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## Coughing Out the City : Habitable Air in Petrochemical South Africa.

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Breath is a powerful material and spiritual force, a point not only of harm but also recovery...[showing] convergences of racial violence, health and environmental hazards, socioeconomic precarity, and disaster through time and space. (Jolaosho, 2020: 1)<sup>1</sup>.

South Africa-based scientists were the first to detect the highly contagious Omicron variant of Covid-19, prompting international travel restrictions that hurt the country's tourist industry and economy<sup>2</sup>. Public fear in Europe and the U.S. about the so-called "South African variant" echoed that of other headline-making illnesses, such as HIV/AIDS and Ebola<sup>3</sup>. Simon Watney, writing about HIV/AIDS, argues that narratives about illness in Africa resonate with "a long discursive tradition" of missionary writing about the continent, immortalized by Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (Watney, 1989: 1). In such accounts, the social, cultural, political, economic history and its diversity, which is attributed to Europe and the U.S., is denied to Africa. The continent, instead, is framed as having a "special affinity" toward disease ascribed to a generalized and homogenous "backwardness", whether social or medical. Watney observes that news reports phrased "AIDS in Africa" instead as "African AIDS", suggesting both origin and cause; similarly, Covid-19 variants "discovered" in South Africa became new and dangerous "South African variants". The country's Tourism Minister Lindiwe Sisulu said South Africa was being "punished for the work that we do"<sup>4</sup>. Yet, it is not only knowledge of scientists

<sup>1</sup>- A rising star in anthropology, Dr. Omotayo T. Jolaosho, recently passed away on October 22, 2021. They were astute a critic of dynamics of power and healing in relation to the politics breath and music.

<sup>2</sup>- Lynsey Chutel, "After detecting the Omicron variant, South Africa feels 'punished' by global travel bans", NY Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/26/world/africa/south-africa-omicron-travel-ban.html>, accessed June 6, 2022.

<sup>3</sup>- William A. Haseltine, "AstraZeneca Vaccine Fails To Protect Against The South African Variant, Says Study", Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/williamhaseltine/2021/03/17/astrazeneca-vaccine-fails-to-protect-against-the-south-african-variant/?sh=7c3e86876526>, accessed June 6, 2022.

<sup>4</sup>- Lynsey Chutel, "After detecting the Omicron variant, South Africa feels 'punished' by global travel bans", *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/26/world/africa/south-africa-omicron-travel-ban.html>, accessed June 6, 2022.

or experts that is being denied by this “long discursive tradition”, but also that of ordinary citizens who are presently grappling with the global pandemic under dire conditions. Some of these conditions include a lack of access to life-saving vaccines, tested in South Africa, yet hoarded by global North countries<sup>5</sup>. Like the AIDS crisis before it, and a lack of equitable access to anti-retroviral medicines, the African continent becomes a testing ground for knowledge and the extraction of knowledge, but not viewed as worthy of its production or recipient of its benefits.

These are old tropes, as Watney observes, that abjectify Africa. Yet, in South Africa specifically, there are other ways that history catches up to the present in the time of Covid-19, notably through pandemic lockdowns. Pandemic lockdowns are premised on the idea that bodies crossing borders and boundaries perpetuate harmful contagion. Less well known in Europe and the U.S. than the Omicron variant is that South Africa had some of the strictest series of lockdowns in the world<sup>6</sup>. Ironic considering international travel bans, South Africa was more systematic and centralized in its coronavirus measures than its global North counterparts in the early stages of the pandemic. Between March 2020 and December 2021, the South African government imposed curfews, banned alcohol, and barred residents to leave their homes, except for essential shopping and medical appointments. These measures were involuntary, yet largely popular. Less popular was how police and private security forces backed the lockdown measures. Local news outlets showed officers firing into crowds of shoppers in Johannesburg, and checking IDs at city checkpoints in scenes called “reminiscent of apartheid”<sup>7</sup>. Also “reminiscent” was that residents could not cross the lines between what are still highly race-and-class-based neighborhoods, or between rural and urban areas. By putting emphasis on the home as a space of safety from the virus, pandemic lockdowns spotlighted persistent spatialized inequalities. Police checkpoints amid lockdowns meant poor township residents had to stay at home in their poor townships, and rich suburbanites had to stay at home in their rich suburbs. During this period, the very air that residents breathe became a threat, as did crossing spatial boundaries that separate bodies – yet again.

In the interest of tying these two threads together – tropes resuscitated by Covid-19 and history that repeated in pandemic lockdowns – this article examines what I call “habitable air”, everyday practices among ordinary citizens and interactions with the environment that make air breathable and urban lives viable. To do so, I highlight what residents in Durban shack-settlements call *ukhubhodla*, which is best translated as “coughing out” in *isiZulu*. Coughing out encompasses both physically expelling pollutants or blockages from the lungs and, symbolically, speaking out, or vocally

<sup>5</sup>- Daphne Psaedakis, “Developing nations’ plea to world’s wealthy at U.N.: stop vaccine hoarding”, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/developing-nations-plea-worlds-wealthy-un-stop-vaccine-hoarding-2021-09-22/>, accessed June 6 2022.

<sup>6</sup>- David McKenzie and Nimi Princewill, “South Africa enters strict lockdown to combat ‘extremely serious’ impact of Delta variant”, *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/06/28/africa/south-africa-lockdown-covid-intl/index.html>, accessed June 6, 2022.

<sup>7</sup>- Jason Burke, “South African police fire rubber bullets at shoppers amid lockdown”, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/28/south-africa-police-rubber-bullets-shoppers-covid-19-lockdown>

expressing pain or discomfort lodged in the body. As this suggests, the converse of habitability, namely “unhabitable air”, is also relevant, which is exposure in the everyday lived environment or place of dwelling that constricts, or disables, the universal right to breathe (LeFebvre, 1996; Mbembe). The reason “coughing out” is relevant to building knowledge about ordinary citizen responses to Covid-19 is that the air, typically defined as a mixture of gases that we breathe and that envelopes the earth, does not have the same material-symbolic value or idiomatic meanings everywhere, not across South Africa and not globally. Many different theorizations of air, as threat or as healer, range in a variety of knowledge systems from climate science to Chinese medicine to yoga practice to robotics (Dove, 2013; Jolaosho, 2020). The novel coronavirus is an airborne illness that attacks the lungs, demanding the world re-envision the air all around as a site of danger, of medical and governmental intervention, as well as of moral politics. This rapid re-envisioning of air at multiple scales did not take place in a vacuum, but built upon existing infrastructures – social, cultural, political, economic history and its diversity – as well as emergent notions about the air that were highly localized and crossed borders, such as new conspiracy theories in South Africa that G5 mobile telecommunications masts spread Covid-19 through the air<sup>8</sup>.

Yet, in many parts of petrochemical South Africa, the air has long been regarded as a threat by residents, and coughing has long been an index of contaminated air. The World Health Organization identifies the South African city of Durban, for example, like other petrochemical producing areas globally, as not meeting basic standards for air quality. Residents blame oil refineries and other industries for the well-documented high rates of life-threatening illness, notably asthma and cancer. Since the apartheid era, local activist groups have mobilized against the unequal exposure to industrial chemicals in black and brown communities (Chance, 2018; Chari, 2010). This legacy of social movements against environmental racism continues into the post-apartheid present with such groups as the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA), which boast successful court cases, citizen science initiatives, and street actions. New groups have emerged to respond to industrial toxicity and climate change, like affiliates of the international Extinction Rebellion. The links between unequal distributions of air pollution and Covid-19 in cities like Durban are not incidental. Early research in the areas hardest hit by coronavirus in Italy, places known all over the world for overflowing hospitals and high rates of death, are also areas with unusually high rates of air pollution (Fattorini, et. al. 2020). The same was found in the U.S.<sup>9</sup> Scientists have established a correlation between the severity of the illness and places where residents have already compromised breathing capacity. Cancer and asthma are comorbidities with Covid-19. Scientists

<sup>8</sup>- <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-safrica-telecoms-5g/5g-covid-19-conspiracy-theory-baseless-and-fake-s-africas-telecoms-regulator-says-idUSKBN29G2B0>

<sup>9</sup>- “Air pollution linked with higher COVID-19 death rates”, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, In the News, <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/hsph-in-the-news/air-pollution-linked-with-higher-covid-19-death-rates/>, accessed June 4, 2022.

point to a possible relationship between the spread of Covid-19, and better studied infectious diseases such as HIV and TB, and industrial areas, where there is a reliance on highly mobile migrant labor populations, which even under South Africa's strict emergency measures, were not abated during the pandemic (Mushomi, *et al.* 2022). In this article, I first bring into dialogue anthropological literatures on the politics of air, voicing, and the body. Then, I turn to ethnographic materials to analyze idioms of “habitable” and “unhabitable” air in Durban shack settlements. I argue that residents use the air, and specifically, what they call “coughing out”, as a platform to turn individual pain into collective injury within at risk communities<sup>10</sup>.

### Coughing Out a Polluted City: Air, Voicing, and the Body

A person in mourning, a person harboring great suffering and emotional stress, experiences a heavy weight on the chest and shoulders, and cannot breathe easily. *Phefumlo* [to breathe in *isiXhosa*] has a moral connotation, for to breathe is also to speak of painful events that weigh on someone. It can also mean the strong empowered speech of the traditional healer. This speech is the exhaling of the soul, the release of blockage, and an emergence from social death that is incomplete unless it is witnessed and historicized by congregational modes of performance, rather than passive recording. (Feldman, 2004: 177)

In this section, I bridge two anthropological literatures that do not typically speak to each another. The first is the politics of air in urban environments, which I outline by examining “habitable air”. The second is a literature on the politics of voicing in relation to the body, which I summarize by examining “coughing out”. I further relate both to research on post-apartheid South Africa. Scholars are only beginning to explore the complex ways industrial air pollution intersects with global warming in interconnected petrochemical hubs, like the city of Durban. Recent scientific studies, for instance, investigate how pollutants, such as SO<sub>2</sub>, impact the human body and greenhouse gases (Dove, 2013). Policymakers and private sector leaders, meanwhile, point to an aligning of the stars between “clean energy”, reducing air pollution, and meeting global climate benchmarks. My focus on “habitable air” shifts the focus to ordinary citizens, their practices and interactions, as they grapple with an industry that is at the center of their lives and at the center of community debates about their own health and that of the planet. In Durban, for example, two of the biggest oil refineries are shutting down, citing local and global policy shifts, rising costs, and the unfavorable outlook for fossil fuels in the future of “green” energy. I therefore contribute to a growing literature that investigates how communities are with energy transition in the shadows of extractive industries.

<sup>10</sup>- To add a brief note on method, I have conducted ethnographic research in Durban shack settlements since 2006. I tracked habitable air through participant observation in shack settlements outward to the city streets and the courts, as well as through the analysis of relevant archival materials, including policy documents, court papers, scientific reports, texts produced by residents, and statements by state agents. I have conducted semi-structured interviews and life histories with hundreds of residents about their everyday lives and political activities before and after the end of apartheid. I also have interviewed – and observed on-site interactions with – housing officials, environmental experts, development planners, and other relevant professionals working on infrastructural and environmental issues in South Africa's poorest communities.

Yet, for decades, South Africanist scholars have stressed how urban environments in South Africa have been impacted by extractive industries, such as coal mining, notably through migrant labor regimes that spatialize race and gender (Breckenridge, 2016; Sparks, 2016; Moodie, 1994). In post-apartheid South African cities, air pollution politics is not new, but has undergone rapid transformation since the ruling African National Congress (ANC) came to power in 1994, and with the adoption of a new South African Constitution that guarantees “the right to a clean environment” (Bond, 2011; Chari, 2004). Air pollution, which links industry and climate change, has moved to the center of national policy debates, donor-funded NGO projects, and grassroots organizing (Bond, 2002; Swyngedouw, 2007; Taylor, 2013; Allen, 2003). Scholars in South Africa have observed that the health-effects of polluted air are newly being framed in terms of tort law and citizen rights claims (Lahsen, 2011). The South African government has endeavored to institute large-scale reforms, promising to cut greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution by 2030, and invest in renewables with the “co-benefit” of improving public health<sup>11</sup>. I argue that it is vital to analyze habitable air, or how ordinary citizens use everyday practices and interactions to make air breathable and life viable in these rapidly changing environments.

A growing number of anthropologists have turned to theorizing air, taking seriously local knowledge<sup>12</sup>. They also identify several relevant pitfalls. Michael Dove (2004) observes that two directions of thought about air persist from Hippocrates’ *Airs, Waters, Places*: one is based on human physiology, e.g. a theory of humors, and the other is based on geographic position. Returning to Watney’s observations (1987) about the missionary writing of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “bad air” was often associated with the colonies, and particularly to the African continent and thus, biologically or culturally determining. In the humoral vein, Carl Linneaus contributed to “miasma”

<sup>11</sup>- South Africa’s First Nationally Determined Contribution Under the Paris Agreement, September 2021, <https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/NDC/202206/South%20Africa%20updated%20first%20NDC%20September%202021.pdf>, accessed 1 June 2022.

<sup>12</sup>- Examinations of air and air pollution have been extensive in anthropology. Anthropologists of ritual and religion have examined air – the sky or the heavens – to explain how human manage good or evil other-worldly forces, such as witchcraft (Comaroff 1989). Medical anthropologists, too, have looked at how different times and places conceive of air-borne illnesses. Didier Fassin, for example, looks at the history of colonial epidemiology and how early racial segregation in South Africa is justified under the rubric of controlling the spread of tuberculosis. These studies are relevant for «coughing out» because they historicize public debates over multiple meanings of polluted air. More recently, environmental anthropologists of the 1970s and 1980s, as climate change and environmental activism really came into global prominence, have analyzed the impact of industries and chemically toxic air, especially in so-called fence-line communities. Notably, Barbara Allen looks at “Cancer Alley” in the petrochemical hub of Louisiana outside of New Orleans – which is connected to Durban’s energy industry – to illustrate how communities use air pollution as a platform to political mobilize and take industries to court, often with the ally-ship of scientific experts. Wind, the movement of air from one place to another, also has been written about extensively in relation to energy, for it provides cities with sources of energy via wind power, a technology that scientists increasingly return to as a “green” alternative from its humble beginnings as a windmill. More recent turns toward the Anthropocene in anthropology study science, technology, and expertise in relation to climate change, turning the atmosphere into an object of indigenous knowledge. In this way, air increasingly has been framed as a threat or a crisis, as it is in the post-nuclear age, or as a vehicle for “atmosterrorism”, where radiation and “drones raining down from the skies is no longer the stuff of science fiction” (Masco 2015, Sloterdijk 2009; Helmrich 2014; Povinelli 2017). Part of this crisis in the air is about industrial toxicity, thus prompting all sorts of new efforts toward carbon sequestration and removing pollution from the air. Moreover, in a global pandemic, as the air becomes reimagined as a potential threat and site of contagion, new and old theories proliferate in the contemporary moment.

or “bad air” theory, an obsolete medical theory prior to the germ theory of disease, which held into the 19th century and claimed that illnesses like malaria and epidemics like cholera were caused by noxious forms of air (Hempelmann et. al. 2013). Linneaus also contributed to the geographic vein of thought about air. In “The Great Chain of Being”, Linneaus ordered all life and matter – from rocks to plants to animals to humans to angels – into a governing hierarchy that spelled out racial classifications tied to climate (Lamb, 2011). While some early ethnographers pushed back against the racism of their day, for instance Franz Boas wrote against Linneaus’ climate theory of race (taken up by eugenicists), many anthropological accounts have since been critiqued for environmental determinism or for playing into a “savage slot” that places indigenous people as aligned with or “closer” to nature (Liss, 1997; Trouillot, 2013). Early ethnography also tended to focus unidirectionally on the impact of air on human life, rather than impact of human life on the air (Dove, 2013). Founding anthropological figures of the 1920s and 1940s, wanting the discipline to be as close as possible to the hard sciences, often opened monographs by tracking various climatic phenomena, such as wind’s impact on cattle and cattle-keepers (Stocking, 1992). E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1939), for instance, reflecting on Nuer systems of time-reckoning, wrote “*Duong* is the month of breezes (*duong*). In this month dust-laden winds bring cool air...”, which he suggests is characteristic of “ecological time” inferred by the weather versus “structural time” inferred by a tick-tock of a timepiece. In this formulation of cyclical versus structural time, there is a fraught debate about the African continent in relation to underlying universality (all humans keep time), and unchangeable difference (humans keep time differently) across air-based geographies.

Taking account of these pitfalls into account, rather than approaching polluted air etically, or as an analytic, I focus on how ordinary citizens mobilize local understandings of the habitability of air, and do so tactically to achieve certain community-based or political ends. Polluted air, then, as a key discursive category and innovative set of practices, becomes a staging ground for contested claims over race, class and citizenship that map onto and contribute to the production of urban space. I now turn to analyzing what residents in Durban call “coughing out” as an example of community-based interactions over the environment. To do so, I bring “coughing out” in relation to theories of political voicing and everyday resistance. Classic debates about political voicing and everyday resistance are relevant to analyzing “coughing out” in Durban for two reasons (Chance, 2018). First, *ukubhodla* is often expressed as “noise”, such as a cough, a roar, or a bellow. Second, it is not typically addressed to authorities or dominant groups, but rather to intimate kith and kin. In these ways, *ukubhodla* tests normative understandings of politics that privilege word-laden speech in state-citizen interactions. In a literature on political voicing, anthropologists have illustrated the variety of historical, economic, political, processes that have prevented marginalized groups from being heard, including in environmental struggles. In “Can the Subaltern Speak”, Gayatri Spivak (2003) analyzes the colonial and capitalist systems that have excluded subaltern women

from being recognized as political agents. Spivak famously critiques Aristotle's classic distinction between voice and speech. The distinction maps onto others – male/female, culture/nature, reason/unreason – embedded in colonial logics. For Aristotle, all animals have voice, which can express sounds of pain or pleasure, but only men have speech and *logos*. Speech and *logos* enable men to indicate what is just and unjust, or good and evil, thus laying a foundation for public participation in political life. The legacy of this distinction, scholars argue, coheres in colonial world-making. Even when subaltern women speak in the limited and expected forms of speech permitted by colonial regimes, for instance in terms of customary or statutory law sanctioned by the state, they are silenced or dismissed.

However, coughing out is not straightforwardly political speech. Depending on the context, coughing out – like a cough – is somewhere between that which is voluntary and involuntary. Post-colonial scholars following Spivak, moreover, point to the privileging of speech over “noise” in the bourgeois concepts of civility and consensus in the public sphere. The modern European concept of the public sphere, according to Jürgen Habermas (1981), is where political participation happens between society and the state through the medium of speech. By building shared public opinion through free and open speech, the state is thought to be held accountable. Antithetical to civility and consensus in the public sphere are riotous protest or disorderly dissent, such as by radical environmental movements. Post-colonial theorists have long examined the entrenched gender, race, and class-based exclusions from “the official” European public sphere. They also have documented the variety of responses by marginalized groups. One response by marginalized groups to forge counter-publics, where speech as well as noise is admitted, or at least regulated differently to the mainstream, which resonates with “coughing out”. To use Nancy Fraser's words (2016), counter-publics are where members “invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities.” Anti-colonial and peasant movements, for instance, use political songs and slogans among themselves, and to the exclusion of understanding by the authorities and dominant groups. The concept of counter-publics is relevant to *ukubhodla* insofar as it gathers and assembles residents' critical faculties to express pain that they view authorities as being unable to remedy or recognize (Ralph, 2013).

South Africanist scholars have argued that an explosion of battles over speech in the post-apartheid period point to the limits of political subjectivity after apartheid more broadly. Modern democratic theory and South Africa's celebrated state transition rests on the foundational principal that all citizens have an equal share in political life. In contemporary South Africa, racial segregation and economic inequality, as well as neoliberalism and climate change, tests that foundation. Even while Durban shack-dwellers are admitted as citizens, their ability to share in political life is limited, living on the margins in precarious environments. Rosalind Morris (2006) illustrates how new state-making rests on battles over speech deemed legitimate and intelligible by authorities. In the hearings of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation

Commission (TRC), for example, young Black activists who committed crimes under apartheid were given amnesty, if they testified that they acted on behalf of a political organization. Those who could not, regardless of whether or not their actions had political intention or political efficacy, remained in prison. This example illustrates the policing of the legitimate demarcations of political speech, particularly between the much-remarked relationship between the criminal and political. Being a legitimate and intelligible political actor, in other words, hinges upon sanctioned forms of political speech. “Coughing out” is not one of those forms of sanctioned speech. A gasping, sputtering TRC testifier resulted in a break from the proceedings (Reid, 2000). The relevance, then, of these classic debates over voice and speech for *ukubhodla* is that it is uttered by disenfranchised groups historically excluded from the “official” public sphere and does not conform to “official” idioms of post-apartheid political discourse. Yet, plausible deniability, I would argue, is part of the power of coughing out in this case. It is speech that largely flies under the radar of the authorities and dominant groups, yet gathers and assembles collectivities in shack settlements – friends, family, and neighbors – to invent and circulate other meaningful ways of expressing pain or injury. As James Scott argues (1989), these practices of the poor that fly under the radar are everyday resistance.

“Coughing out” – even the phrase itself which emphasizes the cough – puts the discomforted body front and center. Linguistic anthropologists, also writing against normative understandings of politics, have illustrated that political speech is comprised not merely of words and sentences, but also of sounds and sensations in the body, citing for example, the affective impact of singing protest anthems (Harkness, 2013; Weidman, 2014; Bauman and Briggs, 2003; Feld and Fox, 1994; Irvine, 1990; Gitelman, 1999; Kunreuther, 2010; Schäfers, 2017; Posel, 2008). As this suggests, voicing is often a metaphor – those who do not count in politics are said to have “no voice” – but it also involves the body: lungs, larynx, vocal cords, inhaling and exhaling air. Some anthropologists have argued for the important role of the body in political voicing to accomplish actions (Comaroff, 1997; Bernstein, 2011). According to J.L. Austin (2013), the voice has not only direct effects on the body through illocutionary utterances, but also foreshadows its effects through perlocutionary utterances. J.L. Austin refers to “illocutionary” speech acts as achieving a given action in the moment that it is being said. For instance, a judge announcing, “I hereby find you guilty...” As this suggests, illocutionary speech acts work through conventions, as being found guilty by someone other than a judge would not produce the same effect. “Perlocutionary” speech acts, by contrast, produce certain consequences that are not the same as the speech act itself. “Please pass the salt”, for instance, puts actions in motion, but they may not be the desired ones. Someone other than the addressee might pass the salt, or it could be ignored altogether. Austin uses the example of an unintentional insult.

“Coughing out”, while at times unintentional or unable to be fully controlled by the speaker, contains a perlocutionary force. By coughing, bellowing, burping,



or growling, residents put into motion certain consequences. Notably, for one, coughing out interpellates other nearby listeners. Louis Althusser phrases this as a hail (Butler, 2013; Althusser, 1970). He explains with the example of a police officer shouting, “Hey you there!” on a crowded street. If a man turns around, he answers the call and admits, however inadvertently, that the hail was addressed to him. Put another way, the address of an other has the potential to bring the addressee into social or even political existence in that moment. What happens in coughing out is that the other is addressed, intentionally or not, and this identification with each other is put into motion. Of course, a cough may be ignored, or lead to other than the desired consequences. In this way, coughing out may not always be effective or liberatory, but misrecognized or manipulated. However, it nevertheless has potential to shift individual pain to a collective, one that can be shared and heard by others. Alan Feldman, in writing about TRC testimony, highlights the way such testimony interpellates others, but also the traumatic aporetic elements (Feldman, 2004).

As this suggests, the line between speech-laden words and unintentional noise in political action is blurred through “coughing out<sup>13</sup>”. Marcel Mauss (1973 [1934]) suggests that coughing is not merely an environmental reflex, but a cultivated, albeit largely unconscious, bodily technique. He suggests that where coughing (or spitting) may be done, in what manner, and by whom are examples of techniques adapted with age or by gender, justified for a variety of specific reasons, that are taught and disciplined. Writing on Pierre Bourdieu, Dana Anderson uses the example of covering one’s mouth when coughing, suggesting that it reflects our relationship to ourselves and our world, but is also generative of moral values (Anderson, 2004). The pervasiveness of the “new” way to cough into one’s elbow recommended by the C.D.C. and other authorities to avoid Covid-19 spread, became a way to virtue signal during the pandemic in some places, while regarded as a comical and convoluted elsewhere, becoming the subject of memes<sup>14</sup>. There is also something potentially subversive or grotesque about coughing as well, as Mikhail Bakhtin (2004) observes about the lower bodily strata, in that it indexes not only an uncontrollable body processes or an interjecting body, but also the sick or dying body. The body that is coughing has a permeable opening between the inside and the outside that are meant to remain closed and distinct. Phlegm, respiratory spray, or spit is something that is matter out of place (Douglas, 1998), viewed in most places as either an index of polluted air or illness in the body, both of which are potentially contaminating. In the case of coughing out, however, it might be encouraged or given a platform, something that people would like to share, however, dangerous – or, because it is dangerous and boundary crossing.

<sup>13</sup>- “Coughing out” – even the phrase itself which emphasizes the cough – puts the discomforted body front and center. .

<sup>14</sup>- Emily Henderson, “Study: Funny memes may help people cope with COVID-19 stress”, 17 October 2021, <https://www.news-medical.net/news/20211018/Study-Funny-memes-may-help-people-cope-with-COVID-19-stress.aspx>, accessed 1 June 2022.

In a context like Durban, South Africa, coughing – and its relationship to speech and the body – have even more complex and varied meanings than aspects of Western political theory I have mentioned here, or that I have the space to fully address. Yet, in this section, I have sought to examine not only the communicative role of “coughing out” but also the polluted air that is the stuff being “coughed out”. In both, I approach air as a transformative material and symbolic force that shapes, and is shaped by, ordinary citizens practices and interactions as they endeavor to make their lives viable and secure.

### **A Brief History of Urban Housing and the Spatialization of Habitable Air in Durban**

A few years before the Covid-19 pandemic in May 2017, I sat with Mnikelo downtown in South African city of Durban<sup>15</sup>. The downtown is near a touristy beachfront and the second largest industrial port on the African continent. An oil-producing and former textile area is in the south of the city. Durban is a yin and yang of “fresh” and polluted air. Mnikelo was expounding on his concept of “air” or *umoya* the in *isiZulu* and *isiXhosa* languages. I had been writing a book that examined how urban governance and political mobilization shaped, and was shaped by, the elements of fire, water, air, and land, as symbolic and material forces in shack settlements. Mnikelo thoughts on “air” centered around two primary forms: the first was *ugliso umoyo*, or “dirty air”, that is, air dirty from pollution, or noxious smells, or illness; and, the second was *umoyo upolili*, fresh air, like flowers and trees, and good health, or “like someone [you love] talking softly in your ears”. Air in shack settlements, he said, was definitively, of the “*ugliso umoyo*” variety because settlements are congested. There is no space between shacks, there is open sewerage, there is no trash collection, there are no green spaces and they often are near polluting industries. Mnikelo’s own shack settlement was near to the largest municipal dump in Africa.

Mnikelo said to help manage this legacy of *ugliso umoyo*, residents have to “cough out” (*ukubhodla*), which he described both as coughing literally wrenching or coughing out polluted air, and expressing oneself to others to “remove the bad spirit and instilling in people the good spirit”. Residents I knew often spoke of *ukubodla* in various contexts, so I wanted to understand more of how the practice worked, as Mnikelo said, to turn “dirty” air into “fresh” air. More broadly, Mnikelo’s description of air changed my own perception of how the air in shack settlements, and elsewhere, was composed, and how it could be understood in different times and places. Then, the pandemic happened, and Mnikelo’s thoughts on air were thrown into relief. Ordinary people across the world were asking the kind of questions that Mnikelo posed back in 2018: “What constitutes habitable air? What is a threat and not a threat? What actions do we take to protect ourselves, our families and communities?” In the absence of clearcut and consistent political or medical

<sup>15</sup>- Fieldnotes, 7 May 2017.

guidelines about Covid-19 across local or national borders, ordinary people were often left to draw their own conclusions and draw from the existing social, cultural, economic, and/or medical resources that they had available. To begin to examine what Mnikelo means by “dirty” air versus “fresh” air, it is necessary to situate his comments within urban space and Durban shack settlements.

The most frequent references to “dirty air” among residents of shack settlements is in relation to cramped housing and industrial pollution. Durban is one of the most polluted cities in South Africa. When Durban hosted the COP 17, the U.N.’s global conference on climate change in 2011, international news outlets frequently commented on the air in South Durban, the city’s oil-producing hub – for some, to an offensive degree. As representative *The Guardian* article put it, “The air [in South Durban] really does smell of rotten cabbage, cat wee, and almonds” (Vidal, 2011). Less explored by this international coverage is that exposure to poor air quality correlates to racialized housing patterns (See also Chari, 2004). Under apartheid, African, Indian, and so-called Coloured (or mixed-race) communities were often housed in the most polluted areas, at times, as industrial labor reserves. Repressive forms of influx control in the 1950s – which built upon earlier legislation such as the 1923 Native Urban Areas Act – aimed at curbing the movement of Africans leaving the countryside for cities like Durban. Residents of Durban shack settlements recall forced removals under the 1950 Group Areas Act, after parcels of land were rezoned for “whites only”. Following one notorious forced removal in the 1950s, at least seventy thousand Cato Manor residents were scattered about racially segregated townships and shack settlements outside the city. At other times, however, during this same period, the government, along with allied corporations, such as in the petrochemical and textile industries, sought to maintain racial segregation and the availability of a cheap labor pool by tolerating, or even facilitating, the growth of shack settlements. Exposure to uninhabitable air was built into apartheid design.

The poorest African, Indian, and Coloured (or mixed-race) communities in Durban continue to reside in the polluted industrial areas on the city’s periphery. In South Durban, for example, where some Cato Manor evictees ended up, the Engen refinery on their doorsteps vaporizes crude oil to manufacture gasoline and lubricants. Sulfur dioxide (SO<sub>2</sub>), Durban’s most prevalent chemical pollutant, is concentrated here. SO<sub>2</sub> has a vinegar smell, and if inhaled for long periods, it can contribute to life-threatening illness, such as asthma and cancer. Nausea, drowsiness, vomiting, and headaches are commonly reported among this area’s residents. Along with the refineries, one which has recently slated to be shuttered, poor communities in Durban live next to other toxic sites, including South Africa’s largest paper mills, biggest industrial port, a dozen chemical companies, several major landfills, and factories. These sites produce an estimated 80% of South Africa’s oil products and much of its industrial emissions. Air samples collected by citizen scientists in Durban reveal ethanol, ethanol, solvents, dioxins, benzene, sulphides, and bleaches. As one South Durban resident said, “We have every chemical in the world here”. Leaks,

explosions, and fires are routine in all these sites. Yet, residents in South Durban and elsewhere in the city also live next to shuttered industries, like textile factories, that have left toxic remains and with no one left to account for the pollution. Still others live in places, where there is unregulated dumping, for instance, in Motala Heights where the area landowner routinely discards toxic waste near a shack settlement.

The reasons behind a continued unequal distribution of air pollution in Durban is not merely because residents remained in existing, segregated communities. In fact, the transition from apartheid marked a period of mobility for many poor urban and rural dwellers. As apartheid-era pass laws and other repressive legislation was lifted, hundreds of thousands of people moved to urban and peri-urban areas in search of work, education, and other previously unavailable social and economic opportunities, some joining the millions already living in shacks. Since the election of Nelson Mandela in 1994, the ruling African National Congress has aimed at dismantling apartheid and extending citizenship rights enshrined in national policy and the new South African Constitution, in part through the “eradication” of so-called “slums” and the provision of formalized housing on a mass scale (Makhulu 2010). Often violent forced removals of shack-dwelling followed, at times to make way for new development projects, or what Jacob Dlamini has called “development by force<sup>16</sup>”. Nearly 2.4 million homes have been built, but the post-apartheid state has struggled to keep pace with overwhelming demand. In no small part, this demand is driven by the combined forces of urbanization – delinked from industrialization – and mass unemployment after the fall of apartheid.

Whether being evicted or seeking a better life, newly mobile populations often found themselves stuck living, working (or hoping to work), and attending schools adjacent to polluting industries. Some new arrivals to Durban in the post-apartheid period could only afford to live in fence line communities, or they only had family and support networks in these communities. Still others moved from one polluted area to another polluted area because it was closer to the city or near to a better school previously unavailable under apartheid (See Hunter, 2019). Among those 2.4 million built since 1994, many new housing units were in places with poor air quality. In some cases, this is because residents demanded houses be built or in situ upgrades to happen where they already lived. In the Kennedy Road shack settlement in Durban, for instance, residents organized protests to stay living adjacent to a polluting municipal landfill, instead of moving farther outside the city, where jobs and other resources are comparatively scarce. In other cases, public controversies arose when the Durban municipality proposed to build new housing structures in highly polluted urban peripheries. For example, a court case was bought by residents when the city proposed to build a new, single-sex migrant workers’ hostel next to the airport and other industries. The controversy raised debates in the local papers about the extent that entangled histories of environmental racism and race-based housing practices were being extended in the post-apartheid period.

<sup>16</sup>- <https://allafrica.com/stories/201010210525.html>

In short, the air that people breathe in these parts of the city is structured around urban spatial transformations. When asked to point to examples of “fresh” air in Durban, Mnikelo immediately pointed to Durban’s historically race-based suburbs, which are at a distance from the city’s oil refining hub, landfill, and busy industrial port. Formerly a “whites only” area, a suburb known as The Berea looks down on, and has a panoramic view of the city and the ocean from atop a leafy green ridge on the northern part of the city. It is where the city’s most prestigious university campus is located, as well as a sizeable nature reserve. About a mile from historic Cato Manor, the suburb boasts orange-roofed mansions, swimming pools, and lush subtropical gardens. The Berea remains among the most expensive and old money parts of the city. Some shack settlement residents, even Mnikelo himself, have worked in those suburbs, whether as domestic laborers, gardeners, car guards, or private security. Poor urbanites move regularly between the congested shack settlement air and the “fresh” air of the open-spaced suburbs. As one security guard in The Berea said to me, commenting on the unequal distribution of air in the city, “The rich own everything, even the fresh air!” As his representative comment suggests, the air is perceived by many locals as a purchasable commodity inscribed with the race and class history of the city.

More officially, the suburbs in Durban were designed with public gardens and green spaces. The Berea, which was once a forest area, is part of the Durban Metropolitan Open Space System (D’MOSS), green corridors that the city established under apartheid in 1982. D’MOSS links conservation sites and nature reserves, “allowing a path for the free movement of fauna and flora”, although the free movement of people in the 1980s were severely curtailed. In 2015, the system is reported to include about one-third of the municipal area, an estimated 74,500 hectares, which is originally intended as a space for conservation and public recreation for those who were able to access it. A lack of green spaces in poor urban areas is not unique to South Africa, and those that do exist in townships and shack settlement are typically not publicly sanctioned or maintained. The British Empire use gardens and conservation spaces to cultivate ideas about nature and the African continent, and to recruit subjects (Hunt; . Orderly green spaces were viewed as not only conducive to health and well-being, but also of societal order. Yet, even while the Berea remains an exclusive suburb, it has transformed too as wealthy and white residents move out of the city center, citing racialized perceptions of crime. Thus, what was once the most expensive real estate in the city shifted even farther north to Umhlanga and Durban North, where many gated communities near a picturesque shoreline are located and even farther from polluting industries, rendering them invisible.

### **Coughing Out: Sisipho’s Story Linking a Humoral System to Polluted Air**

Among the many life histories I conducted in Durban’s shack settlements about urban toxicity, Sisipho’s stands out for her vivid descriptions of a humoral system of air, which was invoked by other residents as well (See also Flikke, 2018). Sisipho, like Mnikelo and many of her neighbors, was a part of this urban mass migration after apartheid as provincial

borders opened up. Like many in Durban's shack settlements, Sisipho's hometown was in an impoverished former "Bantustan", a segregated non-sovereign territory built by apartheid in the Eastern Cape, and where traditional authorities operated. Growing up, Sisipho dreamed of the city as a place to "breathe freely", released from the hold of male elders and ethnicized expectations of identity formation. In 1999, Sisipho moved with her boyfriend to the city of Durban, where the odds of getting a job, however limited, were better than in their "suffocating" rural hometown.

Yet, traversing the boundaries between rural and urban, rather than liberating her from the "bad air" of the countryside, brought on its own polluting "suffocations", as she put it. Sisipho's shack settlement, then, was home to about seven thousand families. It was stuck between a busy six-lane highway and the largest landfill on the African continent. This state-owned landfill asserted its presence with a putrid-sweet chemical scent. With only two outdoor communal standpipes and six functioning pit latrines, water and sanitation were a luxury this settlement could not afford. Along with a lack of basic infrastructure, Sisipho worried about the city's reputation for being a place of illness, especially TB and HIV. Alan Paton in *Cry The Beloved Country* wrote about perceptions of the city as a place of illness and suffocation as opposed to the fresh, open air of an idealized countryside. In the city, as Sisipho recalls, coughing could be heard through thin shack walls, along with loud televisions, radios, and family dramas. Congested traffic on industrial highways and noxious gases spewing out of a landfill, these daily suffocations were exacerbated by what she and other residents described as not feeling fully admitted to the center of the city, living in politically and economic disenfranchised peripheries. Day-to-day life was a struggle. Her boyfriend and her barely made ends meet with his part-time day job picking garbage at the landfill. Like many unemployed women, Sisipho eventually opened up a "spaza" shop (an informal convenience store) in her two-room shack, where she sold matches and cold drinks. Policing is routine in Durban shack settlements, including, as she quickly found, brutal raids by police searching for contraband in women "spaza" owners' shops. Sisipho's interactions with police, which had previously been limited in her rural hometown, she said contributed to the "suffocating" sense of the city.

However, as this suggests, there are other humoral aspects to bad or polluted air worth examining in her and other residents' descriptions of life in shack settlements. Importantly, the air is not empty, as these residents describe it, in South Africa. Unlike air in Western cosmological thought, the air is charged with and full of dynamic social and spiritual relations. The *isiZulu* word for air is *umoya*, which also means ancestral winds, the Holy Spirit, or the immortal soul. This usually refers to "good" or "fresh" air. *Umoya omubi* is *isiZulu* for "bad" air, which also refers to ugly wind, bad soul, or evil spirit. *Ukungcola* can also mean "bad" or polluted air. Like the interior of a body or a home, each shack settlement has its own ever-changing composition of air. Balances, or imbalances in this composition – sweet or sour relations with ancestors, the clamor of taxis jostling for customers, the powerful aroma of an informal barbeque stall, or the chemical sprinklers of the landfill – can inspire comfort and familiarity, or the presence of contagion and congestion.

My time living in poor communities in South Africa taught me to be better attuned to polluted air (Zigon, 2014; Stewart, 2011). Cases of injury or illness, such as landfill chemical burns or pneumonia in winter, can profoundly affect the most sensitive and intimate regions from the lungs to the soul (also *umoya* in *isiZulu*). Bad or polluted air, residents told me, can adhere not only in bodies, but in close personal objects that bodies have touched, like blankets or mattresses. They need to be “aired out”. Domestic laborers from Kennedy Road working in white suburbs like The Berea regularly line up mattresses for airing, especially if “the person has a bad spirit”. When a crime happens, a theft for instance, a shack, likewise, must be “aired out” to clear out the bad air that might have gathered inside. “Bad air”, in short, alerts the senses. In this way, it also can be predictive. During the build-up to the xenophobic pogrom that later left Sisipho homeless, for example, residents told me, in retrospect, that they felt something ominous was “gathering in the air”. They said the settlement’s air was “choking that night”, that the landfill smelled sicklier than usual, or that the nighttime mist constricted respiratory systems even more tightly. As this suggests, bad air can signal violence on the horizon, or a wrong committed in the past. To examine how this works in practice, I now turn to community meetings, which help residents diagnose bad polluted air and potentially transform it to good fresh air.

As I have mentioned, Sisipho’s friends, family, and neighbors do not describe her as an activist. She would never imagine her activities as “short-circuiting” power. However, when seeking treatment for past injuries, Sisipho often attended community meetings, where I first met her. Community meetings in shack settlements are common ritual spaces where coughing out is practiced in Durban. The community meetings that Sisipho attended to treat her injury, an inability to hear due to police beating her about the head. The meetings were organized by a leading poor peoples’ movement called Abahlali baseMjondolo (*isiZulu* for residents of the shacks). Abahlali’s gatherings were initially structured in relation to liberation movements, such as the ANC. Under apartheid, ANC community meetings often were secreted from authorities. From 1950 onward, legislation such as the Riotous Assemblies Act, the Suppression of Communism Act, and the Unlawful Organization Act criminalized such gatherings in African, Indian, and Coloured communities. Traditional authorities in segregated rural “Bantustans” also outlawed unauthorized community meetings. Sisipho and other residents recall that anti-apartheid gatherings were held in the dead of night and in secret locations, so as not to be seen or heard except by those in attendance. Liberation struggle activities also were kept hidden, for instance, within networks perceived as apolitical by state agents, notably of social clubs, music ensembles, and spiritual groups. In spite of the danger at that time, community meetings enabled residents to cough out – to speak, sing, and pray in collective spaces.

### **Voicing at Community Meetings**

There are many different types of community meetings in Abahlali-affiliated shack settlements. These meetings last from six hours to several days. Among the most frequently attended were called Branch Area Meetings, where ordinary members

congregate. Branch Area Meetings are the stage – or what Alan Feldman calls the “congregational” performance space (2004) for coughing out polluted air. Depending on the size of the branch and the degree of its mobilization, these local settlement-wide meetings might draw fifty to one thousand people. Branch Area Meetings have a few common and expected features. The opening of Branch Area meetings is signaled with the singing of a reformulated version of the national anthem, “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika” (God Bless Africa). The lyrics of the national anthem combine Christian religious and African spiritual traditions. The original version of the anthem, sung under apartheid and now at Abahlali meetings and funerals, asks the Holy Spirit, or the ancestral winds (both *umoya* in *isiZulu*) to come to the congregation and unify a liberated African continent. The last few stanzas repeat *umoya* to be heard by the Holy Ghost as a spiritual collectivity:

<i>Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika</i>	God Bless us Africa
<i>Maluphakanyisw’uphondo</i>	May her glory be lifted high
<i>Iwayo Yizwa Imithandazo Yethu</i>	Hear our petitions
<i>Nkosi Sikelela, thina lusapo iwayo</i>	God Bless us, Us Your children
<i>Woza Moya</i>	Come Spirit
[ <i>Woza Moya</i> repeated 4 more times]	

A prayer typically follows the apartheid-era anthem. As I was told, it was to create collective feeling and a space for “good air”. In that way, the anthem invokes what it seeks to bring into being: *Woza Moya*, come spirit. At the time of my research, an elderly woman from a long-standing branch area delivered the prayer. She is an African Zionist, a form of Pentecostalism, and said to have spiritual powers. At times, she is overcome with emotion, weeps, gasps for breath, or falls to the ground. Residents say, in this process, she is coughing out, but not through explicit narration. Her occasional speaking in tongues, I was told, meant that spirits had overtaken her. More reformulated liberation struggle songs are peppered throughout meetings to enliven people, whether between agenda items when the crowd becomes quiet, or when something is said that the assembly finds particularly moving. These reformulated songs, at times, reference techno-scientific toxicity, such as the mournful hymn “Senzeni Na?” (What Have We Done?). The mournful hymn has been sung against corporate polluters in Durban and elsewhere (Ledwaba, 2017). Singing is described as another form of coughing out.

Following song and prayer at Branch Area Meetings, an Abahlali member then will call for the agenda to be set. An agenda tends to have three primary components: (1) reports on upcoming events such as a street march, or court case, where strategy takes place; (2) reports on movement-wide matters, such as a new housing policy or a branch launch, where relevant information is shared; and (3) Area Reports, the longest in duration that concern any violent goings-on in communities represented in the meeting. At times, these narrative interludes can last for hours. During Area Reports, residents typically describe painful experiences with an eviction, an illness, police brutality, or chemical spill. Residents say that, in Area Reports, members collectively “cough out bad air”. Sisipho coughed out her injurious experiences during these Area



Reports. As they begin, Branch Area Meetings often end with singing, and a great deal of informal talk afterward, an hour or more of post-meeting lingering is not atypical.

The practice of coughing out at Branch Area Meetings – through collective speech, singing, and prayer – is to relieve discomfort by shifting bad air from an individual to a collective body. Traversing the body's interior and exterior, this voicing involves inhaling air and then exhaling it with a force that can be felt and heard by others. The *isiZulu* term for coughing out, *ukubhodla*, implies making a noise, and can also mean to roar or to bellow. Residents told me it means, quite literally, “coming out of silence”, which implies a change from one state to another accomplished by sound. This turn of phrase — “coming out of silence” — puts into perspective apartheid-era bannings and a suppression of gatherings, when politicized singing, praying, or speaking could get you arrested, or even killed. This voicing also resonates with the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) political theological mandate to unearth past violence through public confessional narration (Ross, 2003; Posel, 2008).

But this phrase, at the same time, invokes emerging post-apartheid corporeal and environmental conditions. “Breaking the silence” is a slogan used to promote testing for HIV and tuberculosis. It is a slogan used in South Durban environmental activist newsletters about chemical pollution. Coughing out – like confessional narration – has conventions and internal hierarchies, including along lines of age, gender, and status within the movement. The voicing practice of coughing out is not wholly egalitarian even when it purports, or endeavors to be. However, unlike these other examples of voicing, coughing out does not – or, not at least immediately – seek to address the authorities. Rather, coughing out speaks a common language to intimates: family, friends, and neighbors. I now turn from the structure of Branch Area Meetings to the musical performances in these ritual spaces to examine more closely coughing out in the songs in Durban shack settlements. As we will see, musicians and healers have a respected status, and ceremonial role, in coughing out.

### Voicing at Musical Performances

Musical performances bring into focus the affective dimensions of becoming political actors (Mazzarella, 2017). Coughing out at community meetings, like some other cathartic activities, is intimately associated with pain, but also a feeling of sensuous relief, pleasure, or even joy. Sisipho sought out this pain/pleasure upon her traditional healer's advice. The special musical performances that happen at community meetings in shack settlements are ritual spaces for coughing out. In particular, coughing out is entwined with popular musical styles associated with the anti-apartheid liberation struggle, in particular the a capella choir music called *isicathamiya*, and a style of South African township jazz known as *mbanganga*<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>17</sup>- Mbanganga has Zulu migrant laborer roots – which is particularly significant in KwaZulu Natal, where Durban is located. Its most famous icon is Mahlathini, “The Lion of Soweto”, so-called for the gravelly, roaring cadence of his distinctive voice. He toured and appeared with international celebrities, such as singer-songwriter and civil rights activist Stevie Wonder. Kin to the “Lion of Soweto” are homegrown heroes Ladysmith Black Mambazo, who via American folk singer Paul Simon's album *Graceland* helped popularize the choir music of *isicathamiya*.

These sounds still may be heard wafting through the air during community meetings. The settlement where Sisipho lived had its own award-winning *isicathamiya* choir, the Dlamini King Brothers, who performed at Abahlali gatherings. Sisipho often saw them perform. Shack-dwelling residents formed the choir in 1999, and, when Abahlali emerged, they began composing anthems for the movement. The Dlamini King Brothers' most well-known track — circulated with a music video online (<https://vimeo.com/7657178>) — is titled “Abahlali baseMjondolo”. Translated from *isiZulu*, the performance emphasizes the suffocating conditions of poverty in shack settlements. The lyrics are about “being heard” by audibly collectivizing “pain”:

Abahlali baseMjondolo you experience pain...  
 Because you live in the shacks. But we say, now is the time to be with us.  
 And make ourselves heard about the issues that concern us...  
 We say there shouldn't be anything that is done for us, without us.  
 To make peoples' lives better in this land...

In several respects, the song's lyrics are exemplary of coughing, insofar as they invoke an incipient collectivity voicing a fundamental wrong in the city: “[Y]ou experience pain...But we say, now is the time to be with us.” The lyrics move from a second person “you” — objectified, isolated, and outside — to a third person “we” an active, agentival, and speech-filled collectivity. The addressee of the lyrics are shack-dwellers themselves. Unified participation is emphasized lyrically, in the layered staccato baritone singing as well as in the polished accompanying dance. The dance is performed with soft-stepping movements in circular — or semicircular — mobile unison with only the designated choir leader breaking form for didactic emphasis. Although the performance is about vocalizing politics to be “heard”, in this case by other residents, the dance is almost entirely silent: a signature Dlamini King Brothers move is to firmly grasp the air with two fists, a visualization of working hand-in-hand on state infrastructural projects, such as the installation of toilets or the provision of water.

*Isicathamiya* is revealing of coughing out not only because it assembles listening collectivities to release “pain” through performance, but also because it is a musical style cultivated by migrant miners, or men taking on the role of migrant miners. Bad and polluted air in *isicathamiya* is analyzed through coal, platinum, and gold-rich underworlds, prime sources of chemical toxicity (see also Coplan, 1987). Take for example, famed a capella choir Ladysmith Black Mambazo's lyrics on “Homeless”: “Strong wind, destroy all our homes/Many dead, tonight it could be you/And we are homeless<sup>18</sup>.” While these lyrics might invoke a natural disaster, they also refer to the homelessness of migrancy, the strong winds of capitalism pulling workers to the mines. More broadly, the lyrics refer to an apartheid system that destroyed African homes and a brutal labor system that brought men to an early grave. For Abahlali members in Durban, while temporary construction and private security jobs are the

<sup>18</sup>- “Homeless”, 1985, Graceland, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Warner Brothers.

most common type of economic migrancy, the polluting mines of Johannesburg loom in songs and stories of the past. The soft stepping in *isicathamiya* performances in Durban, I was told, was to not wake the mine bosses, or the authorities while politicized counter-publics were in formation.

In the case of coughing out, performatively, the style frequently connects a laboring underground with living in the suffocating hostels and shacks of Johannesburg, often faraway from what is considered home. The music, although a meditation on the present, reaches spatially and temporally back to imagined ancestral grounds, and to extended kin networks. As immortalized in Alan Paton's novel *Cry the Beloved Country* (1948) and examined by scholars (Coplan, 1987; Breckenridge, 1998), migrant labor and influx control, in theory, kept women at home in the rural countryside of KwaZulu Natal, rather than joining the ranks of men working in the polluting cities. *Isicathamiya* troupes typically are all men, but when a woman – such as the famed traditional healer, Busi Mhlongo – takes on the form by singing, she is considered toughened, savvy in the ways of the world, and androgynous (Moodie, 1994).

To sing *isicathamiya* is to breathe the air of a familiar and nostalgic countryside in relation to the toxic dust that permeates your lungs inside the mineshafts, or the smoky coal fires outside the urban hostels and shacks at nightfall. The mines become an affectively felt metaphor for the daily suffocations of poverty in Durban, and especially in polluted areas like Kennedy Road. Rather than positioning performers as victims or supplicants, singing is an assertion of empowered masculinity. These musical styles have built-in modes of respect (*hlonipa* in *isiZulu*), particularly for the skill and status of the performer, how he breathes and measures air being one important index.

Amid widespread unemployment in Abahlali areas, where paying *lobola* (a marriage rite involving payment to a would-be wife's family) increasingly seems a luxury of the few (White 2004), respectability is embodied by the performer but also transferred to listening collectivities. Sisipho, waiting to marry her incarcerated boyfriend who could not yet afford *lobola* payments, intimately related to these songs. The performances posit the liberatory possibility of mobility against labor migrancy (or labor scarcity), the latter a fracturing of masculinity and constricting the possibility of family. The musical roots of coughing out reveal how the voicing practice among residents of shack settlements is tied to ancestral kin, such that the regulation of material-symbolic pollution is in embodied yet dispersed spiritual networks (Douglas, 1966; Ashforth, 2005). I now move to coughing out in spiritual healing: first in Christian traditions, and then in traditional medicine, both which channel past generations of ancestral spirits.

### **Voicing at Spiritual Rites**

As I have already suggested, Abahlali community meetings in Kennedy Road resemble and invoke church services, including by beginning with Christian

prayer. Musical performances, for instance of *isicathamiya*, are likewise steeped in references to God and the Holy Spirit. The *isiZulu* word for bad/good air – *umoya* – is also the spiritual breath that leaves you when you die, which becomes the ancestral spirit. It is same word that white missionaries used for the soul. Voicing, here, takes community politics to a new metaphysical domain, for spirits enter into the scene of political action. At the same time, it brings the body into focus because “breathing freely” is key to these spiritual healing rites.

I accompanied numerous residents in Durban shack settlements as they sought counsel from traditional healers, much like Sisipho did for her injury. Coughing out, in this context, is associated with the ancestral realm but also contrasting Christian theological traditions, which have their own particular notions of polluted air (Chari, 2004). Notably, among poor residents, these are Anglicanism and African Zionism. Community meetings, musical performances, and spiritual healing rites in shack settlements are inflected with these traditions (Gibson, 2011). The Anglican Church, while seen by residents as an institution that championed liberation theology during the anti-apartheid struggle, was also viewed as problematic, for it was central to colonial missionization (Pype, 2012; Comaroff, 1985). Anglican constituents in Kennedy, like Sisipho, are most often associated with Black Consciousness churches. Its leaders are former anti-apartheid activists, who broke away from Nelson Mandela’s ANC to follow such figures as Steve Biko. They argued their mission was to liberate not only South Africa as a nation, but also the depths of consciousness from “suffocations of white rule” (Fanon, 1965; Biko, [1969] 2002).

In spiritual healing, multiple open-ended spirit worlds often are at stake simultaneously in the practice of coughing out. While Christianity might enable prayer to ancestors who have died, the management of spirits is more often associated among residents with the curative practices of traditional healers. However, not every resident in these settlements I spoke with wholly espouses a so-called ancestor cult, and some actively reject it as a colonial construct, a capitalist mystification, or a challenge to Christian doctrine. Others speak openly about ancestors, but actively taboo public discussion in the movement of related forces such as witchcraft, positing these as reactionary superstitions that uphold social hierarchies (Geschiere, 2013). Yet, any Kennedy resident will know of their ancestors – or the fact that others have them – and nearly everyone I know has respectful, or sometimes secreted, interactions with them. Some say they have lost their ancestors because migrant labor or land dispossession meant they were severed from meaningful burial places. Others say their ancestors’ spirits may be rendered mobile by carrying earth from their gravesites to other public spaces.

As I learned in Durban – and, Africanist scholarship has established – among the most primary difference between you and your ancestors is that you breathe, and your ancestors do not (See also Comaroff, 1985; Pype, 2012). They are not exactly dead in the determined biomedical sense, but in a stage of the continued life process that you eventually also will enter. As one young resident told me, linking techno-scientific and cosmological frames, they are like networks produced via social media. Ancestors are

virtual networks that compress time and space, but have pragmatic effects upon your life in the here and now. Your ancestors, depending on them and how well you maintain your relations with them – as when they were breathing – can contribute to your good fortune, or misfortune. They can help bring you windfalls of profit or the wild winds of love, but also illnesses and calamities. Neglecting to maintain your relations with your ancestors can leave you vulnerable to witchcraft – a charged substance in the air arising from the jealousies of your neighbors (Smith, 2008; Nyamnjoh, 2011). For some residents, witchcraft is bad air writ large. Coughing out in traditional healing can help readjust ancestral harmony and ward off the polluting hazards of witchcraft (Thornton, 2009).

A traditional healer may “breathe in” the ancestors in order to access them, and then “cough them out” into divinatory totem objects. In one case I witnessed, this totem object was a small shapely gourd that chirped as if a bird inside. By coughing out, the traditional healer can help treat various ailments and unfortunate events common in urban poor communities. Residents, for example, will seek out healer for nausea and headaches, but also more serious cases of asthma from bad air, which have come to be associated with chemical pollutants in shack settlements. Bad winds (also *umoya omubi*), moreover, regularly seeps up from the mud floors or through mildewed plank walls, cuts through cracks of informally constructed tin roofs, all of which exacerbates asthma and other illnesses. Apropos of coughing out, in treatment, a healer may make the sound of roaring lions or other animals (*ukubhodla kwengonyama* in *isiZulu*), a manner of speaking in tongues that evidences and makes “audible” communication with ancestors. As the *isiZulu* term suggests, roaring is a variety of coughing out (*ukubhodla*). This type of roaring, or coughing out, can be therapeutic, or violent and unpleasant, especially for the traditional healer.

### **Conclusion: From Individual Pain to Collective Injury**

[W]e need air to breathe. But also, offering little resistance, [air] allows us to move about to do things, make things, and touch things. It also transmits radiant energy and mechanical vibration, so that we can see and hear. And it allows us to smell, since the molecules that excite our olfactory receptors are diffused in it. Thus, the medium...affords movement and perception. (Ingold, 2007: 525)

Tim Ingold observes that precisely because air is intangible and invisible – he notes how difficult it is for anyone to draw the air without fluffy clouds – it is a dynamic medium. In the city of Durban, I have argued that it is platform for voicing in relation to the body and industrial pollution. I have further argued that residents “cough out”, in part, to turn their individual pain into a collective injury, which is explored through multiple ritual spaces in this article. Coughing out is examined in community meetings when residents narrate violence that they experience in the day-to-day<sup>19</sup>. The voicing practice is described when residents sing music that refers back to the colonial

<sup>19</sup>- I use the term structural violence to refer to the injuries accrued by a marginalized group on the basis of race, gender, class, or other identities (See Farmer, 2004, Kleiman, Das, Lock, 1997).

and apartheid eras that racially and spatially segregated urban and rural areas. Coughing out is conjured in spiritual healing rites that treat ailments resulting from fitful ancestral spirits or toxic chemical pollutants. But precisely because residents remain suspicious that formal state institutions will not remedy or recognize their pain, they look to their own communities in shack settlements to share their experiences of grappling with polluted air. By addressing violence together, poor residents transform polluted air as something that is not merely injurious, but also as platform for ways of connecting with each other, and potentially fashioning themselves as political agents within their own communities. Not allowing individuals to harbor their pain alone is a way to remind residents of shared histories of violence, and to perform acts of healing in the process. Coughing out, furthermore, illustrates how not all forms of collective politics proceed to rupture or “protest”, but rather through long-standing practices that help make air breathable and urban lives liveable. Sisipho, for instance, never became an activist, or participated in a protest. But by coughing in in community spaces, she contributed to collective associational life, and more broadly, to an emergent body politics over urban pollution in post-apartheid Durban shack settlements.

To conclude, I note that traditional healers and their own conceptions of air turned into a public debate in South Africa as the Omicron variant raged and the scientists who discovered it called for credit, where credit was due. Returning to Covid-19 and where I began with Simon Watney’s observation that Africa becomes a place where “missionary tropes” dominate knowledge production about the continent, South African traditional healers made a similar argument as Watney in the op-ed pages of the local and national news. Sangomas reported feeling “left out” of governmental measures to address Covid-19. A heated discussion about the value of local knowledge erupted in the press. During the HIV/AIDS crisis, Thabo Mbemki famously called for “cures” via traditional medicine in line with his vision of an African Renaissance, and held a critique of the hegemony of Western biomedicine. There was a vigorous backlash globally and locally to his comments and “denialist” policies that were said to cost lives. Similar themes emerged around traditional healers during Covid-19. As one traditional healer wrote, “[The President] shunned ancient African healing knowledge, African medicine, and traditional healers when he addressed the nation on Covid-19. However, in the same breath he sent out a statement mourning the passing of *iSanusi Mkhulu Credo Mutwa*”, a famous healer<sup>20</sup>. The op-ed argued “in all the measures put in place for the national lockdown, Western medicine was prioritized...” Medical plants can be used for treating and managing the respiratory system. The traditional healers position was validated by the head of the World Health Organization calling for research into traditional healing in China, India, and South Africa.<sup>21</sup> Some reports suggested that there was as shortage

<sup>20</sup>- Thuli Nhlapo, “Ramaphosa’s failure to acknowledge role of sangomas in Covid-19 fight”, *City Press*, 29 Mar 2020. <https://www.news24.com/citypress/voices/ramaphosas-failure-to-acknowledge-role-of-sangomas-in-covid-19-fight-20200329>, accessed 2 June 2022.

<sup>21</sup>- WHO affirms support for COVID-19 traditional medicine research, 17 September 2022, <https://www.afro.who.int/news/who-affirms-support-covid-19-traditional-medicine-research>, accessed 2 June 2022.

of *Artemisia afra*, an indigenous plant used for coughs, colds, fevers, and Covid-19. The substance can be smoked, inhaled, and “coughed out”. At the same time, other reports suggested that South African traditional healers expanded their influence and increased their patients loads via telehealth during the pandemic. Not only were there more patients seeking help who had Covid-19, and massive shortages in the regular hospital system, ordinary citizens had a great deal of mistrust of the South African government, foreign governments, and pharmaceutical companies in this pandemic. In this example, conceptions of air and the practices of coughing out become relevant to better understand an emerging body politics.

My research in Durban considers how and what practices ordinary citizens name as habitable air and use it as a platform for community mobilization. These practices include organizing protests, waging court cases over illness, lobbying about climate change, but also “coughing out” within their own communities. By doing so, my research seeks to theorize how interactions between various levels of governing agents and ordinary citizens constitute new understandings of the environment in historically disenfranchised communities. These networks increasingly are galvanized by shared dwelling on polluted urban peripheries (Chari, 2006; Pithouse, 2016; Chance, 2018). Scholars in South Africa, the United States and Europe have illustrated how illness, or bodily injury, can become grounds for citizen participation and community-based mobilization (Ralph, 2012; Livingstone, 2012; Bhiel, 2005; Petryna, 2002; Walley, 2013). To consider how poor residents come to inhabit this collective, but by no means singular or uncontested, identity at the intersections of gender, race, and class, one premised toxic urban ecologies, I show how residents have melded old and new practices, for instance, by working within long-existing community organizations and previously segregated state structures. As I have found in my research, thus far, poor urban dwellers are linking old struggles over industrial toxicity to new struggles over climate governance in transnational sites, and are doing so through long-standing community-based organizing, for instance, through mobilization on the streets and in the courts as well as intimate care in the home; but also through novel media platforms, notably the power of digital technologies.

Activists themselves are using climate politics as a platform for making citizenship claims about how the industry threatens not only local health, but also planetary warming (Petryna, 2002). Toxic air, while indeed invisible, has tangible cultural and corporeal effects, notably through the prevalence of cancer and other illnesses in communities adjacent to petrochemical plants. In Durban, these poor communities also have been particularly hard hit by climate change effects, notably flooding and fires. The theoretical contribution of my research is to explore what politics is possible where residents face radical life-shortening illness, but also the known “slow” violence of toxic exposure. Gender perspectives are integral to the project because such a dimension is central to understanding how women are differentially impacted by toxicity, notably as industrial workers, but also as family caregivers, sufferers of illness, and leaders of climate activism. While new research emphasizes making air

pollution legible to technocratic planning from above, my research examines how poor residents, and especially women, newly are deploying a politics of habitable air toward their own ends from below, in particular, to sustain the integrity of their bodies and communities. I am especially interested in how these urban residents do so through everyday scientific and spiritual practices that offer innovative challenges to an emerging consensus about urban air pollution and climate crisis.



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### **Coughing Out the City: Habitable Air in Petrochemical South Africa.**

#### **Abstract**

This article examines what I call "habitable air" everyday practices among ordinary citizens and interactions with the environment that make air breathable and urban lives viable. The Covid-19 pandemic shone a spotlight on "unhabitable air", exposure in the everyday lived environment or place of dwelling that constricts, or disables, the universal right to breathe. Drawing from research in contemporary petrochemical South Africa, I highlight what residents in Durban shack-settlements call *ukhubhodla*, which is best translated as "coughing out" in isiZulu. Coughing out encompasses both physically expelling pollutants from the lungs and, symbolically, speaking out, or verbally expressing discomfort lodged in the body. By indexing industrial toxicity and historic inequalities, residents use coughing out as a platform to turn individual pain into collective injury within at-risk communities, and dismantle a homogenized notion of air pollution across borders.

### **Cracher la ville : L'air habitable dans l'Afrique du Sud pétrochimique.**

#### **Résumé**

Cet article s'intéresse à ce que j'appelle « l'air habitable », c'est-à-dire les pratiques quotidiennes des citoyens ordinaires et les interactions avec l'environnement qui rendent l'air respirable et les vies urbaines viables. La pandémie de Covid-19 a mis en lumière « l'air inhabitable », l'exposition dans l'environnement quotidien ou le lieu d'habitation qui restreint, ou empêche, le droit universel de respirer. En m'appuyant sur des recherches menées dans l'Afrique du Sud pétrochimique contemporaine, je mets en lumière ce que les habitants des bidonvilles de Durban appellent *ukhubhodla*, que l'on peut traduire par « tousser » en isiZulu. Tousser signifie à la fois expulser physiquement les polluants des poumons et, symboliquement, parler ou exprimer verbalement le malaise logé dans le corps. En indexant la toxicité industrielle et les inégalités historiques, les résidents utilisent la toux comme plateforme pour transformer la douleur individuelle en blessure collective au sein des communautés à risque, et pour démanteler une notion homogénéisée de la pollution de l'air à travers les frontières.