Capitalism, suffering and struggles in silk roads and Hazmat highways: Sitas' poetic-sociological 'flâneur' around the world

An essay on Ari Sitas with Kristy Stone, Greg Dor & Reza Khota (2020), from "Notes for an Oratorio, on small things that fall", Tulika Books, New Delhi

Abstract

This is a review essay on a volume by Ari Sitas with Kristy Stone, Greg Dor & Reza Khota (2020), *Notes for an Oratorio, on small things that fall" (like a screw in the night)*, which is a poetic journey of suffering in the world of contemporary capitalism with a sociological twist. The paper aims to present and interpret an ambitious volume combining a poetic, creative art, and sociological voyage worldwide, critically engaging "our contemporary Silk Roads and Hazmat Highways". The story is narrated by an African mythical figure from the Tales from Southern Africa: she embarks on a voyage that encounters savage labor, murderous borders, daisy cutter bombs and gadgets, refugee camps, and refuse that chart a global map of suffering. It is a story that connects the Marxian commodity with products of wonder, art, craft, and the labor process right through to destruction and death. The book provides a poetic and sociological gaze on 'globalized' capitalism utilizing the Wallersteinian world-system analysis from the vantage of the Global South in a highly engaged and committed art that creates a radicalized, de-racialized, and deprovincialized perspective on the world.

Strange birds from afar: a global sociology of suffering

Sitas' hero, Nomxakazo, embarks on a global voyage, like the "strange birds" that "come from afar" and "are condemned to wander".[1] This is a wonder/wander around the world of savage labour, murderous borders, "daisy cutter bombs and gadgets, refugee camps and refuse", charting a global map of suffering, connecting the *commodity*[2] with products of

[1] Ari Sitas with Kristy Stone, Greg Dor & Reza Khota, *Notes for an Oratorio, on small things that fall" (like a screw in the night)*, (New Delhi, Tulika Books, 2020): 5.

[2] Marx starts his magus opus, *Capital*, with the commodity. He defines it as "an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind. A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether, for instance, they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference. Neither are we here concerned to know how the object satisfies these wants, whether directly as means of subsistence, or indirectly

wonder, art, craft, and the labour process right through to destruction and death. Outraged Nomxakazo encounters and, in the process, uncovers "the ugliness and wonder of our material and tactile worlds". It is a majestic work combining a poetic, creative-art, and sociological voyage along "our contemporary Silk Roads and Hazmat Highways".[3]

Nomxakazo bares the spirit of the African *Sage*.[4] According to the Southern African tale, this is a wisdom derived and accumulated, after her own wanders imposed on her by the choices of her megalomaniac father, a powerful warrior *inkosi* (king).[5] Her very name, *Nomxakazo wako Gingqwayo*, symbolises the great war her father had waged, defeating his equally powerful neighbour enemy-*inkosi*.[6] Her daunting adventures taught her a thing or two about wars, justice, and life. *Notes for an Oratorio* sets Nomxakazo in the current global context to augment this southern African spirit to become a kind of *modern Sage of the Global South*. Since antiquity, this very spirit of the *sage* has been wondering around the globe in different philosophical traditions.[7]

Nomxakazo's 'wandering' is not quite the wandering idleness that Benjamin associates with the 'flâneur'. Despite their differences, both forms of wandering have commonalities in that that they contain a powerful reaction to the oppressive division of and exploitative labour regimes imposed on workers. A notable difference is that with Sitas, Nomxakazo's voyage is from the outset one of purpose, engagement, and outrage. Nomxakazo personifies Sitas' students from around the world,[8] who after their study, see the world anew. During their visits to different parts of the world, or once returned home, they are outraged by what they witness. Also, distinguished from Benjamin's times, a century earlier, this is 21st century voyage that takes the form of an *engaged* 'flâneur'. Yet, just like Benjamin's, it remains "a

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as means of production" (Carl Marx, *Capital*, volume one, p. 125) also available at https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm#2

[3] Back cover note from the author, Ari Sitas, *Notes for an Oratorio*.

[4] Henry Odera Oruka *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy of History and Culture*, Vol. 4., 1990, p. xxxi, Leiden: E. J. Brill Munyaradzi Mawere & Tapuwa R. Mubaya) *African Philosophy and Thought Systems: A Search for a Culture and Philosophy of Belonging*, (Bamenda: Langaa Research & Publishing CIG Mankon, 2016).

[5] Archibald C. Jordan, *Tales from Southern Africa*. Translated and Retold by AC Jordan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

[6] In this folktale, Dumakude, her father who is a powerful warrior *inkosi* (king) swore that when Nomxakazo came of age he would give her a present of cattle "that will be so numerous" that the dust they raised as they were driven along would cover the sun. However, she suffers greatly when *Nomxakazo* is captured by Maphundu, a huge cannibalistic creature, until her escape and return. Abner Nyamende "The relevance of folktales to 21st century society", *OuLitNet*, https://oulitnet.co.za/isikhundla/21st.asp

[7] The 'sage' is often associated often with the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates and later the stoics, see René Brouwer, *The Stoic sage, The Early Stoics on Wisdom, Sagehood and Socrates*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[8] He has been one of the pioneers in a genuinely Global Studies Masters.

demonstration against the division of labour" that avoids "any sort of tie to the idler's line of work, and ultimately to the labour process in general."[9]

The world's map on suffering, connecting labour to cultural forms is a subject Sitas has been thinking and developing since the days he cut his teeth as sociologist in the 1980s.[10] His *Theoretical Parables* and *The Mandela Decade*, had already opened new frontiers in sociological debates on labour, culture, and global-local transformations. Moreover, Sitas's readings of the South African experience application well beyond the country's boundaries as resonate to globe so insightful and with, as articulated in his phrase "universally comprehensible, arrogantly local".[11] It is from this vantage point that the *Notes for an Oratorio* move further, contributing and paving new understandings to "social suffering in contemporary society", a segment of which Bourdieu at al. had documented sociologically.[12] With *Notes for an Oratorio*, Sitas adopts but augments Spinoza's "do not deplore, do not laugh, do not hate – understand", which, per Bourdieu is an integrated canon in sociological praxis.[13] In parallel genres, poetry and sociology, Sitas realizes in new form "a complex and multilayered representation capable of articulating the same realities but in terms that are different and, sometimes, irreconcilable".[14]

This is a project that Sitas had been developing sociologically with his *Voices That Reason*,[15] and *The Ethic of Reconciliation*,[16] and *Gauging and Engaging Deviance* in the world-system.[17] Poetically, he narrates the story where the actors articulate thoughts derived from

[9] Patrick McGee "The Communist flâneur, or, Joyces's bordom", Maurizia Boscagli and Enda Duffy (eds.) *Joyce, Benjamin and Magical Urbanism,* (AP 427/M5,8) (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2001): 122–131.
[10] This is apparent from his 1980s essay, republished as *The Flight of Gwala-Gwala bird*. *Essays by Ari Sitas*, South African History Online, Cape Town, 2016 and his *Voices that reason, theoretical parables*, (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 2004). However, these can be traced back to his PhD, as Eddie Webster illustrates that Sitas' intellectual formation in bringing cultural aspects as formative to class consciousness, their social imaginaries and praxis.
[11] This phrase, taken from his *Theoretical Parables* (Sitas, 2004, p. 32) by Wiebke Keim, *Universally Comprehensible, Arrogantly Local, South African Labour Studies from the Apartheid Era into the New Millennium* (Paris: éditions des archives contemporaines, 2015).
[12] Pierre Bourdieu et al, *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).
[13] As Bourdieu suggests this requires that we take "people as they are" and by "providing the theoretical instruments that let us see these lives as necessary through a systematic search for the causes and reasons they have for being what they are", Pierre Bourdieu et al, *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p.1.
[14] Pierre Bourdieu (1999, 3) "The space of Points of View", Pierre Bourdieu et all, *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society,* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999): 3—5.
[15] Ari Sitas, *Voices That Reason: theoretical parables*, (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 2004).
[16] Ari Sitas, *The Ethic of Reconciliation*, (Durban/New Delhi: Madiba Press, 2008).
[17] Ari Sitas, Sumangala Damodaran, Wiebke Keim, Nicos Trimikliniotis, and Faisal Garba, *Gauging and Engaging Deviance 1600-2000*, (Tulika Academic Press, 2014)., and Ari Sitas, Sumangala Damodaran, Wiebke Keim, Nicos Trimikliniotis, "Deviance", Immanuel Wallerstein (ed.) *The World is Out of Joint: World-*

their suffering, alienation, exploitation as well as struggles and perseverance found also in Sitas's earlier works.[18] The book integrates important elements found in ancient Greek tragedies with the chorus acting as the 'common mind', sometimes revealing aspects, others amplifying sentiments or cynically commenting but above all connecting us, the world at large, with the characters. The chorus articulates what is a contradictory 'common sense', containing 'good sense' and 'bad sense', as elegantly described by Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*.[19]

One of Sitas's leap is that of a poetic-and-sociological gaze on 'globalised' capitalism or better the Wallersteinian world-system from the vantage of the Global South, the outrage of the highly engaged and committed. In that sense, it is a *radicalised, de-racialised* and *deprovincialized* perspective on the world.[20] The other important contribution is the centrality of what is coded as 'Hazmat Highways' in environmental sociology so as to theoretically connect global and local labour under capitalism with the pressing global environmental challenges amid the dangers of the 'ecological rift'[21] of is referred to by some scholars as the 'climate leviathan'.[22]

Poetic-and-Sociological pathways: A Map of World Suffering in contemporary Capitalism

Six acts, twenty-two scenes force us to wonder/wander around the world in a way that sociology 'hits' on art, labour, suffering and the struggle for survival contra profiting, power, and destruction. This masterful design can only be fully appreciated when the last scene kicks in. Like Cavafy's Odysseus, who sets out relive Homer's *Odyssey*, only at the end of the painful 20year-long journey can he at last reach the point where he "understood what these Ithakas mean".[23] So does Nomxakazo, in Sitas' oratorical journey. The *Odyssey* here meets

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Historical Interpretations of Continuing Polarizations, Fernand Braudel Center Series, (Milton Park: Routledge, 2016).

[18] For a selection of his poetry, see Ari Sitas, *Rough Music- Selected Poems 1989-2013*, Deep South, 2013.

[19] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, pp. 419-425, Lawrence and Wishart, 1971, Arun K. Patnaik "Gramsci's Concept of Common Sense: Towards a Theory of Subaltern Consciousness in Hegemony Processes", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Jan. 30, 1988, Vol. 23, No. 5 (Jan. 30, 1988),https://www.jstor.org/stable/4378042; Karen Crehan, *Gramsci's Common Sense, Inequality and Its Narratives* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

[20] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, second edition, (Princeton University Press, 2007).

[21] John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, Richard York, *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism's War on the Earth*, NYU Press, 2010.

[22] Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright, *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future* (London and New York: Verso press, 2018).

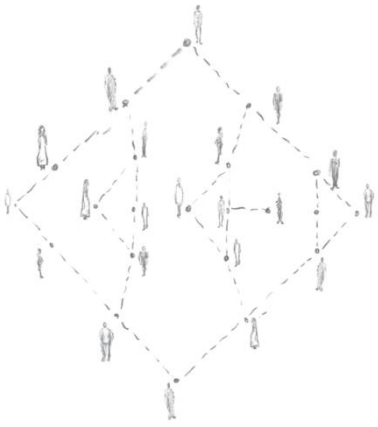
[23] Constantine Cavafis, "Ithaca", Translated by Edmund Keeley/ Phillip Sherrard

Sitas's own explosive poetry of the 1980s insurrectionary South Africa in *Tropical Scars* and his 2000 masterpiece, *Slave Trades.* Also, we can trace aspects of *The Vespa Diaries* and *Around the World in Eighty Days*.[24] The wonderings however go back further to his childhood home of Limassol Cyprus in *Rhythmskewed*:

> 'So many thousand molecules, shaped by history's rhythms-the molecules press, solid, visceral, at my brains and ignite ancient premonitions.'[25]

There are multiple innovations that inspire in the *Notes for an Oratorio* as it is staged in a way that makes it is poetry, theatrical, visual art/animation and, importantly for the purpose of this review, it is sociological. Moreover, Sitas gives a prominent voice, reason and elegance to the millions of suffering peoples, workers, refugees and all those whose lives are dispensable.

The map revealed to us at the end which is much more than a remarkably dizzying geographical map. "The Map of where we travelled" is revealed to only on when it is declared: "the real instruments made on stage ARE the image" (capitalised in the original).[26] Mapping via google maps allows us to follow the geographical routes of the current Silk Roads, but the mapping per Sitas is as poetic as it is sociological of labour, exploitation and suffering of the world. The logic of bifurcation is the underlying logic of the 'silk roads' which also serves as Hazmat highways. It is logic that connects the fragment of a 'world in fragments',[27] as the "map of the way of suffering", drawn by Karen Press (p. 1):



Silk roads and Hazmat highways: The cruel world from Chinese workers' perspective(s)

[24] Ari Sitas, *Around the World in Eighty Days* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 2014): Iii-Iv.
[25] See Ari Sitas, *Rough Music- Selected Poems 1989-2013* (Grahamstown: Deep South, 2013).
[26] *Oratorio,* Final Act VI, Scene 22: 110.
[27] Cornelius Castoriadis, *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination* (California: Stanford University Press, 1997.

Act I consists of three scenes. From Southern Africa (Eastern Cape /KwaZulu-Natal) Nomxakazo travels to Shenzhen, Guangdong Province in southeast China, to meet the factory workers producing the iPhone. From Scene 1, the drama intensely unfolds, as narrated in the conversation between Nomxakazo and Xu Lizhi, the Chinese poet-worker who decided to end his life with his last poem, just before his tragic death in 2014, was entitled, "A Screw Fell to the Ground".[28] In the 11million metropolis, populated primarily by migrant workers where Foxconn factory is located, the lives of workers cost very little. Shenzhen Foxcomm employs between 250,000 to 450,000 workers who perform endless repetitive shifts to produce "the most desirable commodity of the twenty-first century – the cellphone."[29] Xu Lizhi, is not the only one to end it all; in 2010 alone, 18 employees attempted suicide, resulting in 14 deaths, ages 17 to 28. As *a worker blog* suggests, after the 12th jump at Foxconn, "To die is the only way to testify that we ever lived".[30] It is not only the extremity of these conditions that makes the story disturbing, but also the sheer numbers of migrant workers in China that are expanding: 285.6 million migrant workers, who make more than 20 percent of the total population or roughly 35 percent of the Chinese labour force, half of whom left their hometowns without their families.[31] The Chinese poet-worker's pained and agonising poetry resonates Hawking's resignation before the question "why the universe bothers to exist".[32] In this strange universe we all reside in, the 24-year old migrant worker's life is but *one* of the "small things that fall" (like a screw in the night)". He decides to end it all, as his wretched life as he no longer sees any reason bothering to exist.

From there, Nomxakazo travels north-eastwards to Anqiu, Weifang in Shandong (Scene 2), where workers produce the space-like Hazmat suits, such as those used in in the 2013-16 Ebola crisis in West Africa. YU is a major business player in the industry in China,[33] connected to the USA multinational Lakeland industries. Jinju, the factory seamstress there, narrates the story of the production of Hazmat suits, tents, and body bags; she produces 400 Hazmat suits per day. She is one amongst the millions of Chinese workers who had migrated

[28] The poetry and brief life of a Foxconn worker: Xu Lizhi (1990-2014), https://libcom.org/blog/xulizhi-foxconn-suicide-poetry (accessed 11 august 2021)
[29] Ari Sitas, *Notes for an Oratorio.*
[30] "A Worker's blog", quoted by Jenny Chan, Pun Ngai, "Suicide as Protest for the New Generation of Chinese Migrant Workers: Foxconn, Global Capital, and the State", *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Japan Focus Volume 8, Issue 37, Number 2, Article ID 3408, 13 September 2010.
[31] Number of migrant workers in China from 2010 to 2020, https://www.statista.com/statistics/234578/share-of-migrant-workers-in-china-by-age/
[32] The scientist is optimistic about the prospect of science discovering how it all began, but he resigns in front of the question of "why the universe bothers to exist". Stephen Hawking, 'Origins of the Universe', *Black Holes and Baby Universes and Other Essays*, Bantam Books, London, pp.77-90.
[33] For the firms profile see https://www.yu-associates.com/services/hazardous-materials

from rural areas to find work there. Let's not forget that Mao had promised a "different path of accumulation."[34] It was a revolution in the 'third world' organised where the revolutionary force were the peasants with global implications that inspired across the world.[35] However, contemporary China, just like the rest of the world, is deeply riddled in the contradictions that Mao had famously written about.[36] The onset of *Adam Smith in Beijing* in post-Mao China[37] has produced phenomenal growth but also major inequalities and contradictions,[38] producing different social relations and articulation between the urban and the rural as well as another trajectory of development for much of Eastern Asia. China is already the largest economy in the globe,[39] she is a global power about surpass the USA.[40] However, China's income inequality is among the world's worst with the gap between the rich and poor in China is almost as huge as in the US.[41] Despite official Communist party declarations about "socialism with Chinese characteristics",[42] China seems to resemble something like "capitalism with Chinese characteristics".[43] With Mao's death and the end of the cultural revolution, peasants and workers power has been eliminated, allowing for the rise and the consolidation of a new class that rules under tutelage of the Chinese Communist Party hierarchy.[44] China is already integrated in world economy buying the USA debts and hence stabilising the global economy, but the socioeconomic transformation within China is as

[34] Ari Sitas "50 Years since Mao's Little Red Book: The Scholarship of Ascendant China and its Heritage", unpublished paper presented in South Africa in 2017.
[35] Costas M. Constantinou, "Transgressing the Nation: In Defence of Cypriot Peasantry and Rustic Politics", *The Cyprus Review*, Vol. 31 No. 1 2019, pp. 73-97, https://cyprusreview.org/index.php/cr/article/view/630/577
[36] Mao Tse Tung, *On Practice. On Contradiction. On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People* (National Book Agency, 1967).
[37] Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-first Century* (Verso, 2007).
[38] Gillian Hart, *Disabling Globalisation: Places of Power in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2003).
[39] According to the World Bank for 2020, the adjusted GDP for China is $24,274,130.80, surpassing the whilst the USA stands at $20,893,746.00, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.PP.CD?most_recent_value_desc=true
[40] Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order*, Penguin Books. 2012; Minxin Pei "Why China will not surpass the United States", *The Economist*, 30 August 2021.
[41] The Gini coefficient of China stands at 38.5%. Nicu Calcea, "China's income inequality is among the world's worst", The New Statesman, 23 August 2021, https://www.newstatesman.com/world/2021/08/china-s-income-inequality-among-world-s-worst
[42] John Garrick and Yan Chang Bennett "Xi Jinping Thought, Realisation of the Chinese Dream of National Rejuvenation?" *China perspectives*, 2018, 99-105, https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.7872
[43] Yasheng Huang, *Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics" Entrepreneurship and the State*, (Cambridge University Press, 2009); Ronald Coase and Ning Wang, *How China Became Capitalist* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
[44] Andreas Joel, *Rise of the Red Engineers, The Cultural Revolution and the Origins of China's New Class*, (California: Stanford University Press, 2009).

contradictory as ever and the Chinese leadership itself is alarmed about the dangerous rise of inequality.[45]

Hard Labour: Silk production and the uses of Hazmat products

Act II bifurcates into four scenes. Nomxakazo in scene 4moves south-west to Bhagalpur, Bihar in eastern border of India to speak to workers in the famous silk factories. The modern silk roads are built on the ancient silk roads that have already changed the world around us. Our societies from China, India Europe, Arabia, and Africa have been transformed, inter alia, via these encounters.[46] In this commodity-led voyage, Nomxakazo follows the silk road to Ghandi's land. Recall how Ghandi said he was "a spinner, a weaver and a farmer": she meets each of them sweating away in their everydayness as their life-and-death.

The image role at the background in scene 5 shows deforestation by actively chopping off vegetation of the jungle which "fades into image of Mao on a spinning wheel and Gandhi with a gun".[47] The irony is apparent. Nomxakazo now travels to the Chatra District, where she encounters India's war against the Naxalites, the Maoists in the state of Jharkhand, literally 'land of jungles and bushes'.[48] The burning forest is but a part of the burning and tortured flesh of the oppressed people.[49] At Pukti village, Charta district in Jharkhand State India, Nomxakazo meets a young Adivasi woman, Ritika, in a horrid background of a machine chopping off vegetation and destroying the forest, as coalmining destroys farmlands and jungle which once had a thousand tiggers roaming. She stands next to a silk-made body bag, inside of which lies the body of Sarita, a Maoist leader, a trenchant terrorist for the Indian security forces or a heroic leader for the Nexalites. As forest lands are chewed away to make space for the 1500 ever-expanding coalmines, the armed struggle led by the Maoists wages relentless.

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[45] Yupu Zhang, "Three Aspects of Xi Jinping's Thoughts on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era", *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, volume 415, 5th International Symposium on Social Science ISSS, 2019; John Garrick and Yan Chang Bennett, "Xi Jinping Thought, Realisation of the Chinese Dream of National Rejuvenation?" *China perspectives*, 2018, 99-105, https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.7872 ; Yunxia Qian, "Xi Jinping's New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics is the Newest Theoretical Model of Marxism in China in the New Era", 9th International Conference on Education and Social Science, ICESS, 2019, https://webofproceedings.org/proceedings_series/ESSP/ICESS%202019/ICESS19055.pdf

[46] Oratorio, Scene 4: 28.

[47] Sitas *Oratorio*: 30.

[48] Sitas *Oratorio*: 30-32.

[49] For a brilliant ethnography of democracy examining the struggles and suppression in Bastar that has a broader application particularly in resource-rich areas with indigenous people, see Nandini Sundar, *The Burning Forest, India's War Against the Maoists* (London: Verso, 2019).

In Scene 6, off Nomxakazo goes to the Ebola treatment centre of Goderich/Lakka in Sierra Leone to encounter the south African nurse, Maddi Tloloane, dressed in a hazmat space suit. There, she can see the connections of the capitalist world-system: Tloloane is the daughter of a miner who died mining the metal that made lead and cadmium, essential for the cherished mobile phones. The mine was sold to an Indian firm.

The following stopover in Nomxakazo's wander along the silk roads is Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jordan, which hosts 80,000 refugees since 2015 (Scene 7). There, she encounters, Yaseen, the worker from the Jordanian port city on the Red Sea's Gulf of Aqaba who has hammered 5000 tents under the relentless sun.

An aerial view shows the Zaatari refugee camp in Mafraq, Jordan, Thursday, July 18, 2013. (AP), https://english.alarabiya.net/blog/2016/03/28/Behind-the-fences-of-Jordan-s-Zaatari-refugee-camp

A world in fragments: Suffering unleashed

Now we are overwhelmed. As the fragments of the world unfold, these are connected in a way that blows the mind. Act III bifurcates into eight scenes.

We are then taken to Buxar jail, Indian Bihar State in scene 8, the 'factory' that since the 1930s is the sole producer of the ropes used throughout India to hang those sentenced to death. other prisoners are made to produce the ropes. Prison workers across India, live in inhumane conditions and most of whom come from the lower castes and classes: inmates are

put to work by private companies in many prisons to produce apart from ropes, tents, handcuffs and, cloths and rugs. Shocked by the practice, Ritika wonder: "why to do make the morbid rope?" (p. 50). The Roper thinks he is special. In the play, the Masked Chorus is left wondering:

> "Do they know where these ropes go?
> Do they know and if they do?
> Why are they quiet?
> Do they know?
> Why don't they riot?" (p.51)

Then in Scene 9, off we go to the Scavengers colony, Panchsheel Nagar in the 20 million megacity of Mumbai, where 60% live in slums. In the extreme contrast between modern Highrise buildings and squalid slums. Such am minster of a city produces huge waste of 2,000 million litres a day. But who will service 1500-kilometres long sewers consisting of open gutters, storm drains, and more than 50,000 manholes built since colonial times? The 4,000 sanitation workers employed by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation clearly do not suffice. The informal workers known as 'manual scavengers' are performing these horrid jobs: over 95% of these workers are Dalits, paid 15,000Rs (198 dollars or 175 euros) per month, about 20 dice on the job each month and 80% never reach the age of sixty. Many live in the Scavengers Colony, a damping ground located a kilometre away from the luxurious Taj Mahal Hotel. Deaths of manual scavengers are routine, despite the fact that it is banned in and India[50] and Indian Courts warnings that those responsible will face criminal proceedings.[51] Class and caste here is preproduced as the caste system in the neoliberal era is historically conditioned in Brahminy hegemonic system: Despite constitutional pleas for equality before the law, Dalits are compelled to perform heinous task of cleaning human excreta: the caste oppression is de facto state-sponsored cast as a low-wage occupation and social discrimination and caste prejudice and massive inequality are institutionalised forcing them to choose the same occupation, generation after generation.[52] Equality remains an empty declaration.

[50] India: Manual scavengers continue to remove human waste by hand despite ban, DW 24 august 2021, https://www.dw.com/en/india-manual-scavengers-continue-to-remove-human-waste-by-hand-despite-ban/a-58970498

[51] "Madras High Court warns civic bodies of criminal proceedings for manual scavengers' deaths", *Times Now*, https://www.timesnownews.com/chennai/article/madras-high-court-warns-civic-bodies-of-criminal-proceedings-for-manual-scavengers-deaths/733454 .

[52] See the documentary *Kakkous*, directed by Divya Bharathi that details the lives and living conditions of people engaged in manual scavenging, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7186362/

Scene 10 takes place at the Pozzallo reception centre, in southern Italy, where we are introduced to Ibrahim Farka. He has run 5,000 km through the Sahara, from Gambia to Senegal, survived the purges from the Libyan militia and crossed the deadly Mediterranean Sea. He was lucky to reach the shores of Italy, unlike the thousands of others who have drowned. It is estimated 16,676 people who drowned were never found between in the Mediterranean since 2014.[53]

The journey continues with more encounters, intensifying the horror of the dystopian world we live in. There are another three visits in refugee camps (Pozzallo reception centre in Italy, Nyaragusu Refugee Camp in Tanzania and again at Zaatari Refugee Camp, Jordan gives the picture of a *world of camps*: at least 82.4 million people around the world have been forced to flee their homes, and according to the UNHCR, an estimated 6.6 million people. Among them, 4.5 million reside in planned and managed camps and approximately 2 million are sheltered in self-settled camps.[54] Amongst the encounters, at Nyaragusu Refugee camp, which hosts around 35,000 Burundians, we are introduced Charles Ilunga, a 26-year-old refugee who has lived 18 years in camps. What is the future for his generation which has grown in the camps?

At the scrap metal recycling (Basra, southern Iraq), we witness the recycling of material contaminated by depleted uranium, left after the USA bombings there. Radioactive dust contaminates air, water and soil, and has dire consequences for health—notably, conspicuously high incidences of cancer, leukaemia and severe birth defects in areas where depleted uranium weapons were used.[55] According to statistics from an Iraqi government institution, the rate of cancer in the province of Basra between 2015 and 2017 ranged from 400 to 500 new cases per month, but that these increased by up to 200% in 2018.[56] Dr. Jawad Al-Ali, an oncologist and member England's Royal Society of Physicians. "Our studies indicate that more than forty percent of the population around Basra will get cancer. We are

[53] This is an estimation from the total numbers added according to the IOM figures up to September 2021. As Varela suggests "the accurate number of deaths recorded in the Mediterranean Sea cannot ascertained", see Simona Varrella, *Deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea 2014-2021*, Sep 17, 2021 https://www.statista.com/statistics/1082077/deaths-of-migrants-in-the-mediterranean-sea/ (accessed 26 December 2021)

[54] UNHCR "Refugee Camps Explained", 6 April 2021, https://www.unrefugees.org/news/refugee-camps-explained/#How%20many%20refugees%20live%20in%20refugee%20camps?

[55] Edward Fox, "An Iraqi Scientist Speaks Out on the Lingering Effects of Radioactive Weapons", 2 Jul 2019, Al Fanar Media https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2019/07/an-iraqi-scientist-speaks-out-on-the-lingering-effects-of-radioactive-weapons/

[56] Mustafa Saadoun "Cancer hits residents of Iraqi oil city of Basra", Al Monitor, 14 June 2019, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/06/iraq-health-basra-cancer.html#ixzz7GQUezTnw

living through another Hiroshima."[57] Here, Sitas digs deep into the environmental dystonia generated by the powers that be are generating, as DU has a radioactive life of 4.5 billion years, equivalent to the life on earth:

> "Our Hazmat man blast the surface clean. Fuck the soil. It is fucked. Then grinds the pieces down to moveable size. Loads it. Then disposes the Hazmat suit in a container at the end of the day and seals it. There are about 400 tons to cut and sell." (p. 79.)

Hazmat reloaded is recycling profits, death, and disaster.

Then, we encounter the forensic archaeologist, the boner in Cyprus, in search of human bones via exhumations. This is nothing but a polite metonym to reconstruct the horror of the atrocities that buried beneath us but their memory haunt like ghosts, disturbing and distorting the fabricated 'official histories' for history school textbooks.[58] Then, Nomxakazo takes us to the Nyaragusu Refugee Camp that Sitas explains (p. 81):

> "The story of Africa, its history and sociology cannot be fathomed without understanding encampment and migration. It is a deeper history of resistance against the rapacious mining of the East of the Congo – the callous removals of people, the guerrillas, the mercenaries. Charles's uncle was there to know how and why the best around Che Guevara died. At least Charles is safe for the time being. The mines are booming. The reality remains: it has been so for years as refugees, economic migrants and nomads are trapped in our humanism's carceral. For Ilunga, Cape Town calls, he may be a hairdresser or a car guard there. It was not supposed to be so, but Lumumba's ghost buys no cellphone Apps."

The apex of death: The global networks of Capital

In Act IV the bifurcation narrows down to four destinations. It is here that we are so exhausted from what we witness the world that we long to reach a resolution to return home to find solace and somehow restore hope. Nomxakazo senses that we must be close, but not quite there. It is at this point that the horror of the dystopia meets Death-as-Hazmat for profiteering in the form of *global* networks. We feel the connecting nerves of the *silk roads as Hazmat highways*. The Imager Role uncovers: "The perennial hunter-gatherer woman with a trolley and large birds squawking off her way and the pile of debris" (p. 84): At the waste disposal at the City Waste Disposal site in Johannesburg, the informal hunter-gatherer tells a

[57] Jeffrey St. Clair, "Cancer as Weapon: Poppy Bush's Radioactive War on Iraq", Counterpunch, 7 December 2018, https://www.counterpunch.org/2018/12/07/cancer-as-weapon-of-mass-destruction-poppy-bushs-radioactive-war-on-iraq/

[58] Ari Sitas, Dilek Latif & Natasa Loizou, *Prospects of Reconciliation, Co-Existence and Forgiveness in Cyprus in the Post-referendum Period*, *PRIO Cyprus Centre Report* (Nicosia: PRIO Cyprus Centre, 2007).

very modern tale. Yet, it is also story takes back to prehistoric times. As we discover that "we are all African and their dying is ours", these falls on deaf ears.

Nomxakazo then, scene 17, takes us to the next and perhaps most morbid encounter: the literal trade of huma flesh and organs via the Global network of organ harvesting and trafficking. This network is not located anywhere in particular it is everywhere with the figure of "the Pimper", who according to Sitas (p. 98) is "the key man of our system", but must not be thought to be "Mr Capital":

> "He is in the shadow and he has an enormous way in the shade. He is not Mr Capital but he is his tonic, his remedy, capitalism's Viagra."

This is a highly sophisticated lucrative network organisation with agents located next human misery, next to refugee camps or any other places of squalor and potential to exploit it:

> "Organ harvesting and trafficking is a vibrant, robust and extremely lucrative business that has been documented in some 50 countries. Cases of this shad practice have been recorded in China, India, South Africa and Brazil, amongst others. The reason for this thriving industry is simply that demand for organs far outstrips supply. Fewer than 1 in 10 people waiting for an organ end up receiving one. It is kidneys that are the most in need, making up around 70% of all organ transplants. Of the 70,000 kidneys that are transplanted a year globally, 20,000 are from living donors – of these 10,000 are trafficked. Kidneys from living donors are sought after as they have a life span that is 5–10 years longer than from deceased donors. In the US alone there are over 100,000 people on the waiting list for kidney transplants. An average of 3,000 people are added to the waiting list each month, while every day 13 people die as they await a transplant. With an insatiable demand for body parts, trafficking rings help increase the supply of these modern-day blood diamonds. Trading is made easier if organs are harvested – separation from bodies dehumanizes the products, making them easier to trade as pure and simple commodities. However, as mentioned above, 'fresh' organs are favourable. This process requires complex coordination." (p.90)

The next scene is in Japan. The ancient craft of sword-making, perfected since the industrial revolution, assumes new meaning in todays digitalised world. The blades exchanged for heads at Date City in Hokkaido (scene 18) are not mere relics of a disappearing "world of elegant cuts" (p. 99). The Saffron Silk Chorus sum it up nicely (p. 93):

> Saffron Silk Chorus
> *The blade of a katana sword!*
> *Blessed be the hands of the Miyari School*
> *Blessed be the hands of Watanabe Korehira of*
> *Hokkaido Blessed be the Tamahagane steel*
> *Mixed with the scrap from Africa*

Blessed the furnace with the choicest wood and
coal Coal from Bihar
Wood from the Congo
The sacred heat of 1300
Celsius Blessed the
hammering
And the quenching
The charcoal clay and whetstone
powder The three years
Of hammering and heating and
quenching The three years
the brightness
Blessed be the Cut

The ultimate, the ingenious but ruthlessly deadly 'toy' of the Daisy Cutter bomb is produced at the Military Metal works at Pittsburgh, United States (scene 19). This is a manifestation of global knowledge, labour and technology connected to perfection to kill:

> **Image Roll:** Starts from the embroidery below of the Daisy Cutter Bomb and then it turns into the real thing – drop, silk parachute, explode, heads like daisies cut off, exchanged for cloth, for rope, for cellphones (p. 96).

Rajesh is the brainy Indian engineer and algebraic mathematician is employed there to assemble this toy of death.

> Rajesh is of Indian descent, he is an engineer and an algebraic mathematician of note. He is playing with the sophistication of the Daisy Cutter bomb. It can be made more precise and elegant. This is an ideogram of what it could be made to do, a wondrous pattern of inescapable beautiful shock and awe. He was from the 'backward castes' of India, his scholarship in the West has made him a kind of pure deity.

We are left gobsmacked with the exchange there (p. 97)

> Saffron Silk Chorus
>
> *Blessed be the engineer*
> *The algorithm the algebra*
> *The makers of wondrous patterns*
> *of inescapable beautiful shock and awe.*
> *intricate patterns for weaving*
> *for threading*
> *for awe.*

Rajesh

Call it collateral damage,
call it just war,
the design is to annul the dispensable,
make no mistake,
the cut is not about high drama
of Shakespeare to be or not to be,
it is about from non-being
to non-being,
slight variation for height and weight.
the design is to annul the dispensable.

Beyond Redemption? Struggles as hope in a hopeless world

The final Act V is return to China and India. First to Shandong Province and then Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh in India where beautiful musical instruments and sculptures are made. In this musical journey a poetic sociology is mapped and the various directions coverage to one, but what about hope in hopeless world?

As the sociological voyage went deeper into the horrors of murderous labour and cruel suffering of a world of unbearable bare life hope seemed depleted and impossible. Haunted by the monstrous scenes vividly painted and elegantly crafted, Hazmat capitalism seemed to confirm the Foucauldian dystopia with humanity moving from one domination to another, in what he called "the endlessly repeated play of dominations."[59] This is perhaps the main weakness of the book: whilst it offers some hope at the end and the resistance of the subaltern are present that may offer emergency exit from the dystopian futures throughout the volume, these struggles and their potentialities are not elaborated. Whilst this is somehow alluded to, the book stops short of sketching a pathway out of these destructive pathways – perhaps these may be developed in a future volume. The sociological side of the book could have been larger to offer more clues into the poetic, but then again that would change the 'balance' of the volume where the artistic and creative side is by far the dominant. The sociological serves as an explanatory note that points to the debates for those who wish to trace the current social science behind them. Again, this could be elaborated in a separate volume or a discussion single-author or multi-authored volume.

[59] Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinowitz (Penguin, 1984): 85.

Sita's critique of the global suffering, which is not only about human suffering but life at large on the planet, is devastating. The sociology behind this provides the clues for a sharp critique directed at the world-wide frames and capitalistic processes that operate and reproduce these relations everywhere. It is a capitalist world-system in play here. In post-Mao China this takes specific form an intense and oppressive regime of accumulation:

> Companies would have workers located inside their walled 'campus', which is akin to a labour camp or small city of its own. 'Foxconn City', for example, is not just a workplace but a home for many workers who live crammed into bunkbeds in small dormitories. The vast majority of these workers work at stations on assembly lines, performing repetitive tasks for 12 hours a day, six days a week. Nonetheless, facilities and conditions at the 'campus' are considered by many workers to be better than at the other factories in the area. It was only in 2010 that employment practices at Shenzhen drew public attention, when, in that year alone, 18 employees attempted suicide, resulting in 14 deaths. These workers ranged from 17 to 28 years of age. After initially denying the reports, the company proceeded to introduce measures such as no-suicide pledges to be signed by employees, suicide safety nets installed on buildings, and suicide-venting rooms.

As discussed, the potential for revolution, progress and presence of resistance is not the focus, as the aim is to sketch a devastating mapping of the world of suffering in a bleak world. Yet, the potential for evolution and resistance is somehow implanted within the *Notes for Oratorio* does: the potential for change via the praxis of resistance is inscribed within the devastating critique of the dire conditions of those who suffer, who are certainly not docile and passive. The prominent voices the subaltern who speak loud and clear, and the critique that emerges comes from them. In the *Notes for an Oratorio*, we witness the wonders and suffering world-system in motion of world that is *not* normalising because it simply cannot under these terms and conditions. Elsewhere, Sitas et al have underscored:

> "We can sketch the anomalic phase but cannot as yet grasp the ascending fixers and moral entrepreneurs. What technology has done is to make deviance theatrical and immediate, but the world is in no way 'normalized.'"[60]

We can now look anew to the past when the German geologist, Ferdinand von Richthofen, named the "sprawling web of connections" of the world as 'Seidenstraßen' – the Silk Roads, as "pathways serve as the world's central nervous system, connecting peoples and places

[60] Ari Sitas, Sumangala Damodaran, Wiebke Keim, Nicos Trimikliniotis, and Faisal Garba, *Gauging and Engaging Deviance 1600-2000*, (Tulika Academic Press, 2014).

together, but lying beneath the skin, invisible to the naked eye".[61] These were well in place since the thirteenth-century Venetian merchant Marco Polo. Sitas with his *Notes for an Oratorio* provides us with the key to unlocking the 'new silk roads', but in the 21st century these are intimately connected to the destructive course of the 'Hazmat highways'. He again challenges the Foucauldian dystopia as only one part of the story,[62] as Nomxakazo deliberates to redeem a world that seems beyond redemption.

In *Notes for an Oratorio,* Sitas starts with the quote of *Tales from Southern Africa*, "Death has entered this land…". Then we wander through Chinese idiom for thousands of silk threats and countless ties, to Adorno to end with Seamus Heaney, "the end of art is peace". Like the princess in the southern African tale, we must thank Ari Sitas' Nomxakazo: "We thank you for making humans of us" who "redeemed rehumanised her own broken people".[63] In the meantime, Nomxakazo (p. 113) reminds us that,

> "We sing but like birds we also tear up worms for our young. But we do hear screws falling exploding our dreams."

This is the plight of humanity. We are condemned to know *how* and *where* these screws came from, if we are not only to better the world, but allow for the world to survive by radically transforming it. This is *the* world worth struggling for.

[61] Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World,* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).
[62] Ari Sitas et al *Gauging and engaging deviance 1600–2000,* ibid.
[63] Annie Gagiano, C. "Jordan's Tales from Southern Africa", *Alternation, Journal pf the Centre for the study of southern African Literature and Languages* 4, no. 2 (1997): 79.