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VISUAL ESSAY



There is enough gold for all of us

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ABSTRACT

The images that make up this visual essay are from the book *Wake Up, This is Joburg*, a collaboration between photographer Mark Lewis, and researcher, author and urban planner, Tanya Zack. They tell stories of people who have newly arrived, and others who are long-time residents, but all have found a way to inhabit urban space in South Africa's largest city in unusual ways, carving out a living – and a life – in an alternative economy.

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Undercity: artisanal miners



Figure 1. Johannesburg viewed from the Village Main mine dump. Photograph by Mark Lewis.

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Decades after the mining houses closed shop in Joburg, the metal that made this the wealthiest city on the continent continues to attract fortune seekers ([Figure 1](#)). Now they come to glean what is left of a once booming industry from the mine dumps on the edge of the city and the abandoned shafts beneath the city. These artisanal miners or “*zama zamas*” use the same methods to extract the gold. It’s a gamble and fraught with danger, but the money earned sends children to schools, pays the rent, and keeps households and communities afloat ([Figures 2 and 3](#)).



Figure 2. Entrance to an abandoned mine shaft. Photograph by Mark Lewis.

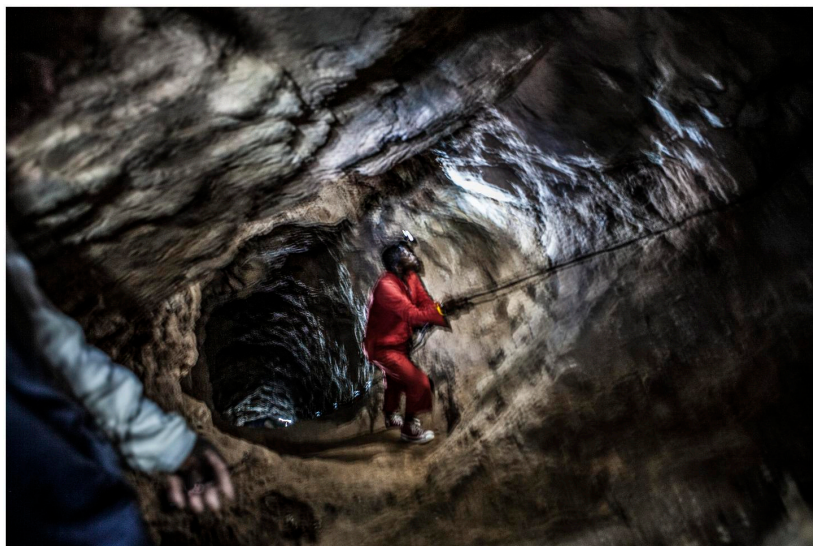


Figure 3. Luyando Moya lowers himself into an abandoned shaft with the aid of a cable that’s secured to a rock at the entrance. Photograph by Mark Lewis.

“There is enough gold for all of us,” says Philip Pelembe, an informal miner who digs for gold on a mine dump at the city’s edge. Like the other *zama zamas* who work the dumps and abandoned shafts along the reef, his reward after many days might be a pellet of gold dust. In the shafts, rock is chiseled out by hand and carried to the surface to be pulverized, mixed with mercury, and refined with a blowtorch (Figures 4 and 5).



Figure 4. Phillip Adelion pans for gold on Village Main mine dump on the edge of the inner city. Photograph by Mark Lewis.



Figure 5. On a concrete slab – once the foundation of a house – kneel dozens of women, grinding the ore into a precious powder. The women have gouged deep indentations into the concrete with their grinding stones. Photograph by Mark Lewis.



Figure 6. Jabulani Ndlovu. Informal butcher. Photograph by Mark Lewis.



Figure 7. Informal butchers ply their trade chopping cow heads in Kazerne, an abandoned parking garage in the inner city. The meat is then cooked on fires and sold at taxi ranks all around the city. The dish is called S'kop, "the head." Photograph by Mark Lewis.



Figure 8. The bones are collected and taken to factories to be processed into bone meal and an additive for the making of ceramics. Photograph by Mark Lewis.

S’Kop: informal butchers

Every part of the cow’s head is commoditised in Johannesburg (Figures 6–8). In the bowels of an obsolete inner-city parking garage, men stand around huge chopping blocks wielding axes with which they strip every shred of flesh from hundreds of cow’s heads. The loosened meat is transported to the taxi ranks and informal markets of the city where it is cooked and sold to the passing trade as *s’kop*. The skins, peeled off the heads and then singed and scorched on blazing fires, are used in the dish known as *kwasa-kwasa*, favored by West Africans, and the bones and teeth are processed into bone meal and are also used as an additive for the making of ceramics. The butchers form part of a vital but largely undocumented network of informal food trade in Johannesburg.

Good riddance: waste pickers

There are many survivalists in Johannesburg whose labor forms part of a complex informal economy (Figure 9). Of these, few toil harder than the reclaimers: men and women who daily cross the city by foot to salvage recyclable materials from the Johannesburg’s discarded waste. It is extreme physical labor. Long before sunrise each day, they ride their trolleys skateboard-like to the sidewalks of suburbs and industrial sites to sort through waste bins. They load many kilograms of paper, plastic, glass, and cans into gargantuan bags carefully balanced on their trolleys. Their bodies strain against these loads, which they pull for many miles to informal sorting spaces close to where they live. And on weekends they drag multiple bags of sorted materials to buy-back centers, where they are paid by the kilogram (Figures 10 and 11).



Figure 9. A waste picker walks along the ridge of a Landfill site. The birds they say, “work six to six, just like us.” Photograph by Mark Lewis.



Figure 10. Elvis Mkhwebane, unable to afford the cost of a trolley, carries his load across the city to a buy-back center. Photograph by Mark Lewis.



Figure 11. Lucas Ngwenya hauls his 265 kg load over Nelson Mandela bridge to the recycling depots in the inner city where he will receive the going rate for plastics, cardboard, metal tin and glass. Photograph by Mark Lewis.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Mark Lewis is an urban photographer based in Johannesburg and for the past twelve years has traversed the dense inner core and the constantly shifting edges of the city of Johannesburg. His images are largely an interplay between people and space. At root, they are tales of lives carved in the search for economic opportunity, and the stories of the impacts of those lives on the spatial fabric of the city.

Tanya Zack is a researcher, a professional urban planner and popular writer on Johannesburg. She works at the interface of academia, community organizations and the professional world of town planning and has a unique entry into the shadows of South Africa's most interesting urban place.