

ARTICLE

The Informal Economy in Masande Ntshanga's *The Reactive*

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Abstract

The idea that (semi-)peripheral societies might follow developmental pathways distinct from those prescribed by globalization has been explored at length in the last twenty years by scholars such as G. G. Alcock, Rem Koolhaus, Jane Guyer, AbdouMaliq Simone, Achille Mbembe, and Sarah Nuttall. For scholars who have celebrated these kinds of sociality, the informal economy—as Keith Hart has called it—represents Gordimer's “space that lies between camps”: an alternative social velocity to both the corrupt or “can't do” state and global capitalist modernization. But more and more South African writers are using their work to interrogate the idea that living in the interstices of institutions such as the state, traditional community, and capital is in fact liberatory or counter-hegemonic. In this article I argue that Masande Ntshanga's 2014 novel *The Reactive* is the paradigm of the “disaffection” of present fiction—as Ivan Vladislavić describes it—with contemporary South Africa.

Keywords: Masande Ntshanga; economic informality; South African novel; neoliberalism; Achille Mbembe

Introduction

In this article I explore how Masande Ntshanga's 2014 novel *The Reactive* registers the “disaffection” of present fiction—as Ivan Vladislavić describes it—with life in the informal economy of contemporary South Africa.¹ The novel tells the story of Lindanathi, a young man who becomes estranged from his family and disillusioned with most forms of work. He now does a lot of “standing around,”² drug abuse, and *ad hoc* work in an economy ostensibly separate from both

¹ Jane Poyner and Josh Jewell, “An Interview with Ivan Vladislavić,” *Contemporary Literature* 62.2 (2021): 149.

² Masande Ntshanga, *The Reactive* (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2014), 22.

South Africa's corporate sector and *kasi*—the system of trade operating in the townships.³ The surprisingly small body of scholarship on *The Reactive* reads its aesthetics in terms of this interstitial position; while Andrew Van der Vlies grasps the novel's affects of "impasse, stasis, and arrested development" as paradigmatic of life in South Africa's informal economy,⁴ for Jeanne-Marie Jackson, "Nathi has deliberately embraced the stasis of his generation in order to think his way toward agency."⁵ In contrast to Jackson for whom the novel is a space for philosophical reflection and "self-actualization" amid "pervasively hostile global conditions,"⁶ I argue that even as Nathi embraces his stasis to effect an unassimilable boredom and inertia, his actions are integrated into the neoliberal world economy. Following Sarah Brouillette's Schwarzean claim that the African novel is formally shaped by underdevelopment,⁷ I suggest *The Reactive* is structured by Nathi's retreat into the informal economy where he exploits the lacunae of South African society through his minimal casual labors.

Economic Informality and African Literature

In her review of J. M. Coetzee's 1983 novel *Life and Times of Michael K*, Nadine Gordimer asked, "Is there an idea of survival that can be realized entirely outside a political doctrine? Is there a space that lies between camps?"⁸ The idea that (semi-)peripheral societies might follow developmental pathways distinct from those prescribed by capitalist globalization has been explored at length in the last twenty years by scholars such as G. G. Alcock, Rem Koolhaas, Jane Guyer, AbdouMaliq Simone, Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall. "These works" claim Nuttall and Mbembe:

Have based their readings of the African city on the assumption that in the wake of the new circulations of the global economy, African urban social life is being reshaped in the midst of uncertainty. They have also sought to rehabilitate the informal and what they see as the spectral quality of African city life—that is, its constant interplay between what is "visible" and what is "invisible," between appearance and disappearance.⁹

The "informal" and the "invisible" are useful concepts to these scholars because they imply practices and social forms out of reach of hegemonic forces. African

³ G. G. Alcock, *KasiNomic Revolution* (Bryanston: Tracey McDonald, 2018).

⁴ Andrew van der Vlies, *Present Imperfect: Contemporary South African Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 151.

⁵ Jeanne-Marie Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas: Philosophy and Individualism in the Age of Global Writing*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), 177.

⁶ Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 176, 178.

⁷ Sarah Brouillette, *Underdevelopment and African Literature: Emerging Forms of Reading* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁸ Nadine Gordimer, "The Idea of Gardening," *New York Review of Books* 2 (1984).

⁹ Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe, *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 6.

cities, for Guyer, “generat[e] quite new institutions and forms of social organisation, practices of everyday life that encompass systems of employment, housing and urban transport,”¹⁰ while for Simone, the very bodies of the un- or underemployed constitute a complex, dynamic, and improvisatory form of infrastructure in their own right: “The transport depot in Abidjan is full of hundreds of young men who function as steerers, baggage loaders, ticket salespersons, hawkers, drivers, petrol pumpers, and mechanics”; while “Nigerian syndicates have instituted an interesting governance structure, which uses the hotels in Hillbrow to accommodate a large transient population that camouflages their development of a steady clientele of drug users, including sex workers.”¹¹ A legacy of colonial underdevelopment and the recent retreat of the state amid IMF-imposed “structural adjustment programs” leaves gaps in basic civic provisions such as transport, resource distribution, and law. For Simone especially, these gaps are filled by the energy and creativity of the population who provide basic material necessities for themselves and their kinship networks by performing or *becoming* the very systems of trust, governance, or transport that neither the state nor capital will provide.

For scholars who have straightforwardly celebrated these kinds of sociality, the informal economy—as Keith Hart has called it—represents Gordimer’s “space that lies between camps”: an alternative social velocity to both the corrupt or “can’t do” state and global capitalist modernization. But more and more South African writers are using their work to interrogate the idea that living in the interstices of institutions such as the state, traditional community, and capital is in fact liberatory or counter-hegemonic. In a recent interview, Ivan Vladislavić notes a shift in perceptions of economic informality. “The small changes like informal trading should be seen in context,” says Vladislavić; for some, “Pavement hawkers were a sign of a new disorder and lack of regulation ... but many people, myself included, also saw them in a positive light. There is a vibrant informal economy in many cities, certainly in African ones. Of course, how this informality fits into a highly regulated contemporary city is a complex question that still occupies authorities.”¹² But as South Africa’s postapartheid shift to neoliberal economic orthodoxy has worn on, perceptions have begun to shift: “It became clear as time went on that the macroeconomic policies adopted by the new government were not really making a difference to formal employment and the distribution of wealth in South Africa.”¹³ Vladislavić lists Songeziwe Mahlangu, Nthikeng Mohlele, and Niq Mhlongo as writers who express “disaffection” with the postapartheid proliferation of informal economies: “These writers have a much more critical sense of that period and in fact of the [anti-apartheid] struggle itself.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Nuttall and Mbembe, *Johannesburg*, 6.

¹¹ AbdouMaliq Simone, “People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg,” *Public Culture* 16.3 (2004): 410, 420.

¹² Poyner and Jewell, “An Interview with Ivan Vladislavic,” 148.

¹³ Poyner and Jewell, “An Interview with Ivan Vladislavic,” 148–49.

¹⁴ Jane Poyner and Josh Jewell, “An Interview with Ivan Vladislavic,” *Contemporary Literature* 62.2 (2021): 149.

Indeed, seventeen years after penning her review of *Life and Times of Michael K*, Nadine Gordimer seems to answer her own question regarding the possibility of living between camps in her 2001 novel *The Pickup*. Here, Julie Ackroyd Summers, daughter of a wealthy Johannesburg capitalist, falls in love with her mechanic Ibrahim (or Abdu as he calls himself in South Africa). Ibrahim is an economic migrant who, in the middle of the novel, receives a demand from the authorities to leave the country. Julie, who goes to great lengths to distance herself from her family's privilege, believes that both she and Ibrahim now have no stake in any of South Africa's official institutions and proposes that they attempt to live beyond reach of the authorities:

She has friends ... who solve amongst themselves all kinds of difficulties in their opposition to establishment officialdom. They have alternative solutions for the alternative society, and there is every proof that that society is the one to which he and she belong: that letter [of deportation] makes it clear. She abrogates any rights that are hers, until they are granted also to him.¹⁵

Postcolonial critics have focused on the novel's transnational love story, reading it as a redemptive reengagement with the world after years of apartheid: "In her recent fiction, Gordimer seems to understand that [marginalized and excluded people of different origins] with continually altering self and identity no longer respond to ideas of colonialism, nation, and postcolonialism, rather they are part of a neo-colonial, postnation, transnational collective consciousness."¹⁶ Throughout the novel, however, Ibrahim is impatient with Julie's fantasy of an "alternative society" because he is too well acquainted with the concrete reality of living outside of "establishment officialdom." The outcome of Julie's rejection of formal society is to accompany Ibrahim to his homeland (an unspecified Arab nation) where she does double duty, observing Ramadan with the family yet engaging in sexual activity with Ibrahim during daylight hours (the discovery of which nearly kills Ibrahim's mother with shock). Ultimately, she decides to draw on her family's wealth to invest in a rice irrigation scheme in the desert, believing it—I have argued elsewhere—to be a way of stimulating infrastructural development when in actual fact it is a front for a money laundering racket.¹⁷

Far from being a panegyric to some redemptive, deterritorialized third space—as Homi Bhabha would have it—*The Pickup* demystifies the developmental trajectory of unofficial or informal economic activity. As the impacts of South Africa's postapartheid macroeconomic policies have become clear in the years since the publication of *The Pickup*, fiction has increasingly grasped infrastructural decay, the absence of formal employment, and the growth then

¹⁵ Nadine Gordimer, *The Pickup* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 54.

¹⁶ Kusha Tiwari, "Negotiating Transnational Identities: A Study of Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup*," *IUP Journal of English Studies* 11.2 (2016): 9–10.

¹⁷ Josh Jewell, "'Alternative Solutions for the Alternative Society': Labour and Neoliberalism in Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup*" *Safundi* 22.4 (2021): 5–6.

exploitation of informal economic activity as a crisis of neoliberalism. I argue that Masande Ntshanga's 2014 novel *The Reactive* is the paradigm of the "disaffection" of present fiction—as Ivan Vladislavić describes it—with contemporary South Africa.

The Economic Zones of *The Reactive*

The Reactive is pertinent to the discussion of economic informality in Africa because it represents the descent of Lindanathi into an interstitial social and economic position, ostensibly between the contingencies of tribal affiliation and the formalized capitalist economy. In this section I analyze Ntshanga's representation of Nathi's disillusion with these two spheres, before going on to discuss how even Nathi's boredom and idleness in the informal economy becomes a form of labor in the neoliberal economy. *The Reactive* represents the lives of three friends who also attempt to live outside of both the traditional community and the world of mainstream manual and intellectual labor. The novel tells the story of Lindanathi, a young man who becomes estranged from his family and disillusioned with most forms of work. After breaking a pact with his brother Luthando to undergo their *ulwaluko* together—the Xhosa circumcision ritual—Luthando is killed by the procedure and a guilt-ridden Lindanathi spirals into self-destruction. Despite receiving a good education through a postapartheid strategy and getting a job in a science lab, Lindanathi appears to deliberately infect himself with HIV and descends into a life of boredom and drug abuse. Along with his friends Cissie and Ruan, Lindanathi funds his life of drug-taking by selling his antiretroviral medication at HIV and addiction support meetings around Cape Town.

In an excellent chapter on the novel, Andrew van der Vlies says that the friends' ARV scheme makes sense within South Africa's neoliberal political economy:

Neoliberal governing rationality therefore dictates economic policies less than it reconceives the relationships amongst economy, state, and subject entirely, casting all aspects of life susceptible to market valuation ... Rather than the "invisible hand" of liberal governance that, in Adam Smith's (in) famously utopian vision of mercantile capitalism, secures common good out of the self-interested actions of individuals, Nathi is a character of whom Manga's friend Ndlela (in *Penumbra*) might well approve, a citizen "who appropriately self-invest[s] in a context of macroeconomic vicissitudes and needs that make all of these investments into practices of speculation."¹⁸

What van der Vlies does not emphasize is that Nathi does not operate as a totally rational individual. Elsewhere he claims that "Nathi finds the virus has few effects on him (which is why he can safely sell his ARVs)."¹⁹ In fact, Nathi does not

¹⁸ van der Vlies, *Present Imperfect*, 163–64.

¹⁹ van der Vlies, *Present Imperfect*, 167.

submit a single CD4 count (the test to see the extent of the damage the virus is doing to the immune system) to his health insurance company until the very end of the novel. It is only then that he learns that he seems to experience few ill effects from HIV and could not possibly factor this information into his decision to sell his ARVs. Given the discussion of “last life,” an episode in which he contemplates suicide at work, and his relentless drug habit, I read the character of Nathi as being deeply ambivalent about going on living. Rather, Nathi literally *embodies* the ethic of neoliberalism by attempting to profit from lack. Due to his overwhelming guilt, he doesn’t care whether he lives or dies, so he sells rather than takes his ARVs in order to accelerate his own demise. But his demise is also pleasurable because it is further accelerated by his drug habit. Indeed, the money made from selling ARVs funds the drugs. The closer we look at the novel, the more we see the duality of all of its elements. Everything is both business and pleasure, fun and fatal, bleak and hilarious.

In the opening section of the novel, Nathi introduces both his Xhosa community from eMthatha and his work as a lab assistant in equally disillusioned terms. As these descriptions wear on, the two spheres emerge as dialectical counterparts, linked in Nathi’s dropout prose by admonitions of inauthenticity. “Ten years ago,” begins the narrative, “I helped a handful of men take my little brother’s life.”²⁰ Nathi and Luthando, or LT, “had made a pact to combine our initiation ceremonies,” or *ulwaluko*.²¹ But Nathi abandons LT to undergo *ulwaluko* alone. He says that he “wasn’t there” for the ceremony, but he “told Luthando where to find” the elders who would initiate him.²² The source of Nathi’s guilt seems to be that he abandoned his brother to a ceremony designed to enforce tribal and masculine normativity: “like me, [LT] was often called *ibhari*, or useless, by the older guys in the neighbourhood. LT was pretty bad with girls, too.”²³ “I guess I had a few more [girls] than LT did before he turned to a boy in his neighbourhood.”²⁴ *Ulwaluko* is advanced in explicit opposition to LT’s queerness: “When the Mda house came under pressure to make a man out of its sissy son, I kept away—I crossed my arms in Cape Town.”²⁵

To Nathi, utility is cast by the traditional community in terms of reproduction. This reflects the obvious desire for indigenous groups to maintain their identities in the modernizing “New” South Africa, but such conformity leaves no room for the individual. Yet Nathi still wants to endear himself to this group:

I remember our uncles, with their gold teeth and beer breath, and how they’d find the two of us at every family gathering, hoist us on their knees, and goad us about becoming men. I’d smile at them while my stomach sank. I’d learnt early to be deceitful with older drunks. They got on the bottle and

²⁰ Masande Ntshanga, *The Reactive* (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2014), 5.

²¹ Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 5.

²² Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 5.

²³ Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 5.

²⁴ Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 173.

²⁵ Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 174.

treated you like anyone else—not a Model C who didn't know his clan name from his asshole.²⁶

This is a brutal representation of a circle of community elders, and one cast in explicitly classist terms. The cheap status symbol of gold teeth, and smells that belie alcohol abuse, place these people in a class—rather than just a community—that Nathi does not want to become part of. Initiation represents, for Nathi, entry into an impoverished and undignified group. But something motivates him to placate them; he smiles at them and has “leant early to be deceitful with older drunks.” They “treated you like anyone else—not a Model C who didn't know his clan name from his asshole.” As van der Vlies points out, “Model C schools were fee-paying (white) government schools whose governing bodies voted to admit students of colour who could pay the fees or qualify for scholarships.”²⁷ Nathi gets a scholarship because for him “it didn't take much to go to school for free, in those days, or rather to trade on the pigment we were given to carry.”²⁸ For Nathi, the postapartheid government endlessly racializes its subjects (even if this is a sincere attempt to redress the country's enormous racial inequalities) while the community simply sees him as a member. By telling “Luthando where to find” these elders and undergo his initiation, Nathi perhaps feels that he is able to ingratiate himself to them without actually having *ulwaluko* himself. Indeed, he says in the very first line of the novel that he “helped a handful of men” take LT's life. “I also knew that, really, I was scared of being close to you, LT.”²⁹ By sending LT to his *ulwaluko*, Nathi believes he can placate the elders and distance himself from his brother's queerness.

But Ntshanga also shows how entry into the world of formal work represents an equivalent aporia for Nathi. After abandoning LT, and with the benefit of a decent education, Nathi takes a job in a lab testing blood samples for HIV. During this time he is stabbed and robbed in the Observatory (or Obs) neighborhood of Cape Town, after which he makes the curious decision to leave his job. This appears to have something to do with the way he is treated by South Africa's privatized health-care system. Note the paternalism of his treatment in the emergency department:

The paramedics got me up and strapped me to a gurney... . The three of us drove in silence through the suburb where my pockets had been emptied... . The paramedics gave me a bandage to press on my wound and I was told to wait until I received assistance. Then a nurse arrived and took me to a bridge room where there were more of us in the middle of dying... . The wheels of another gurney creaked behind us. This one carried a teenager—a boy from Beacon Valley, the medics said—who'd been shot in both legs... . The bandages around his thighs were dark with blood, the cloth rough from the bone splintered through beneath.

²⁶ Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 173.

²⁷ Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 159.

²⁸ Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 7.

²⁹ Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 173.

I began to lose consciousness in my seat. Then I heard them call my name. Two more nurses arrived to help me up and I was passed through a door and sat in front of a doctor. The doctor was a balding, middle-aged man with spectacles pushed up his forehead. He instructed me from behind his desk, and I peeled off my clothes and showed him my injuries.... They discharged me the following day, on a Sunday morning, and I received my bill a month later.³⁰

The passage grasps the dialectic of paternalist authority and individual responsibility that manifests in a privatised health-care system. The private health sector—the sector that Nathi himself now works in—typifies the neoliberal “new public management” ethic of treating patients/employees/victims as fungible and atomized consumers of a service. As much labor as possible is deferred to Nathi, “the paramedics gave me a bandage to press on my wound,” turning him into a casual *paramedic* in his own treatment. At the same time, however, he is expected to be an obsequious and passive recipient of care: “I was told to wait until I received assistance.” (What else do they expect a stab victim to do?) Similarly, the doctor “instructed me from behind his desk” combining paternalist authority and a deferral of labor.

Afterward he is sent a bill. Nathi begins and ends the ordeal with his pockets being emptied. This is why “two and I half months after I was stabbed and robbed in Observatory, I resigned from my lab-assistant post in the molecular biology department.”³¹ After this experience, Nathi no longer believes that such a health-care matrix can adequately protect or respect its subjects (or “customers”). He has experienced a similar disillusionment with the world of formalized work (within South Africa’s ever growing private sector, in this instance), as he did with the traditional community. By the time the novel is narrated, Nathi’s betrayal of LT has become the great regret of his life. Nathi becomes totally disillusioned with his community and the controversial practice of *ulwaluko*. For much of the novel, Nathi remains estranged from his family in order to avoid having to undergo his own *ulwaluko*. “I never went home after we buried him.”³² The trigger for the present action of the novel is a text from Nathi’s uncle Bhut’Vuyo “that reminds me of the words we shared back then, and of the promise I made,” namely his initiation.³³ The present action of the novel, then, covers the last few months Nathi spends putting off his *ulwaluko*. But crucially Nathi does not reject family and tradition *in favor* of “modernity.” Most of the action of the novel is set in the intermediary world of casual work, scams, and drug abuse that Nathi and his friends attempt to occupy instead.

Disaffection in the Informal Economy

Nathi’s decision to abandon the world of formal work is conditioned by a disillusionment that characterizes a group of novels from the 2010s, a period

³⁰ Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 143–44.

³¹ Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 144.

³² Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 6.

³³ Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 9.

in which the unemployment, privatization of public services, and political corruption that marked the Mbeki era had become normalized and intensified under Zuma. In Mohale Mashigo's *The Yearning* (2016), past trauma causes a young woman to question her comfortable life spent working at a Cape Town vineyard. Here, the comfortable life of a worker in a major export industry is disrupted to call attention to the obscured continuities between South Africa's pre- and post-1994 political economy. Similarly, in Nthikeng Mohlele's magisterial novel *Small Things* (2013), the unnamed narrator who was active in the anti-apartheid struggle finds himself largely unable to participate in the democratic nation due to a pervasive sense that there has been an insufficient restructuring of its institutions. For Jackson, such narratives speak to the "in between historical position" of figures who must "search for some sort of self-actualization absent the immediate political pressures of apartheid and without a clear economic future."³⁴ In an episode that parallels Nathi's stabbing, the narrator of *Small Things* is shot by a distressed man with no obvious motive. While the narrator is in the hospital, he is unwilling to cooperate with the police investigation, "I have nothing to say. If you find him, good; if not, that is also fine with me."³⁵ Later he expands:

How do I tell the investigating officers to leave me alone? That I have no interest in chasing ghosts? To my mind, no man should hold the power of life and death over others. But to *his* mind, there are perhaps compelling reasons to murder strangers in cold blood. How can I be expected to know what those reasons are? The Dark Figure had cigarettes. It is possible he had money, too—the supposed motive for my near-fatal wounds. A chilling hint stands out: he asked me why I should continue living. What answer is expected from souls that face random executioners? I spend days debating with myself: why does the Dark Figure think strangers owe him explanations, obedience? Extreme narcissism, perhaps? Or something more sinister? Murder is supposed to be a conscience-wrecking deed; how was it then that the Dark Figure seemed so composed, without a shred of remorse?³⁶

Just as some of the labor of his own health care is deferred to Nathi, some of the detective work in an attempted murder investigation is deferred to the narrator of *Small Things*. The narrator is reluctant to conspire with a state institution that he does not trust. This lack of trust is evident in the ambiguity of the subject in the passage: "to *his* mind, there are perhaps compelling reasons to murder strangers in cold blood"; "What answer is expected from souls that face random executioners?." In the experience of the narrator, who was imprisoned by the apartheid state, there is not a sufficient distinction between the Dark Figure and the institutions attempting to catch him. Both do, or have, laid claim to "the power of life and death over others." If murder is "a conscience-wrecking deed," what authority can the South African state possibly summon to pronounce on

³⁴ Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 176.

³⁵ Nthikeng Mohlele, *Small Things* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2013), 33.

³⁶ Mohlele, *Small Things*, 36.

another murderer, one perhaps impoverished and warped by its negligence? The failure of the neoliberal postapartheid state to assist or acknowledge one of its historic victims will, by the end of the novel, drive the narrator to living in a cave in a tortured and animalistic state: “twisted in an agonised ball from suspect meat” and “overwhelmed by sudden raging anger.”³⁷ At the last, official society denied the narrator any ability to articulate who he is, his needs or his desires, as the final line of the novel brands into us forever: “One last thing: I forgot to tell you my name. On second thoughts, never mind.”³⁸ It is this excoriating and total disillusionment with the formal institutions of health care and the private sector more broadly that finally drives Nathi into the intermediate space between tribal or communal affiliation and formalized labor.

Just as the subjects of the state and the Dark Figure coincide in the imaginary of *Small Things*, the imperatives of ritual community and capital coincide in *The Reactive*. Nathi’s disillusionment with various sectors of South African society precipitates a symbolic shift in the novel—one in which he imagines the imperatives of traditional community and neoliberalism to coincide. Here the narrative becomes, as Jackson suggests, a space for Nathi to establish “selfhood” against the rest of society.³⁹ Throughout the novel Nathi defers both his *ulwaluko* and his entry into regular professionalized work. In both the eyes of his community and capitalism, he is effectively delaying his entry into manhood. He is thus a South African version of what Ato Quayson calls—in the Ghanaian context—a *kòbòlò*:

Kòbòlò are in a structural transition between socially acceptable age-related activities.... The young-adult *kòbòlò* ... is seen to be between life phases, looking for a job [for example]. It is also not unusual for the *kòbòlò* to be between short-term, low paying jobs in the informal economy, the defining condition here being not the jobs themselves but the existential condition of impermanence that they generate by being both low-paying and transitory.⁴⁰

The image of Nathi’s looming *ulwaluko* therefore represents a confluence of both traditional and neoliberal ideas of coming of age. The *ulwaluko* involves male circumcision, a practice that is highly controversial in South Africa and has precipitated such forms of opposition as ulwaluko.co.za—a website detailing the various complications that can arise from the way the circumcision is performed. Nathi is alive to such concerns in the novel: “There was an initiate who’d had the head fall off his shaft while he swam upstream in the Mthatha River.”⁴¹ Circumcision poses a threat to the health and function of the penis, but the ritual is performed in the name of centering one of its biological

³⁷ Mohlele, *Small Things*, 150.

³⁸ Mohlele, *Small Things*, 151.

³⁹ Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 178.

⁴⁰ Ato Quayson, *Oxford Street, Accra: City Life and the Itineraries of Transnationalism*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 199–200.

⁴¹ Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 173.

functions as its chief social function. Recall that the initiation is supposed to “make a man” of LT, the “sissy son,”⁴² and remedy the fact that he and Nathi are “ibhari, or useless” within the community.⁴³ To be rendered socially useful, a paternalistic authority imposes itself upon the penis to literally pare it back, to strip it, to reduce it. Similarly, under legislation like *GEAR*, state services are pared back and assets stripped in order to make them truly “efficient” and “useful” to their customers. The way that this leaves bodies exposed and vulnerable is registered in the image of the boy shot in both legs whom Nathi sees waiting in the hospital: “The bandages around his thighs were dark with blood, the cloth rough from the bone splintered through beneath.”⁴⁴ These proximate images of mutilation bring together the negligence or malignancy of the discrepant institutions of *ulwaluko* and private health care in the imaginary of the novel.

Ultimately, toward the end of the novel, Nathi will undergo his *ulwaluko*, move in with his uncle in Du Noon township, and take up a job at a local shop. By delaying his *ulwaluko*, he was delaying entry into both the traditional community and the world of formal work. Van der Vlies raises the concern that the final scenes of the novel offer a moralizing closure.⁴⁵ Indeed, one of the final scenes of the novel features an ostensibly conciliatory sexual experience that seems to suggest that *love conquers all*:

I watch her now as she looks at the inflated flesh around the tip of my penis, still tender from my journey back home. She handles me with caution between her long, thin fingers, and her nails tickly my underside like the tip of an ivy leaf. Then she pushes her teeth into me and puts a hand on my chest when I begin to stir. For a long time, I just lie there, on the brink of creaming, and then I feel surprise when even this pain dissipates.⁴⁶

Finding a job, settling into a heterosexual couple, and living out his life as an initiated man in the same township as his family is here represented as being a much less painful fate than Nathi feared. But the pain that is being soothed is the pain from the wound of *ulwaluko*, the evidence of the ethnic and social conformity that he resisted for so long. Rather than being a conciliatory ending, we might also read this as a question about whether the consolations of life in unevenly developed societies are in fact numbing agents to ongoing injustice. So his *ulwaluko* represents both an acceptance of ritual tradition and the unevenly developed conditions of neoliberal South Africa. By living in the interstices between these two social institutions, Nathi is in a state of arrested “structural transition,” much like the figure of the *kòbbòlò*.

⁴² Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 174.

⁴³ Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 5.

⁴⁴ Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 143.

⁴⁵ van der Vlies, *Present Imperfect*, 167.

⁴⁶ Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 197–98.

Boredom

Although this interstitial position is intended to free Nathi from the imperatives of capital and a traditional community, he ends up suffering from a unique variety of boredom felt by subjects in informal economies. The novel represents how the “ugly feelings”⁴⁷ associated with the informal economy such as disaffection become forms of labor in themselves. Perhaps the principal affect of the novel is boredom, which Nathi introduces at the outset not as a form of idleness or absence of occupation but as something intransitive: “In order to do as much standing around as I do, you need to be one of the forty million human beings currently infected with the immunodeficiency virus.”⁴⁸ Studies of boredom across the world-system describe its emergence in times of economic crisis or transition. For Bruce O’Neill in his analysis of postcommunist Romania, boredom takes root in the fallow soil left by the retreat of the socialist state where the planned economy provided full occupation, if not necessarily abundant opportunities of socially productive labor.⁴⁹ For O’Neill, as for Ato Quayson, this kind of boredom indexes the exposure of the fungible subject. This boredom is extremely dangerous, leaving individuals vulnerable to misadventure or death by suicide.⁵⁰ In his study of Accra, Quayson makes the distinction between “leisure” and “free time”: the former an elite activity that fills gaps between routinized work with entertainment and consumption, the latter an absence of occupation that the *kòbòlò* experiences as “a burden that must be replaced by employment in the tedious cycle of urban life.”⁵¹ Thus individuals must occupy this time with *ad hoc* activity. Diversion, labor, and time occupation coincide, in the informal economy, in casual labor.

Nathi says having HIV *facilitates* his idleness. He is able to do nothing because he sells his ARVs. Far from standing in opposition to neoliberal profit imperatives, Nathi’s boredom is underwritten by hawking his privately funded medication, and, in a dialectical reversal, his boredom plays a functional roll in this informal circulation of medication. By situating HIV in a political economy that has “nowhere else to expand and no new frontiers to exploit,”⁵² *The Reactive* “join [s] the dots between global capitalism, [and] human health” in a similar yet distinct manner to Imran Coovadia’s *High Low In-Between* (2009) and Gordimer’s *Get a Life* (2005).⁵³ By showing HIV being exploited for profit, the novel stages the necessary coincidence of apparent opposites (terminal illness and individual economic productivity) in conditions of combined and uneven development. This is what I propose we call the aesthetics of strategic coincidence, where, amid falling wages, reduced opportunities for work, a collapsing environment, and

⁴⁷ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

⁴⁸ Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 22; my emphasis.

⁴⁹ Bruce O’Neill, *The Space of Boredom: Homelessness in the Slowing Global Order* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

⁵⁰ O’Neill, *The Space of Boredom*, 2.

⁵¹ Quayson, *Oxford Street, Accra*, 199.

⁵² Treasa de Loughry, *The Global Novel and Capitalism in Crisis* (London: Palgrave, 2020), 10.

⁵³ Jane Poyner, *The Worlding of the South African Novel: Spaces of Transition* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 236.

bleak public health outlook, profit must be extracted from virtually every activity. For example, glue is both a substance of labor and leisure in the novel: "Cissie's our resident chemist here at West Ridge. She's in charge of cooking the glue we use to hang up our posters."⁵⁴ Yet "the friends spend their spare time sniffing industrial strength glue."⁵⁵ Glue is thus synthesized and used for business and pleasure. In fact, under conditions where every activity is transvalued, anything that is business must become pleasure and vice versa in order to justify expending time and energy on it.

Recontaining Informality

The itineraries of Nathi's existence in this intermediate, informal economy are, as Van der Vlies persuasively argues, legible within a neoliberal ethic of work and value production. The main narrative of *The Reactive* describes Lindanathi's life and work in the informal, shadow economy of South Africa. Using the dates in the prologue we can calculate that the events of the narrative take place between 2001 and 2003, meaning the novel is set during the time of the ANC's implementation of the ironically named *Growth, Employment and Redistribution*, or *GEAR*, program, "an orthodox neoliberal package."⁵⁶ The psychic and economic space⁵⁷ that the novel explores, then, is produced by the "casualisation" of labor under South Africa's neoliberal era of political economy. It was Lindanathi's putative desire to enter this space, but while occupying it he comes to strongly desire forms of collectivity and community that neoliberalism by its very nature seeks to deconstruct. In the absence of any real opportunities for collectivity or actual value production through labor, then, the novel shows how value is feigned in this kind of economy through Lindanathi's running of an antiretroviral drug scam.

After Lindanathi takes voluntary redundancy from a science lab, he is offered a private health-care package, as antiretroviral treatment was not publicly available under the Mbeki regime—a classic example of the neoliberal state's failure to offer basic public services and its outsourcing of such roles to private companies. Yet, rather than using the HIV treatment himself, Lindanathi effectively gambles it by selling his entire stash of antiretrovirals. This enables him to live idly ("In order to do as much standing around as I do"), without being a member of a formal workforce and without generating any value. Crucially, there is ambiguity in the text regarding whether Lindanathi's infection was an accident or some kind of self-inflicted punishment for his perceived role in the death of his brother.⁵⁸ Even after being offered a private treatment plan to stay the course of the illness, he has chosen to sell his medication instead of taking it. There is evidence to suggest that he has not been taking any of the ARVs at all,

⁵⁴ Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 17.

⁵⁵ van der Vlies, *Present Imperfect*, 158.

⁵⁶ Gillian Hart, *Disabling Globalization: Places of Power in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2002), 18.

⁵⁷ Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 176.

⁵⁸ Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 174.

when, toward the end of the novel, he seems nonplussed to learn that his illness does not seem to have advanced: “Sometimes I still hear from Sis’ Thobeka [the caseworker from the health-care company]. I finally gave her that CD4-count sheet, believe it or not. They say the virus is arrested in my blood.”⁵⁹

Putting this all together, Lindanathi’s entry into the shadow economy where he does lots of “standing around” is deeply bound up with a kind of nihilism. Instead of producing value through labor, he has appropriated the value extracted from the health-care company as capital that he sets in motion among Cape Town’s HIV victims as exchange-value. He then uses this money to fund a hallucinatory, drug-fueled existence in the interstices of the formal communities of 2000s South Africa. Thus, what actually funds Lindanathi’s diurnal existence is the gradual depletion of his body through his failure to take his ARVs, using them instead to feign a kind of phantom value. While these kinds of economic and psychic spaces are often presented as offering an escape from the structures of capitalist society, my argument throughout this article is that they are created and sanctioned by capital, and often exploited for its benefit. This is a neoliberal South African version of Sylvia Wynter’s understanding of the plot and plantation dialectic that animates Caribbean fiction. While slaves who worked the plantations produced value for the world economy, their private plots of land within the plantations allowed a degree of self-sufficiency. For Wynter, the local reappropriation of the hegemonic novel form corresponds to the private cultivation of a plot. The plantation corresponds to exchange-value, the plot to use-value. The private plot maintains the bodies of workers. But *The Reactive* shows that the bodies of workers have become themselves capitalized. Not by being exhausted in factories, but by being exploited as forms of fixed capital, as tools of value production, by their owners. Here, neoliberalism is simply the choice of the untethered free agent to depreciate and exploit their very sinews by their own volition, rather than in mineshafts or at ploughshares.

Although *The Reactive* clearly sits alongside other HIV narratives like Niq Mhlongo’s *Dog Eat Dog* (2004), *After Tears* (2007), and Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001), it goes beyond these novels to advance a more trenchant critique of the neoliberal regime of labor and value production. Although Mhlongo and Mpe’s novels “pit notions of African tradition (culture) against a science perceived by the dissident faction as Western-centric and capitalist-driven,” thereby registering “the virus [as] the preeminent site where the combined and uneven character of modernity manifests itself and is contested,” Ntshanga shows how HIV can be profited from.⁶⁰

Ultimately, there are explicit attempts to integrate the friends’ ARV racket into larger economic circuits. In the second part of the novel, Nathi, Ruan, and Cissie receive an offer via email from a mysterious figure wanting to buy their entire stash of ARVs. Ntshanga represents this figure as an accordionized symbol of the *longue durée* of global capital.⁶¹ But crucially the masked figure is also aligned with the *state*—he offers to buy the group’s entire stash of ARVs and

⁵⁹ Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 192.

⁶⁰ Poyner, *The Worlding of the South African Novel*, 158.

⁶¹ Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 102–03.

claims that “as you’ll soon learn for yourselves, the matters which bring us together bear their own sensitivities regarding the dictates of time.”⁶² One of the final events to take place in the novel will be the nationalization of HIV health care. There is the suggestion, then, that the masked figure is working on behalf of the state, attempting to source antiretroviral drugs from South Africa’s shadow economy. Thus, the heterotopic, interstitial economic space that the group believe themselves to inhabiting, is in fact well within the panoptic gaze of South African state capitalism.

Furthermore, when the group find themselves unable to fill the masked man’s order, the mysterious figure will simply use them to his own private financial ends. During this scene, Lindanathi claims that the group’s activities in fact have no utility or value:

I ask him, why did you bring us here?

Why, he says, you provide a social service, do you not?

It’s a scam, I say.

The man laughs. He does that for a while. Now, now, he says, we both know that isn’t true.⁶³

There is a productive slippage in the use of “social service” here—in British English usage, the social services connote the public services provided by the state, but of course the group’s ARV scam could not be further from such a project. It will emerge that the masked figure will appropriate this “service” to his own devices. Initially, he transfers the group an unspecified (but we are led to believe astronomical) sum for the drugs. Given that the group cannot provide this “service,” Cissie suggests that the group “use the money then kill ourselves.”⁶⁴ Here again we see the nihilistic, self-harming impulse identified by Jackson,⁶⁵ to exploit to the full forms of fictitious capital that can be extracted amid the contradictory velocities of the neoliberal world economy. The drug scam that the three friends believed to be funding their lives beyond the imperatives of family and capital are in fact legible within and profitable for a neoliberal political economy.

When no drugs are forthcoming, the funds are withdrawn. After luring the group to a house and apparently hypnotizing or drugging them into unconsciousness, the masked figure gives the group a package to deliver to a little girl who lives in their apartment complex. It is in this scene that we can grasp the kind of “social service” that the group’s labor actually offers the neoliberal state.⁶⁶ It emerges that the masked man has used the “social service” of the group’s business in the shadow economy to courier funds to his estranged relative. Although neoliberalism promises that financial deregulation and the paring back of the state offer individuals more freedom to associate through the

⁶² Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 102.

⁶³ Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 106.

⁶⁴ Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 107.

⁶⁵ Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 178.

⁶⁶ Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 159.

market to the benefit of all, here we see how neoliberalism actually plays out in the semi-periphery of the world-system. Vast quantities of value pass through the informal economy, yet none seems to benefit those who actually labor in it. The fact that at this point in the novel Lindanathi chooses to leave his life in Cape Town and return to his family who now live in the township of Du Noon suggests that he has come to the realization that the shadow economy cannot offer him any form of escape.

Conclusion

Having found that family and work, tradition and modernity, *gesellschaft* and *gemeinschaft* represent similar and coincidental contingencies, Nathi tries to live outside of them. What he discovers, however, is that under neoliberalism various forms of work can be drawn back into transnational economic activity; even idleness and boredom become reappropriated as labor. Although Van der Vlies argues that Nathi makes a rational economic calculation in selling his ARVs, we must qualify this with the self-destructive impulse I have identified in the text. His guilt and sense of a lack of opportunity—things, I have shown, that are dialectically construed through both individual agency and structural factors—drive him to self-destructive boredom and inertia. This boredom is underwritten by his suicidal decision to sell rather than consume his ARVs, and its sclerotic impact drives Nathi deeper into inertia. But this seemingly closed spiral, as I have shown, is profitable to the very institutions from which Nathi is attempting to escape. Thus, while boredom stands, for Nathi, in opposition to work and utility, it attains a functional role in his interpellation as a neoliberal subject.

As such *The Reactive* is a response to *Life and Times of Michael K* wherein, according to Gordimer's critique, Michael believes he can live outside the forces of history surging about him and simply focus on gardening. In Coetzee's novel, "Freedom is defined negatively: it is to be 'out of all the camps at the same time' according to Michael K."⁶⁷ Ntshanga too demystifies the idea of the "alternative" or interstitial society. In order to believe in it, he must be high for most of the time. In a taxi to an addiction support meeting to sell ARVs, Nathi mulls his decision to wire his uncle some money in the hope this will placate the discussion of *ulwaluko*—the use of glue distracts him from the futility of these twin ventures:

The thought comes to me that Bhut'Vuyo might still take offence to my money, whether or not I deem it clean enough for him.

For a moment, I think about that, the idea of my money. The three of us remain afloat on what's left of the n-hexane in our blood, sitting one next to the other, two rows from the empty back seat.

The driver pulls over at the garage, and I lean forward and feel something jam inside my head. Small orange shapes burst inside the taxi, and from behind my eyelids, I envision myself laughing with Cissie and Ruan, the

⁶⁷ Gordimer, "The Idea of Gardening."

three of us wearing tailored suits and acting jubilantly, our fingers rolling joints from tall heaps of two-hundred-rand notes.⁶⁸

There is an ambiguity here about what is causing the hallucination, for Nathi's entire work life is used to fund his drug habit. The "idea of my money" could thus be said to induce this blurred reality as much as the narcotics it purchases. This blurred reality is used to distract Nathi from his impending *ulwaluko* and transition away from *kòbòlò* status. The irrealist style, then, is a registration of how neoliberal social relations are lived—the distortion of time and sensation by boredom and inertia, and the various ways in which these are contradictorily medicated and prolonged. Crucially, we will recall that even the community elders are dependent on the same blurred reality: "I remember our uncles, with their gold teeth and beer breath."⁶⁹

Life in the "alternative society" is at once brutal and immiserated, but also perfectly legible within neoliberal discourses of flexible, individual labor. Further work of this kind must focus on the links between characters like Nathi and the Brazilian *malandro* and *agregado*; the Accra *kòbòlò*; and the Lagos "area boy," to reveal the transnational affinities between representations of laborers in intermediate, contingent classes.

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⁶⁸ Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 36.

⁶⁹ Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, 173.

Cite this article: Jewell, Josh. 2023. "The Informal Economy in Masande Ntshanga's *The Reactive*." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 10, 57–73. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2022.30>