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Uncommon Rhythms: Rupture and Retreat in Inner-City Johannesburg

Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon[1]

Abstract
This paper argues that the rhythms of life in precarious urban areas like inner-city Johannesburg are characterised by a series of chronic shocks involving fire, police raids, immigration raids and evictions. Against the backdrop of such shocks, inner-city residents, particularly the residents of unlawful occupations, attempt to form bonds of care and support among themselves. Based on long-term fieldwork, over several periods, in the area between 2010 and 2023, the paper shows that these everyday rhythms of commoning – the affective labour of forming social relations in the interstices of the state ensemble and real estate markets – are in constant play with forms of uncommoning – emergent fissures and divisions in the city. However, forms of major shock radically corrode the bases of commoning practices and dissemble everyday rhythms. In this paper, I develop the concept of 'uncommon rhythms' to indicate both everyday divisions and divergences and the recurrent, but unpredictable, forms of shock that shape life among precarious communities in the inner-city. I argue that secure accommodation and spaces of retreat are a necessary precondition for sustaining commoning practices.

Keywords: Johannesburg, urban rhythms, eviction, fire, unlawful occupations.

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Introduction

At the end of August 2023, a fire decimated what was known as the Usindiso Building, at 80 Albert Street in inner-city Johannesburg, killing 76 people and displacing hundreds to a shelter and temporary relocation site. The building was a former apartheid-era pass office that had become a shelter for women and children in the post-apartheid era (Walker 2023), before being criminally taken over and becoming one of the city's so-called 'hijacked' buildings. *The New York Times*, who conducted an extensive investigation into the incident, described "a deathtrap of a building where squatters pilfered electricity, built indoor shacks out of cardboard and cooked on paraffin stoves." (Chutel *et al.*, 2023). The investigation identified 127 buildings in the inner-city in similar states of disrepair that could lead to similar fires. On the Sunday 3 September, I visited the scene of the fire with a woman who had been helping with community support. The five-storey building was desolate, vacated of people and life. Some former residents were still on the street outside, awaiting food support organized by the local Muslim community.

The scale of the tragedy was unprecedented. But I found these scenes eerily familiar. Between 2010 and 2023 I had conducted research in inner-city Johannesburg on unlawful occupations, housing and evictions. During the period I had documented several fires leading to deaths, including at Caledonia Hall (in 2012) and Cape York (in 2013 and 2017). The fire at 80 Albert Street drew unprecedented local and international media attention to the issue of poor living conditions in unlawfully occupied buildings and led to the establishment of the Commission of Inquiry into Usindiso Building. The Commission found that, while the immediate cause of the fire was that a methamphetamine user had killed a man and set his body on fire, there were a wide array of structural conditions that led to the deaths. The executive summary of the first part of the Commission's report found, "The residents did not receive basic municipal services such as water, electricity, and waste management from the COJ. The residents used firefighting connections and equipment, such as fire extinguisher hoses, to draw water for domestic use. The residents were illegally connected to the electricity grid with uncovered cables. The building was partitioned with highly flammable material to divide the living space and to create shacks. Suppliers of the combustible building material were stationed on the south side of the building."[1]

But the conditions in the building were far from exceptional. Poor living conditions, the threats of fire and accident, along with evictions, deportations, police raids and other displacements have characterised the post-apartheid city, echoing its segregationist history. Subsequent municipal governments have relied primarily on either policing strategies or private sector evictions to deal with conditions in unlawful occupations.

This paper argues that the tragedy of the fire at Albert Street, while exceptional, needs to be understood in relation to the longer-term rhythms and patterning of life in Johannesburg where shock, dislocation, violence and fire have formed part of the rhythm of life in the city. Everyday practices of commoning and uncommoning are oriented towards this threat of shock. In the face of these shocks, inner-city residents struggle to create spaces of intimacy and retreat in both unlawful occupations and temporary emergency accommodation if evicted. But housing security and a degree of permanence remains elusive. This paper seeks, drawing from research in the decade prior to the Usindiso fire, to outline how shocks like fire, accident, eviction, police raids and violence have become part of the rhythms of the city. In this paper I argue that these events of shock and displacement, and the ways they entwine with everyday rhythms, can be understood as "uncommon rhythms". The concept aims to capture both their recurrent, enduring, but also unpredictable character. Furthermore, and in line with the themes of this special issue, I see these rhythms as "un-commoning" as disrupting and dissembling the capacities for emergent practices of commoning. Everyday rhythms are disassembled through the uncommon rhythms of accident, policing, and dispossession. Nonetheless, forms of inchoate commoning do emerge and are possible

1 Commission of Inquiry into Circumstances Into Circumstances Surround the Death of at Least 77 People and Dozens more other Injured and Homeless at the Corner of Albert and Delvers Streets Marshalltown, Johannesburg Central (Region F), https://www.wits.ac.za/media/wits-university/faculties-and-schools/commerce-law-and-management/research-entities/cals/documents/programmes/basic-services/resources/Usindiso%20Commission%20Report%20-%20Part%20a(i)%20-%2030%20April%202024%20.pdf

with collective mobilizations within unlawful occupations and with the provision of secure, albeit temporary accommodation, in the inner-city. I will first situate the analysis within the conceptual terrain of the paper, then provide an overview of the methodology and context, followed by two ethnographic and narrative sections.

Uncommon Rhythms: Conceptual Refrains

Urban theory, and theories of the commons more widely, have moved away from a conception of the commons as indicating the strictly rule-bound governance of common resources (see Ostrom, 2008). Rather, more recent literature has shifted the emphasis away to processes of commoning. García-Lopez *et al.* (2021, p. 1211), for instance, argue that commoning may be understood as "a labour that cares for and reproduces commons", in contrast to which "un-commoning" is marked by "difference and divergences." The concept of "the uncommons" developed by Blaser and Cadena (2017) is not necessarily the antithesis of the commons. In fact, they argue that uncommoning can be a form of productive divergence and antagonism necessary for sustaining the commons. As they write (Blaser and Cadena, 2017, p.192) "uncommoning (...) might assist commoning in living up to its democratic and equalitarian promise by keeping those involved alert to the uncommons that undergird the commons." In my conceptualisation of "uncommon rhythms", I will elaborate on this tension: the everyday practices of commoning as affective labour, care and co-becoming may coalesce around uncommoning – forms of antagonism and divergence (García-Lopez *et al.*, 2021). However, the uncommoning forces of dislocation, dispossession and accident may also violently corrode the bases for commoning practices. Furthermore, I am to bring the emergent literature on commoning and uncommoning into conversation with the literature on urban rhythms.

If commoning has a rhythmic element that emerges from everyday practices, then uncommon rhythms are those that disrupt and disassemble the capacities for urban rhythms to give rise to commoning practices. This is not to diminish the generativity, creativity and improvisation required to survive the insecurities of everyday urban life, nor reduce urban life to a repetitive conformity. As Filip De Boeck (2015) has argued, syncopated rhythms, the off-beat, can be central to urban creativity, improvisation and survival. Rather, dislocating events like accident and fire can threaten the grounds in which the labour of care required for urban commoning can take place. Repeated experiences of accident, anti-immigrant conflict, state violence and abandonment in South Africa operate to disassemble highly interpenetrated social relationships continually producing forms of rupture that require residents to recurrently repair everyday relations (cf. Cousins, 2023). These forms of rupture and repair align with the experiences of chronic shock. Such events are both recurrent, but their timing unpredictable. This condition leads to common experiences of anxiety, sleeplessness and limbo as life is lived with a predilection towards some probable but indeterminate dislocation.

With reference to Rio de Janeiro, Fahlberg *et al.* (2020, p. 1) have argued that urban residents are subject to chronic shocks including "constantly recurring disasters, such as floods, severe illness, or violent police invasions." Residents develop multiple strategies of resilience in relation to these shocks, ones which "are the routine and necessary byproducts of the poor's uneven integration into the urban fabric"(*Ibid.*, p. 9). I wish to develop this analysis both with regard to Johannesburg and to theories of urban rhythm more widely. Inner-city residents in Johannesburg are subject to forms of "chronic shock" such as eviction, criminal events, fire, and deportations. Furthermore, these forms of shock form part of, and orient, the rhythms of life in the city.

In Johannesburg, residents of unlawful occupations live in states of extreme precarity. Precarity under these conditions is not simply passivity or vulnerability. Rather, following Lancione (2019), I view precarity as a mode of making and unmaking the city. Furthermore forms of state and private-sector regeneration schemes themselves are "precarious" (Oloukoï, 2018) with only a tenuous grasp of the city. The spaces of marginality that inner-city residents find themselves are not necessarily spaces of abjection. As bell hooks (1989) has argued, spaces of marginality can also be spaces of agency, home-making and resistance. hooks (1989, p. 19) writes:

> "At times home is nowhere. At times one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference."

In a related sense, home should not be seen simply in an idealised space. As Nowicki (2014, p. 785) argues in relation to 'domicide', the "intentional destruction of home":

> "Home and the destroyed home are not static, unchanging sites of comfort and consolation as traditional assumptions of home would suggest. Rather, home is made, unmade and remade across the lifecourse, subject to a seemingly unending variety of factors: financial, conjugal, sociopolitical and so on. Home can shift from a site of safety to a site of violence, and back again." (*Ibid*., p. 788)

Domicides of unlawful occupations, through eviction and displacement, in Johannesburg destroy homes forged amid precarity, conflict and the threat of violence. Dislocations may foster forms of affiliation, resistance and commoning as a response. However, the recurrence of forms of shock disrupts the capacities of inner-city residents to recompose meaningful lives. Everyday rhythms among inner-city residents intersect with the unpredictable and non-linear patterning of capitalist investment, policing and various state officials and agencies. Within this patterned unpredictability and the threat of a rupture, inner-city residents, rather than establishing enduring commons, retreat into alcoves of intimacy, care and protection which provide some buffer against the expected torrents. These forms of retreat, however, remain transitory and precarious.

In theorising the concept of uncommon rhythms, I engage five conceptual orientations that can be woven together: Simone's notion of 'rhythms of endurance'; De Boeck's conception of 'syncopated urbanism'; Povinelli's conception of the 'quasi-event'; Lancione's notion of precarity; and Wanjiku Kihato's conception of urban governance.

Based on research in Johannesburg, AbdouMaliq Simone (2004) developed the concept of 'people as infrastructure', articulating how forms of sociality and improvisation in Johannesburg, including among migrants and residents of unlawful occupations, form part of the urban infrastructure. In his (2021, p. 1345) re-evaluation of the concept, he writes:

> "Despite the extremities of eviction, displacement, and dispossession, residents are still often able to piece together some fragile and limited versions of collective force and action. But they now often do so from locations where few are paying attention. For, physical displacement now most usually entails operating from the far hinterlands, or in territories intentionally made marginal or wasted from overuse or irrelevance."

In a related sense, Simone (2019) has also developed the conception of 'rhythms of endurance'. These rhythms are patterned by experiences of "the surge" as a rhythm which "emerges from the attempts to reach beyond the confines of limited places and routines" and characterised by "surging forward and withdrawing" (*Ibid*., p. 8). Simone's conceptions capture a recurrent form of rhythm in my study of inner-city Johannesburg where inner-city residents, in particular moments, seek to reshape and alter their conditions (for instance in forms of civic or legal activism), but often life is characterised by forms of 'withdrawal' – a retreat into the everyday in the face of forces (such as eviction, police raids, violence and fires) which threaten to dissemble a sense of safety.

Simone (2019, p. 19) argues that these rhythms of endurance require that "everyday experience is not something holed up in some makeshift protective casing called the house, however it might be constructed, but all of the ways residency was instantiated under radars in provisional layouts, in mass produced real estate schemes or improvised shelters." He continues: "spatial configurations and the etching out of discernible territories are much less important than the rhythmic modulations of movement" (*Ibid*., p. 132). This form of rhythm extends beyond the mere protection of a house but, in highly precarious and mobile populations, involves a "repertoire" (*Ibid*., p. 18) of interactions, forms of care and affective relations, which are transposed from one setting to another and re-assembled. Simone uses the metaphor of "ensemble work" for rhythms of improvisation within a "world of constraint" (*Ibid*., p. 28). In this paper, I view the state too – constituted by a multiple of institutions and actors, working at times together, at times in tension – as an ensemble that produces particular rhythms and repetitions.

Simone's notion of endurance resonates with the work E.A Povinelli (See Simone, 2019, p. 125). Povinelli (2011) has argued that under the conditions of late liberalism, precarious populations live in conditions characterised by endurance and exhaustion. Everyday rhythms may be disrupted and

re-assembled by intruding events – not only large-scale political events, but also daily disturbances that might rupture "ordinary life and its taken-for granted conditions and rhythms" (Povinelli, 2011, p. 136). Povinelli, writing about Indigenous housing in Australia, indicates that "experiential events" may "emerge from the rhythms in which human and nonhuman material composition and decomposition are ordinarily encountered." (*Ibid.*) Everyday political life is characterised by "quasi event" – the events of everyday life, of everyday rhythms and endurance. The nature of events like police raids do not fit easily into categories of political events (they are often not registered or are mere spectacles for the media), but they disrupt and re-assemble everyday life in the inner-city. The expectation of such events is often integrated into the life of inner-city residents. Hence they form part of the patterning of every day urban life and politics. But these patternings and rhythms are not simply cyclical but rather syncopated.

De Boeck's (2015) conception of 'the politics of syncopation' explores the rhythms of urban life in precarious settings (Kinshasa in his case study) – these "rhythms may be best understood in terms of a politics of the syncopated and suspended through which urban politics are constantly splintered and reassembled" (De Boeck, 2015, p. 146). The politics of precarious groups revolve around failing and inadequate infrastructures and forms of state absence or patronage. Incomplete infrastructures are not merely voids but "impose their own spatial and temporal logics." (De Boeck, 2015, p. 153) – these involved the patterning of everyday trade, exchange and competition but also forms of violence. This resonates strongly with my own study of unlawful occupations as spaces of dense histories of multiple crossing pathways, and complex and unstable socialites.

The patterns of state policing and violence are not uniform. Wanjiku Kihato (2014) has argued – in her analysis study of migrant women in Johannesburg – that the everyday movement and strategies of inner-city residents shape urban governance. Everyday resistance – which one might liken to practices of commoning – in urban occupations, such as the refusal to move, also impact on state practice. But an analysis of rhythm and movement forces us to see how the modes of intersecting rhythm are not merely issues of territorial control but rather complex patternings involving both state and private sector actors, along with inner-city residents.

These theories of urban rhythms may be articulated with theories of commoning to move away from the commons as ideal, explicitly political, or teleological category, towards how practices of commoning emerge from the everyday rhythms and potentialities of life in precarious housing situations. This approach connects with recent theories that seek to address the practices and improvisations of everyday life in precarious urban environments (See Berlant, 2016; Linebaugh, 2014; Harvey, 2012). As Worby (2022) writes: "'the commons' has been understood as potentiality – something that can only come into being through praxis or 'commoning'." Furthermore, Garcia *et al.* (2021, p. 1200) argue that the analytic focus of commoning might emphasise three spheres: "relational aspects of the work of commoning (practices, labour, care) in transforming our world and being transformed by it; the role of commons and commoning practices in generating subjectivies of being-in-common; and difference and divergences (or un-commoning) that persist and emerge in commoning processes." These spheres have their own rhythms in the improvised and syncopated character of everyday life in unlawful occupations and precarious housing conditions. The uncommon rhythms of everyday life in urban occupations are not necessarily destructive, as they might generate the potentials for new forms of alliance and relationships. However, extreme forms of shock including violence, eviction, police raids and accidents like fires may radically corrode these commoning practices. Hence, we have to understand uncommon rhythms not just through repetition but also intensity.

Methodology

The paper is based on long-term ethnographic and narrative fieldwork conducted in inner-city Johannesburg primarily with the residents of unlawful occupations: so-called 'hijacked buildings', 'bad buildings' or 'dark buildings' where thousands of inner-city residents live, subject to the threats of eviction and often without basic services like electricity, a stable water supply and security. The term 'hijacked building' has no clear legal meaning, and has been used to describe a variety of unlawful occupations, not all of which are controlled in whole or part by criminal syndicates. Rather,

the label has been used by politicians to legitimate indiscriminate police raids against the buildings and, in doing so, stigmatise unlawful occupiers.

This paper draws on over 150 interviews and conversations with unlawful occupiers, informal traders and members of social movements, along with several interviews with state officials and property developers, between 2011 and 2023 along with media and archival surveys The combination of both ethnographic and narrative research, as I will argue, lends itself to a discussion of urban rhythms. Whereas ethnography is attuned to documenting everyday rhythms, narrative research allows one to contextualise those rhythms in a longer temporal context.

The research started with a research agreement with Doctors Without Borders (MSF, Johannesburg) between 2011 and 2013. It is through this initial connection with MSF, who established health-screening projects and waste clearing projects in the inner-city, in collaboration with PlanAct and the Inner-City Resource Centre, that I made connections in inner-city unlawful occupations. It was during this period that I negotiated the initial informed consent to conduct research with individuals and in several buildings.

From 2014 to 2018, I primarily followed-up the cases of individuals and buildings in which I had established contact, exploring issues such as ongoing legal struggles, the aftermath of evictions (two buildings, Chambers and Diamond Exchange, were evicted during this period) and the aftermath of a fire in Cape York in August 2013. I also conducted research on the aftermath of the April 2015 xenophobic violence in Johannesburg and a second fire in Cape York in July 2017[2].

I established a formal research relationship with The Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa (SERI) and Inner City Federation (ICF) between 2018 and 2021. Through this relationship I made contacts with housing activists and visited a number of unlawful occupations which I did not have previous contacts with. I also organized and co-funded two workshops for the ICF in 2018 and 2019 (the first on media and social media strategies, the second on arts and activism). This was based on the idea of critical pedagogy and that the role of the researcher and academic is also to help support and capacitate communities and civil society to speak for themselves. However, I have anonymised individuals unless requested to use real names and have done so with consent (either written or recorded). Where buildings have been evicted and there is no reasonable chance of residents returning, or the cases are already in the public domain, I have identified the buildings. The research was not clearly delineated into field-work periods, given that I have lived and worked in Johannesburg. In 2023, I conducted two follow-up interviews that I draw on below, though the analysis is based on the longer-term research.

Uncommon rhythms in unlawful occupations

Since the ending of apartheid, the African National Congress has controlled political power in South Africa and Johannesburg. However, in August 2016, the party – for the first time – lost control of Johannesburg. Herman Mashaba – a centre-right free market advocate – was elected as mayor. He resigned as a result of internal party disputes at the end of 2019, leading to the ANC retaking power through a coalition. This has precipitated a period of significant instability in Johannesburg's governance resulting in a variety of coalition governments and a succession of mayors. The governance of Johannesburg has hence been characterised by both volatility and recurrent patterns of policing.

Life in inner-city Johannesburg has also been characterised by a series of shocks over the past two decades. There have been frequent cases of fire in inner-city buildings. In my research, these include the case of Caledonian Hall in 2012, where a fire led to the collapse of a building and two subsequent deaths. A fire in Cape York in August 2013 led to the deaths of four people, including a mother and a child, and a fire in July 2017 in Cape York killed at least seven people. However, that these fires occurred shows that the conditions and risks of places like 80 Albert have been well known for over a decade.

2 https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2017-09-26-op-ed-meaningful-engagement-not-militarisation-is-the-way-for-ward-for-mashabas-johannesburg/ "Operation Fiela's Children" published in ConMag.

Xenophobic violence too has been recurrent. Notably, in May 2008 violence broke out in Johannesburg and spread nationally, resulting in over 60 deaths and 100 000 people displaced nationwide (Oatway and Skuy, 2021). This, too, affected inner-city Johannesburg. In April 2015, xenophobic violence in KwaZulu-Natal led to at least five deaths and the 9000 people being displaced. In inner-city Johannesburg, there was the looting of foreign-owned shops, though police managed to quell the spread of violence. However, this violence was followed by an operation initiated by the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Migration, appointment by the Presidency, called Operation Fiela, Sesotho for 'sweep out the dirt' that, rather than protecting migrants, frequently targeted them for deportation. For many of those I spoke to, eviction was not a singular event, but rather part of life in the city – many had been through several evictions. It was the same for deportation, particularly for young Zimbabwean men, who were deported – going through the infamous Lindela Repatriation Centre. But police raids have not solely affected foreign nationals.

In 2017 and 2018 Mashaba made the 'cleaning up' of the inner-city one of his primary goals. He personally facilitated and participated in police raids against unlawful occupations which involved immigration officials, along with the national and municipal police. In a Constitutional Court judgement in October 2021, the Court found that, in these raids, the applicants, "who are poor and vulnerable people, were subjected to cruel, degrading and invasive raids, which were conducted without any warrants. The duration of the search and seizure campaign lasted approximately a year. The true purpose of the raids was not only to seek out and arrest undocumented immigrants but also to frighten and harass the applicants into leaving their homes."[3] As I will discuss below, these raids affected many South African residents and families.

The period of Covid-19 amplified this general experience of shock and uncertainty. While the state provided food support for South Africans, there was no organized food support for foreign nationals. NGOs and Community Action Networks had to fill the gap from the early weeks after the State of Disaster was announced on March 15 2020, and when, on 27 March, a hard lockdown began.he early weeks of the lockdown precipitated intense anxiety for residents living in inner-city Johannesburg, particularly foreign nationals, and also involved the forced internment of homeless people into shelters that were often overcrowded and with poor health facilities.

My point in outlining these histories is not to reduce inner-city residents to a state of unabated abjection. Certainly, there is immense vitality in the inner-city, and the formation of multiple forms of alliance and sociality. My point is rather that these forms of vitality and connections form around the continued experience and unpredictability of shock and dislocation. These forms of shock limit and disrupt the potentials and practices for everyday commoning, though they do not erase them. Rather, everyday rhythms are oriented towards the expected and protection of further shocks. Residents of the inner-city are subject to insecurity and anxiety but have to form meaningful and enduring connections during periods of abeyance. Sleeplessness is generalised and rest disturbed by an ever-present possibility of police in the night, eviction or criminal violence. Prayer, drink, cannabis and narcotics are common responses to lull this fear. Forms of civic activism have been mobilised to restrict and limit these forms of chronic shock, partly successfully. But long and often draw-out legal cases have slowed the uncommon rhythms, the uncommoning, of life in Johannesburg. They have succeeded in creating affiliations among residents, and often been able to defer and postpone forms of shock such as eviction, allowing residents some space to retreat and undertake commoning practices even while they have not secured permanent and stable housing and the conditions for an urban commons. To illustrate these dynamics, I will focus on the way life narratives are interwoven with the stories of buildings and the city more widely.

Living in a Temporary Emergency: Cikizwa Gqokoma

In early 2022, I met up Cikizwa Gqokoma[4] (who I had first met in 2017), living in a temporary emergency accommodation building called Fraser House. Over the redbrick facade at the back of the building is a large mural, in stylised red, black and white, of two figures holding one another

3 "Residents of Industry House, 5 Davies Street, New Doornfontein, Johannesburg and Others v Minister of Police and Others [2021] ZACC 37"

4 Cikizwa Gqokoma is her real name, used with consent as a public housing activist.

between the a black crescent moon. It is home to over 100 households. Fraser House is located at the borders of Maboneng, an arts precinct meaning "place of light", and the derelict suburb called Jeppe. Nearby is New Doornfontein, once a centre of the city's almost disappeared textile industry. A defunct train line runs past the building across the road. The pavement outside is a place of drinking and hanging out.

Inside of Fraser House, there were issues with the water supply, but the building was clean and safe and offered spacious rooms with views of the city. Cikizwa was proud of her home, happy to have a place she and her two children living with her can sleep peacefully. Over the past decade she had been subject to the threat of eviction and victim of unlawful police raids. She has been part of two Constitutional cases, one relating to eviction, the second to police raids. Both her and her comrades, with the support of a *pro bono* legal organisation, the Socio-Economics Rights Institute of South Africa (SERI), have won these. She is a committee member of one of the most active social movements in the inner-city, The Inner-City Federation, formed in 2015.

The rewards of these struggles have been a place to rest a while without the threat of eviction or police knocking on her door at night. Fraser House is known technically as 'temporary emergency accommodation' (TEA). It is a municipality-owned and managed site for those evicted from their previous accommodation, and a who have fought legal battles to avoid being thrown out on the street. South Africa has very strong protections against evictions that will lead to homelessness and, under Constitutional law, the City of Johannesburg is obliged to provide accommodation to prevent this.

But with continually rising rentals and a huge shortage of affordable inner-city accommodation, TEA has become *de facto* permanent. According to the city's housing department's analysis in 2021, they had 1864 households living in TEA and were obliged to provide 10 000 Units for households to be evicted, and this is a conservative estimate. These are households that cannot afford inner-city rentals and are living unlawfully in occupations in old warehouses, derelict tenements and multi-story buildings, while some pay rentals to criminal syndicates. That Fraser existed at all was a result of a Constitutional Court case known as 'Blue Moonlight' over a decade before that had obliged the City of Johannesburg to construct more TEA sites to house those who would be rendered homeless by evictions[5].

One of these sites was Fraser House, the building in which Cikizwa lives. Without Blue Moonlight, Fraser House would not exist. Fraser House then, quite literally, lies at the intersections of two lines of urban renewal in the city – the development of temporary emergency accommodation and the art-based precarious gentrification of Maboneng. But Cikizwa's story also intersects with a third and very significant story, without which a vision of Johannesburg cannot be complete – the role of police in the city.

Gqokoma's legal journey began when she was living in an unlawful occupation of a six-story high-rise called Kiribilly. Gqokoma, a mother of two girls, had moved from the Eastern Cape to Johannesburg in 2005. The building, primarily occupied by Xhosa and Zulu South Africans, offered a sense of community, but also struggled with the threat of eviction. In 2013 the owners attempted to evict the residents but they resisted on the grounds that they had unknowingly consented to their eviction. In February 2017 they won their case in the Constitutional Court, and were later granted the right to receive temporary emergency accommodation.

But the case did not lead to a more peaceful existence. Kirribilly was subject to three raids during Mashaba's lead of the City. In early 2018, Gqokoma and her young daughter were woken up in the middle of the night and forced onto the street. They were insulted by the police and accused of being hijackers. The event affected their sleep and caused lasting trauma to the family. The raids were not, however, specific to Mashaba, but a continuation of forms of policing precarity used by previous administrations.

Represented by SERI, the residents of Kiribilly, along with 10 other buildings, took Mashaba along with the Minister of Police and others to caught. In June 2020 in the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic, they won the case. The Court ruled the clause under which the raids were taken, which

5 City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality vs Blue Moonlight Properties 39 (Pty) Ltd and Another (CC) [2011] ZACC 33; 2012 (2) BCLR 150 (CC); 2012 (2) SA 104 (CC) (1 December 2011)

allowed for invasions of homes under public order regulations without a police warrant, was unconstitutional. In addition, it found that they had been undertaken with no evidence of criminality or evidence that they had an impact on crime.

The case was a major victory. While unlawful police raids on a small scale are still regular in Johannesburg, it has slowed the large-scale police raids that have been used to persecute the poor and migrants in the post-apartheid era. However, as I will discuss below, the slowing of police raids was followed by unlawful attacks and evictions by xenophobic vigilantes.

Nonetheless, the case was a personal victory for Cikizwa. “It was so nice. Because we were tired of being abused by South African police. We were so tired. Every day you have to think that even today the police can come. It’s not that they will come and leave the place as it is. They will do mess in the house searching for something.”[6]

In Fraser House – ironically given that it is temporary emergency accommodation, rather than permanent – there is a glimpse of what a genuinely inclusive urban regeneration policy might look like: one that offers housing to those who can’t afford it, and safe pathways through the city. For Gqokoma, moving to Fraser House has offered a new lifestyle. “You can breathe, man. You can sleep well. You can dream. And you have to decide what you want to do in life. You can focus even if you want to study you can study because it’s quiet and nice and safe and neat. It has no crime.”[7]

Cikizwa’s case reveals how she and her neighbours have constantly had to adapt to the uncommon rhythms and dislocation of life in the city. Ultimately, they have managed to create a space of retreat, a space where everyday commoning practices can emerge, and secure housing has been central to this. Civil society in the city is stronger than it was a decade ago. As noted, Cikizwa is part of a civil society group that represents over 70 buildings called The Inner City Federation (ICF), formed in 2015, that represents both South Africans and foreign nationals and has been mobilising for rights.

The legal and civic activism over the past decade has been successful in slowing evictions and police raids against unlawful occupations. But thousands still live in dire conditions. Siyabonga Mahlangu, the General Secretary of the ICF told me in 2023, “[At the moment] evictions are not that much. But in terms of basic services many buildings are affected.” Subsequent governments have not taken seriously the need to provide existing occupations with basic services. “We’ve been engaging them [the city municipality] for so many years. But fruitful results have not been coming.”[8]

Cikizwa and her neighbours have managed, through legal and civic activism, to carve out a space of rest and retreat where everyday rhythms can emerge. That this is in temporary emergency accommodation reveals the ways in which inner-city residents have to carve strategies to defer dislocation, and retreat from spaces of constant shock. This space emerged out of the constant disruptions and dislocations, the “uncommon rhythms” of life in the city. Cikizwa’s attempts at commoning were twofold. The first was the attempt to form a community and social support networks in the inner-city among her neighbours, attempts that were disrupted but not destroyed by recurrent police raids. The second was her role as a housing activist as part of the Inner-City Federation. These processes reveal how the capacity to form alliances and processes of commoning coalesce around the unpredictability of life in the city: of dislocation and relocation. However, many others in the city do not manage to sustain legal cases and these types of commoning practices – their uncommon rhythms are harsher and more enduring, as the account below illustrates.

Msibi House and Dudula

One of the buildings in which I conducted long-term fieldwork from 2014 until 2019 was called Msibi House. It was a former metallurgical workshop with a red-brick façade. It had been used in the 1940s as a melting laboratory for precious metals and later as an upholsterer and printing works. In the post-apartheid era it had been divided up and formally rented out, before falling into disrepair. While the City and its owners, the property company Afhco and later a subsidiary Purple Fountain

6 Interview, May 2024. This narrative is also based on interviews conducted in 2018.

7 Idem.

8 Idem

Properties, considered it a "hijacked buildings", it was not controlled by a criminal gang, though some criminals would sometimes visit the building and stay in it. Rather, individuals "owned" their rooms, and could rent and sell them.

The building was occupied by both South Africans and Zimbabweans, who were the majority of residents after the xenophobic attacks of 2008 when many moved in, fleeing other spaces. There was a large community of visually impaired residents, and a blind man led the committee for many years. Many of the residents were recyclers and would wander the city with carts returning to sort their gatherings in a drive-way. A few informal traders sold their goods on the pavement. Across the building was a taxi rank where minibus taxi drivers would park and wash their cars. Beside the rank was a concrete park with a few acacia and a basketball court.

Sometimes there were would be community meetings or political meetings of the Zimbabwean Opposition Party, the Movement for Democratic Change in the park. Residents would use the public toilets at the taxi rank or buckets in their rooms. Many of the residents would hang out here for some shade, chatting or braiding hair. There was a small spaza shop beside Msibi House selling cool drinks and fried chips, that was also a space for hanging out. There was only one tap in the building on the ground floor and women would often wash clothes in buckets on the pavements using a fire hydrant. The rooftop was also a space for hanging clothes.

Inside the building, the shebeens or informal bars would start early, selling food and beer and playing music, which often disturbed the blind community. The committee of the building would collect money for cleaning the building, but there were often disputes about paying, and so the collective cleaning of the building was sporadic. The committee, after the blind leader departed, was led by the spaza shop owner and it was a loose collection of individuals rather strictly organised. The building was not a rigidly-organised and rule-bound commons in the technical sense, but revealed forms of commoning through emergent forms of conviviality, friendship and support which made it a home for many residents. An underpinning of tensions over the noise of the shebeens (illegal bars), and between South African and foreign residents revealed how uncommoning also characterised the everyday rhythms of the building.

The residents, with legal representation, had managed to resist eviction in 2010 and, through a series of postponements and deferrals, remained in the building for over a decade. The building was frequently raided by immigration officials and, in 2014, there was an attempt by the owners of the property to evict the building with the help of immigration officials – an attempt blocked by the residents' lawyers, though many of the residents were deported, going through the infamous deportation centre, the Lindela Repatriation Centre. However, many subsequently returned across the border.

As a young man living in the building told me, in 2015, "Last year, they wanted to chase people out. They came in the morning, maybe come with security and some police, some home affairs, they come and say all the men come outside. All the men came outside, and then they took me in the van there by the police. I go to Lindela and that time stayed four days only. I've been to Lindela two times. That was the first time, this was the second time."[9] He had stayed at the border for three days, before his wife sent him money to pay a bribe and return directly home. For many young migrants in the city, deportation is part of the rhythms of life in Johannesburg.

Msibi House was subject to a police raid accompanied by the Mayor Herman Mashaba himself in late 2017, who entered the building accompanied by police. He was filmed sitting on the bed of pregnant woman lamenting the state of the building. It had also suffered from attacks by a criminal based outside the building, and two deaths by electrocution when some residents tried to reconnect to the power supply when the city failed to provide power (even though the residents were willing to pay). In 2018 there was a city audit of the building and the South African residents were granted the right to temporary emergency accommodation, but not foreign residents. However, as there was inadequate accommodation available, this further delayed the case.

Hence, the residents lived in a state of legal suspension and deferral until, in late 2022, they began receiving threats from a group claiming to be Operation Dudula. Dudula emerged a menacing

9 Interview, July 2015.

nationalist movement in 2021, threatening migrants and public interest lawyers. Dudula, an amorphous group that tried (and failed) to register as a political party in 2023, was part of a wider nationalist and online movement that was used as "a vehicle for xenophobic action mobilization on the ground as well as to fuel new public engagements can translate into tangible threats." (Vanyoro, 2022, p. 2). They (or at least individuals claiming to be Dudula) delivered a letter to the residents of the building demanding they vacate. The letter stated, "This letter is served to all the people who are illegally occupying this building. We have communicated with the owner of this building and had an understanding that we can have [sic] illegal immigrants in this building." The ygave residents five days to comply. It is unlikely that they had genuinely communicated with the building's owners. The Dudula branch denied to the online new publication The Daily Maverick that they were involved (Daily Maverick Reporters, 2022)

The residents went to their lawyers, the Legal Resources Centre, to obtain a letter that they were entitled to remain in the building under a court order which was given. But things escalated.

Gloria[10] was an owner of a shebeen, and later a small restaurant, in Msibi House. She was also one of the committee members who had helped sustain the legal case. She had been in the building for over a decade and her son had been murdered nearby in 2014, though the killers were never found. Gloria had managed to re-establish a life in the building, and dealt with the chronic shocks of life in an unlawful occupation, through the support of her neighbours. Her basement was one of the centres of sociality in the building. She would cook lunches on a gas stove and play music for her guests.

She recalled how, during December 2022, men claiming to be Dudula starting coming threatening the residents, telling them that they had to move. One of the South African residents of the building was seen speaking with them. The threats caused great anxiety and sleeplessness among the residents. As Gloria told me "[We were] not sleeping well. Because we were scared (... they) told us one of these days we'll burn you, all you all of you here."[11] These threats resonated with many in the building, who had had to flee the xenophobic violence that spread through the city in 2008, and which had recurrently showed its face over the years. And it was not an idle threat. On Friday 16 December the group claiming to be Dudula started violently evicting the residents.

According to Daily Maverick (2023), "the group – which allegedly identified itself as Operation Dudula – is believed to have evicted more than 60 people with disabilities (predominantly blind) and more than 200 women and children from a derelict building in the City of Johannesburg." The group claiming to be Dudula came inside and started breaking the doors down. Gloria estimated that more than twenty men came with guns, knobkieries and bolt cutters to evict people over the weekend of the 17 December. Gloria, pre-empting losing her possessions, had rented a room in Soweto and, with help from a friend with a vehicle, moved her belongings. But many residents had their possessions stolen. Once on the street, they continued to be robbed and attacked, including families and blind residents, vans coming to take away their things. The police drove past but did nothing, even though residents reported what was happened. The municipality did not respond, in spite of the anti-hijacking rhetoric, even though the eviction was public and reported in the media. This revealed how, even though this was an illegal eviction, the state ensemble on various levels, including the police and city government, was complicit through non-action. The eviction and violence formed part of the uncommon rhythms of the city, splitting apart the forms of connection, support and affect networks that residents had created for more than a decade.

Gloria moved to Soweto, while others in the building dispersed throughout the city, many to other unlawful occupations. Gloria would eventually move back to another unlawful occupation. This type of violent eviction is what I mean by 'the uncommon rhythms' of the city. In one sense it was a singularly violent event. In another, it was part of the wider and recurrent patterns of dislocation, state abandonment and xenophobic violence that has characterised life in the city. These patterns act to uncommon, they undo the labour of care and conviviality through which a semblance of communal life emerges among those who dwell in the derelict infrastructures of the city. While the organization SERI sought an injunction against Dudula's evictions, the residents could not return to the building.

10 A pseudonym

11 Interview May 2013. This section is also based on long-term ethnography at Msibi House between 2013 and 2019.

Discussion

How is one to understand the rhythms of the everyday lives of inner-city residents like Cikizwa and Gloria, and thousands of others who have had to navigate recurrent forms of shock? And, furthermore, what is the value of articulating a theory of urban rhythm with that of the commons?

Providing adequate and secure affordable housing, as Cikizwa eventually obtained, albeit one classified as temporary emergency accommodation, is far more than just shelter: it provides a space of retreat, a space of intimacy, in which the everyday rhythms of commoning can emerge. Gloria was not so lucky. Her space of retreat over a decade, carved out in the wake of her son's murder, was rapidly and violently dismantled, forcing her into a new cycle of moving between buildings. Safe and secure housing provides a space of healing, intimacy and conviviality central to life and security in the city. Without this, and in spite of the labours of care that go on in unlawful occupations, they are always under threat of radical and violent disassembly – uncommoning that becomes corrosive rather than generative.

The state ensemble – indicating not a unified entity but a multiplicity of institutions acting both in harmony and dissonance – operates in a manner that, rather than reducing the uncertainty and anxiety of inner-city residents, frequently amplifies it. Controlling precarity through police and migration raids has become part of the rhythms, albeit irregular and unpredictable, of the life of the city, and something that precarious inner-city residents have to navigate through everyday contestations.

In theorising the rhythms of everyday life in inner-city Johannesburg, it is necessary to situate recurrent police raids, dispossessions and accidents, both in the historical context of post-apartheid South Africa and in relation to the particularities of everyday life. The cycles of dispossession in Johannesburg are both a repetition of past colonial and apartheid dispossessions of Black working-class inner-city populations, but also with radical divergences, resistances and lines of differentiation shaped by the intersection of legal regimes and social worlds. Understanding these processes in relation to the concept of 'rhythm', one has to understand everyday rhythms in terms of forms of repetition, but also in manners that are neither simply cyclical.

First, these rhythms are constituted through the overlay of the rhythms of everyday life with the medium-term rhythms of the city over the course of a decade and the longer-term histories of colonial and apartheid dispossessions. The patterns of life in the city include how the state ensemble (including policing and state bureaucracies) seeks to manage and control the everyday life of the city in ways that exceed its control.

It is precisely this overlay of multiple temporalities that gives the 'uncommon rhythms' of life in inner-city Johannesburg their character. Everyday recurrent patterns of labour, care, and path making, structure and orient themselves in relation to the longer durée of life in the city and its recurrent yet unpredictable shocks.

A final element of these rhythms is the infrastructural dimensions of derelict and decayed infrastructures, and life exposed to accident and fire because residents of unlawful occupations lack basic services and security, which produce frequent shocks and violence. These overlaid rhythms emerge from diverse spatial and temporal scales: the former in relation to the occupation and management of space, the latter through the structuring of the everyday in relation to the longer histories of the city.

However, a focus on the everyday in itself is insufficient. Everyday life in unlawful occupations is not self-contained, but oriented temporally, both in terms of past experiences, and in anticipation of the future. Everyday life is constituted in relation to wider economic and historical processes. In unlawful occupations this future may be seen in terms of hope for a better life or a stable home. However, life is also lived in a state of anxiety and suspension in relation to the expectation of accident, displacement and violence.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we have to temper the normative and teleological dimensions of commoning and life oriented towards a stable commons (which rarely arrives) by noting that practices of commoning often aim just to sustain themselves in a condition of suspension; they are attempts to create intimacy and meaning in precarious contexts and to adapt to the possibilities of violent upheaval. The commons may never arrive and so the rhythms of commoning are precisely the forms in which life is liveable under precarious conditions.

As this paper has discussed, urban theory has shifted away from a vision of the commons as a well-regulated and rule-bound space towards thinking of commoning practices as involving affect, potentiality, and precarity. However, such a shift requires a documentation and analysis of the unstable terrain of everyday rhythms that are constitutive of everyday life. The rhythmic element of everyday life – its movements, rituals and patterns – deepens our understanding of forms of commoning practices, particularly when viewed in terms of the medium- and longer-term cycles of the city.

That commoning practices emerge from everyday rhythms, even while they may not be explicitly articulated in political terms or through a set of rules and codes, has a converse: these rhythms can be disrupted and dissembled by the intrusion of state and criminal violence, dispossessions like evictions and deportations, and by accidents like fire. These shocks are far from isolated but, when one looks over the course of a decade and longer, they become part of the patterning of life in the city. Hence they are both recurrent but also unpredictable. This is what I have articulated as 'uncommon rhythms' – the concept encompasses both the everyday divisions and antagonism of life in unlawful occupations, along with the recurrent events of shock which serve to disrupt and dissemble the everyday rhythms of commoning. Everyday rhythms are recalibrated and everyday assemblages re-patterned in response to recurrent shock. Life is lived with the expectation that at any moment it might be radically recomposed.

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