens showing football, and a selection of Scottish single malts that would put Balmoral to shame. There was even an attendant in white Wellingtons, handing out towels—well, okay, sheets of toilet paper—at the lavatory door. What was remarkable was that it was all squeezed into a container soldered onto a four-room house in the heart of Gugulethu, a black township on the outskirts of Cape Town, the third stop on my trip.

The area is so confined it feels packed if everyone stands up at once. It was beginning to look crowded this Sunday afternoon as a stream of well-dressed young men—one was sporting winklepickers and a striped pink jacket I rather envied—flooded in. Each had a bottle under his arm, which was deposited on the table with a flourish: Chivas Regal, Glenfiddich, Glenlivet, Johnnie Walker. The sleek branded boxes were clearly as important as the liquor inside. "This is called 'making the table black,'" my companion explained, "as in 'black with alcohol.'"

The bottles are a form of fine. Nkuleleko Tuntubele, the reformed petty criminal who owns the Corner Lounge, presides over a system of macho community justice. Slap your girlfriend around, disrespect your elders, and a fine is levied, to be paid in top-shelf spirits.

As the serious drinking got under way, expensive cars cruised past, gleaming attention-seekers on a street as drab as the coats of roaming mongrels. Mercedes Benzes, Jaguars, Audis, a Wrangler, and several "matchboxes," the too-big-for-its-boots BMW 325. Some drivers parked to allow Corner Lounge's army of washers, each in branded T-shirt, to go into action. Others kept on going, pulsating with music and testosterone.

The show has something in common with *izikhothane*, a phenomenon that recently surfaced in the townships. The *izikhothane*—adolescent boys who have begged, borrowed, and stolen to afford their Italian jeans, floral designer shirts, and patent-leather loafers—stage a fashion face-off. A gasping female audience is vital. Rival dandies preen like cockerels, strut and shimmy, hurl insults at one another, and then, in a final destiny-defying act of machismo, tear off their treasured brands and set fire to them.

Unathi Kondile, who teaches media studies at the University of Cape Town and blogs on topical issues, thinks the drive-by display is not as brutally tactless as you might think. "It may seem shocking that someone can go and park a Maserati where there's real poverty," he said. "But townships are all about community. These are guys who have moved out and are going home. They want to demonstrate to the neighborhood, the extended family, 'Look, I did good, I made a success of myself.'"

The irony, he admitted, is that in many cases, the wearers cannot afford the gesture—Mummy and Daddy have paid for it all. "There's a strong element of children being spoiled by parents who felt they suffered during apartheid and now want their kids to have a good time," he said.

But the Gugulethu drive-by also highlights how hard it is to heal a society once segregated, to cleave together what was brutally put asunder. Aspirational blacks routinely mark success by moving to the suburbs. But when they want to be themselves, to have fun, the new districts suddenly seem staid and constricting, and they head back to the township.

CAPE TOWN has always felt like the least African of the country's cities. When I first visited, nearly twenty years ago, I marveled at the way the mountains dropped into the sea, enjoyed visiting the vineyards and their old Dutch homesteads and strolling the surf-pounded beaches. There was something magical about the speed with which the weather changed, soft sea mists giving way to wave-lashing rain, followed by sudden sunbursts and dramatically intense rainbows. But this famously laid-back, bohemian province always seemed far closer to California than Kinshasa.

I had wondered whether this time, things would feel different. I was well aware that the Western Cape represents a "rebel" province in many eyes, thanks to the support it gave Helen Zille's Democratic Alliance party in the last elections—the rest of the country had stayed ANC. But surely the presence of hundreds of black lawmakers attending South Africa's parliament, on top of years of affirmative action, would have had an inevitable effect.



In *izikhothane*, young Soweto men flaunt their designer duds and then publicly destroy them in a gesture of bravado.





Despite alarming income inequality, South Africans are enthusiastic about the good life. The Victorian buildings of Cape Town's Long Street (left) are full of restaurants, bookstores, and artsy boutiques. Nobu, at the One&Only resort, in Cape Town (right).

Strolling Long Street in the daytime, you might think so. It's a medley of faces and races. But come sundown things change. I'd been told that the Taj Cape Town, lying directly opposite the parliament building, is a favorite with local movers and shakers, so I booked a table at its Bombay Brasserie. But the only black faces I spotted all evening were the bobbing heads of a small crowd of protesters heading purposefully to a demonstration.

I checked into the One&Only resort, on the Victoria & Alfred Waterfront. Owned by magnate Sol Kerzner, it was built on an old quarry, with two artificial islands created from scratch. I'd been told that it is one of the hippest venues in town, a favorite not only of the Hollywood actors who are increasingly drawn to Cape Town's expanding film industry, but also of the likes of Kunene, Malema, and ANC politician and business tycoon Tokyo Sexwale. But I managed a sighting only of Fat Joe, a local DJ, dining alone. Most of the tables were occupied by young Americans and Eurotrash, comparing nightclubs.

Quinton Mtyala, a local parliamentary reporter, joined me in one of the One&Only's restaurants, Africa's sole Nobu outpost. But his almost physical distress at finding himself, a lone black man, in a venue of this sort rendered the meal more ordeal than pleasure. "Oh, man," he said, shaking his head. "Me, eating sushi, with a white woman, in Nobu. Oh, man."

His unease was, it seems, characteristic of his home city. "Cape Town was where apartheid was perfected," he said. "People were moved out of the city center in the 1960s, and it became very sterile. Black people rush to leave it at the end of the working day—they can't wait to get out."

If Cape Town is represented as a playground in the tourist guidebooks, to local blacks, he explained, that playground still comes with a "whites only" stamp, regardless of what the law now stipulates. "In Johannesburg, black people feel they own the space. Here, they feel they're in a fake Disney World, a city that doesn't acknowledge its own racism."

A night stroll across a few blocks of city center confirmed his impression of a stubbornly polarized urban landscape. There were so many guards in fluorescent bibs—many of them Zimbabweans and Congolese who migrated here in search of work—that theoretically I should have felt safe and protected. But if Cape Town's black population feels ill at ease, so did I. Casual strollers are in short supply on the dark and gusty pavements. As a young beggar began to follow me, a homeless woman flung a beseeching hand out from the gutter.

A sudden roaring startled me. There was so little traffic about that a group of teenage skateboarders were taking their chances in the middle of the street. In contrast with so much of the rest of Cape Town, this bunch was a thoroughly variegated mix of black, white, and colored.

THE TRIP left me hovering like South Africa's drivers at the traffic lights, undecided. I'd heard upbeat assessments and apocalyptic predictions. Analysts whose opinions I respect had told me that the country, whose townships had already been hit by periodic protests over delays in the installation of water pipes and electrical lines, could experience an Arab Spring if it fails to narrow its widening inequalities.

When Cyril Ramaphosa apologized last fall for bidding \$2.3 million at auction for a pedigreed buffalo, acknowledging it was an "excessive" gesture in a sea of poverty, one sensed an elite belatedly waking up to its dislocation from reality. The rash of miners strikes that followed the

Marikana debacle are unlikely to impact visitors, but South Africans, aware that their nation was built on mineral extraction, see them as a signal that excess can be pushed only so far.

But what I do know—as a journalist who covered the fall of Mobutu’s gilded regime—is what a society looks like when a government stops trying. Anyone who has walked through the slums of Lagos and Nairobi knows the smell of ingrained cynicism. Today’s South Africa, with its burgeoning road and rail links, newly painted four-room houses, and government obsession with “service delivery,” does not have that aroma.

Many blacks I spoke with during my trip feel bitter at a white-dominated media’s denunciations of bling and its steady focus on corruption, saying that below the genuine alarm they detect a patronizing, racist message: “You see what happens when you let them run the country?”

Mamphela Ramphele, former managing director of the World Bank and veteran anti-apartheid activist, surely has a point when she too questions underlying assumptions. “The opulence of white wealth in this country far outstripped that of today’s nouveau riche, but it was seen as ‘old money’ and therefore okay. But why is owning four or five cars considered bling and owning four or five houses not?”

Somewhat to my surprise, I find myself agreeing with Thebe Ikalafeng, one of South Africa’s foremost marketing experts. When I interviewed him in London, I told myself it was hardly surprising if a man whose career was founded on buffing up images chose to look on the bright side.



On Vilakazi Street, in Soweto, once home to Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu and now spruced up for visitors with benches, public art, and memorials.

“Of course, we all want South Africa to be this global example of diversity and harmony, a font of enterprise,” he said. “In practice, it’s going through your typical teenage rebellion. We’re only eighteen years old, and we’re jostling for position, testing boundaries, trying to find ourselves. The tensions aren’t only racial, they’re generational. We’re boiling over in every sense. But out of this boiling will come a South Africa we have all helped define, and for which we can take responsibility.”

Ikalafeng might relish a conversation I had on the day I flew out of Cape Town, when a duvet of cloud draped neatly over Table Mountain, individual flocks falling lazily toward the city. In the harbor, Cape Town’s historic *raison d’être*, the cranes glinted in the sun. It is considered shockingly uncool for journalists to quote taxi drivers, but Trevor Beukes—part-time taxi driver, part-time graphic artist, would-be tour guide—surely merits his mention. Speeding along the freeway, he pointed out the township built for

Cape coloreds like him on our left, its congested black equivalent on our right. It doesn’t matter how many times you read about this topographical segregation, its on-the-ground crudeness always takes your breath away.

Beukes recounted his own circular itinerary from township to suburb and back again. “What happened when apartheid ended was that we all moved out of the townships and started living like whites. One day I realized everything I owned actually belonged to someone else. I had to sit my youngest boy down and tell him I couldn’t afford to send him to college. That was my wake-up call.”

“So what did you do?”

“I got rid of my debts, cleared my mortgage, changed my spending habits. And I moved. My house now is the size of what my servants’ quarters used to be.”

“And are you happy?”

“Yes. Now I know my neighbors. In the old days, we used to just wave at one another in the Pick n Pay.”

It was perhaps the first time in my three-city tour that I talked to someone who knew exactly where he wanted to be. Nice to have met you, Trevor—the man who dipped his toe in the consumerist pool and said, “Actually, no.”

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