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Everyday meanings of "the urban" in South Africa: observations and implications for research

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Abstract
The everyday meanings of key words about urban topics in South Africa differ markedly from their received definitions in much of the international geographic literature. Terms such as urban, city, rural, modern, and developed are used in everyday settings to represent concepts that are sometimes subtly and in other cases markedly in contrast with Global North norms, and embody problematic racialized values and histories. This article briefly describes the authors' experiences of the everyday meanings of these key terms through engagement with students and research participants in South Africa. We suggest that better understandings of implicit urban concepts used in South Africa and elsewhere, particularly in the Global South, will contribute to more rigorous research practice. Awareness of this linguistic disjuncture is particularly important for understanding urban participants' reactions to and narratives about rapidly evolving patterns of development in postcolonial contexts.

"I don't think Soweto is a city. It would be a huge compliment to call Soweto a city."
 (Soweto resident, personal communication)

What is the urban? That is, what distinguishes a city from the surrounding non-city? This definitional "urban question" is at least as old as scholarly urban studies; any one answer is typically understood by geographic scholars as provisional and historically specific. Yet contemporary researchers both within and beyond geography often implicitly use a working definition of "the urban" derived from global North cases. The purpose of this report is to identify a disjuncture between key urban concepts as they are often deployed in the international geographic literature and common uses of the same words in South Africa. Crucially, attributes of informality or lack of infrastructure are often narrated in South Africa as rural or non-

urban: as a result, huge swaths of high-density areas adjacent to downtown and industrial districts are seen as outside of the city. We outline potential implications of this definitional disjuncture for research both within and outside of South Africa. Our goal is to motivate geographers (including ourselves) to reflexively examine our urban field methods in order to avoid unintentional conflation of everyday and scholarly geographic meanings of these key analytical terms, and to work with an awareness of their racialized values and histories.

We build particularly on Author Lawhon's nearly ten years of residential experience in urban South Africa, including as a university-level instructor and researcher. None of these experiences were specifically designed to elicit participants' core urban concepts, but in engaging with South Africans in both structured and unstructured ways over this extended period of time,

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Lawhon iteratively developed an understanding of how these key terms are often used. Conversations with African urbanists suggest that this disjuncture between academic and vernacular uses of urban vocabulary is widely accepted, but the details and, importantly, implications of this have not been considered in the literature.

1. The urban: dense and propinquitous, or a racialized vision of modernity?

"The urban" is often articulated in the scholarly literature as a question rather than an answer (*Soja* 1989; *Brenner* 2000). Yet contemporary researchers both within and beyond the discipline of geography often implicitly use a working definition of "the urban" that entails functional characteristics of population density, intensity and diversity of economic activity, and/or formal local government boundaries (*Mcintyre* et al. 2000). Further, scholars periodically gesture at "a system of values, attitudes and behaviour called 'urban culture'" (*Castells*, 1977). Inasmuch as cities are conceptualized as distinct from "the urban" in Global North contexts, they are often defined more specifically by official governmental boundaries: urbanized areas might be seen as spilling over into the territory adjacent to a city "proper", e.g., the formal territory of municipal government. Furthermore, and in juxtaposition to the associations noted below, in the United States, white residential and capital flight from cities since the 1940s has in some cases led to an implicit association between the urban condition and blackness or non-whiteness (*Goldberg* 1993), evident in the conflation of race with "urban culture" in contemporary American vernacular.

Recently, there has been a theoretical move to transcend the boundaries of the urban/rural binary in urban studies, including a provocative assertion of "planetary urbanization" (*Brenner*, 2013; *Merrifield*, 2013). Yet such terms remain useful for distinguishing between different types of spaces, albeit recognizing that they are co-constituted, and that their interrelationships may be increasing or increasingly systematic. Simultaneously, there has been a call to "provincialize" urban studies, prompting explicit reflection on the universalizing assumptions embedded in contemporary urban theories, including the assertion of planetary urbanization (*Robinson*, 2006; *Roy*, 2009; *Myers* 2014, *Lawhon* et al., 2016). Scholars have interrogated the relevance of specific theories in glob-

al South contexts, at times rejecting and at times arguing for the refinement of notions such as neoliberalisation (*Parnell* and *Robinson*, 2012), gentrification (*Ghertner*, 2015), and environmental justice (*Lawhon*, 2013; *Ranganathan* and *Balasz*, 2015). Yet in this debate, there has still been relatively little attention paid to dissonances between scholarly/analytical and everyday or vernacular vocabularies that are used to identify and describe the urban, and South African urban scholars tend to both implicitly utilize Northern definitions and conflate this with vernacular use.

For Author Lawhon, the disjuncture between academic and vernacular uses became a prominent point of reflection when teaching an urban geography class in South Africa, and several contemporaneous experiences motivated this explicit reflection on this disjuncture[1]. In assignments as well as classroom conversations, students of different races, classes and genders repeatedly referred to townships as "rural" areas. In response to this, Author Lawhon facilitated a conversation with the students about their definitions of the city and the urban. At first, students identified specific areas: they named the central business district as well as several formerly whites-only residential areas. They then named several nearby townships and agricultural areas and labeled these as rural. When asked what criteria was used to differentiate these areas, answers included: tall buildings and shops, wealth, density- and most centrally, development and modernity. Rural areas were traditional, and according to the students, townships fit on this side of the binary. The question of density prompted further reflection from the students: they largely agreed that at some point they had learned of an association between density and urbanity, but that it did not map on to their vernacular distinctions. Specifically, they acknowledged that townships were denser than the formerly whites-only residential areas that they asserted were undoubtedly part of the city. The implication of this awareness, however, was that density was an inadequate criteria rather than a challenge to their notion of what counts as urban. Importantly, evident in the introductory quotation as well as the tone of many students, being urban and of the city was seen to be positive, modern and developed. While many students- and South African culture more generally- have positive associations with township and rural life, when contrasted with notions of the city, such terms took on much more pejorative tones. This conversation prompted further reflection, including in conversation with Author Pierce, and articulation

Table 1: Examples of distinguishing city from township in the Mail & Guardian

Pairings of rural and township characteristics	Distinguishing townships from urban forms
"There's a reason it's so newsworthy when a black child from a poor background makes a huge success of themselves. The biggest odds they've had to overcome are largely invisible. Forget the physical **disadvantages of living in a township or rural area**." (*Pillay* 2015)	"There is presently as much retail development activity **in former townships and rural areas as there is in the CBDs and suburban areas**, although obviously not in terms of the scale of some of the larger metropolitan centres." (*Haggard* 2015)
"Although the past two decades of democracy can boast tremendous gains, for **the average South African born into poverty, or in a township or rural area**, their place and circumstances of birth still determines their path in life." (*Gopal* and *Ngubeni* 2016)	"Finely disaggregated data would make it easier to identify and compare performances among schools **across categories such as rura**l, urban, township, suburban and former model C." (*Nkosi* 2013)
"We would like to see the playing fields levelled in terms of equitable provision of sport facilities between the former Model C schools and **township or rural schools**." (*Matsha* 2011)	"Hunger began playing havoc with **the township folk**, as one village elder after the other spoke at length about how Motake had been a good herdsman. [...] Now **switch to funerals in urban South Africa**." (*Masilela* 2015)
"Entrepreneurs within these areas must be developed and individuals in these areas should be encouraged to start small business **in the township or rural area where they live** to serve the immediate community" (*Boshoff* 2015)	"...these issues were explored in a Mail & Guardian survey of "born-free" high-school pupils of all races, and at state **schools of four dis**tinct kinds – suburban, city centre, township and rural." (*Sosibo* et al, 2006)

of the wider trends noted below.

The link between rural and township characteristics (in contrast to the city centre) is also evident in everyday news coverage. For example, the Mail & Guardian (a national-level newspaper in South Africa) often pairs township and rural contexts in coverage, characterizing them as distinct from the central business district or urban contexts (see Table 1). While such representations in the press are not universal, language pairing township and rural contexts as distinctive from traditionally white urban centers is common.

2. Towards an articulation of vernacular urban vocabulary

In South Africa, we have witnessed commonplace definitions of what defines an area as "urbanized" are primarily related to the existence of "modern" infrastructure (e.g., European-style roads and lighting, well-developed electricity grids, water delivery) and construction techniques rather than population density or formal governmental annexation. In Global North contexts this is would be a useless distinction, because such modern infrastructure has been "built out" to nearly everywhere human beings reside, resulting in a

norm of universal, uniform infrastructure (*Graham* and *Marvin* 2000). However, in South Africa there are many densely settled areas (sometimes in close proximity to a central business district) that may have shared outdoor water access, dirt or gravel roads, illegally connected or intermittent electrical delivery, or informal property tenure. As a result, this is a distinction with a difference.

Such a distinction is certainly rooted in racialized colonial and Apartheid-era policy and discourse, yet contemporary regulations have only further complicated urban vocabularies. The 1923 Natives (Urban Areas) Act[2] was an early iteration of a slowly emerging platform that declared that "cities" to be the domain of urbane white residents (*Savage* 1986; *Parnell* and *Mabin*, 1995; *Maylam*, 1995). Adjacent high-density residential areas for black African residents were not deemed cities (and, in some cases, were legally cast out of South Africa and into so-called Bantustans). After the end of Apartheid, *all* formal local governmental rule was consolidated into "municipalities", resulting in governance landscape of so-called 'wall to wall municipalities' (*Baud* et al. 2014). These new governmental units combine former cities and townships, but also incorporate sparsely populated or agricultural areas. In other words, there is no longer any formal governmental unit

or boundary in South Africa that reflects the conceptual distinction between high-density and low-density uses or residential patterns. However, when the city's prior governmental definition was formally abandoned, the word was neither reclaimed or redefined. While "the city" no longer has official delineation, it continues to be used in the vernacular to describe the apartheid-era city: areas which were historically predominantly white and where wealth and modern infrastructure are concentrated.

Concomitantly – and importantly – many of South Africa's highest-density areas, mostly poverty stricken and overwhelmingly populated by black African residents, are not considered "urban" or part of "the city" in everyday parlance. While this terminology was used less consistently in our encounters, it was not atypical for South Africans (including residents of townships) to characterize these spaces as "rural." This term has its own connotations of black African traditionalism and lived patterns that are neither modern or anti-modern *per se*. In contrast, industrialized farming areas which were designated "white" under Apartheid regulations would be more likely to be labeled "agricultural". Such distinctions are clearer in Afrikaans: *dorp* (town) and to a lesser extent *plaas* (farm) typically imply white residential areas, while *kraal* (ranch or village) is used to describe a black African farm or village. The changing urban demographics in South Africa have meant that these racial associations are less clear in the contemporary context: some black Africans do live in the city (particularly in the central business districts of most urban areas), and (more rarely but still existing) white Africans do at times live in townships. Further, the types of development associated with the urban is now occurring in townships, evident in the growth of malls and middle and high income housing developments. The everyday use of these terms, therefore, is embedded with historical associations of race and colonial power, modernity and development, with particular cultural reference to Northern European norms, although these patterns are less consistent in the post-Apartheid era.

We do not mean to characterize these distinctions as universally held. Rather, we have witnessed a diversity of vernacular characterizations of townships, cities, and "the urban" which seem to break along lines of race, class, and language. Furthermore, we do not suggest that townships adjacent to urban centers are "not urban" in an analytical sense because of these vernacular tendencies. Rather, we hope to provoke a more

careful examination of how analytical language about urbanism is used in South African urban research as it comes into contact with other vernacular uses.

3. Implications for geography and scholarly research

We briefly highlight three notable implications of this divide in the use of language about cities, though there are likely others. First, because Northern theories of urbanization incorporate very different underlying concepts of what constitutes a city, they must be extensively translated if they are to adhere in South African policy or research contexts. This is true both because of differing urban conditions which have been the subject of extensive academic argument (cf *Robinson*, 2006; *Roy*, 2009) but also because of these linguistic differences. When both policymakers and residents exclude most of a region's poorest high-density residents from their imaginations of "the city," and when there is no governmental unit which is specifically and exclusively tasked with managing the governance challenges of high-density as opposed to low-density areas, much of the literature regarding urban economic activity, urban development, and urban governance must be carefully interrogated before it can "travel" to South African contexts (*Said* 1983, *Lawhon* et al. 2014). Even basic ethnographic or survey data about urban experiences must be bracketed to check how differing definitions might impact analyses.

Second, there are open theoretical and empirical questions about whether conceptually dividing high-density areas contributes to the *production of different urban spaces*. Put another way, does contemporary language about the urban in South Africa contribute to reproducing particular patterns of dispossession in the landscape? For example, different kinds of infrastructure have historically been used in townships and formerly-white urban areas: on site flush toilets are the norm in the latter, while the former includes an array of less "modern" and desirable options. High densities make vehicle access difficult, including policing and other emergency vehicles. Do different understandings of what is urban, and what is appropriate urban management, serve as discursive justification for the continuance of such differences?

Finally, we ask in an open-ended way: what does this de-centering of Northern language about the urban mean for Global North urban analyses? Just as we ask questions about how colonial South Africa's defi-

nitions of the urban are shaping development there, Northern core definitions of the urban may not only describe but also reproduce and re-inscribe particular histories of densification and economic development. Would provisionally or experimentally adopting a South African vocabulary of urbanism lead to any insights about limited conceptual or analytical horizons in European or American contexts? *Myers* (2014) has demonstrated how thinking about American urbanism through African empirics and theory can offer new insights; we suggest that doing so through different conceptual vocabularies may as well.

To our knowledge, the implications of the South African urban vernacular we tentatively describe here have not been explored in the scholarly literatur. While we cannot know with certainty why this is the case, it may be that the combination of scholarly training in a globally-sourced urban theoretical canon, as well as the strong incentives for scholars to publish research that is legible to an international audience, have combined to deprioritize attention to incompatible vernacular language. It may also be the case that more privileged South Africans have more often been taught "global" (e.g., Northern) uses of urban vocabulary, and that these citizens are more widely represented in the scholarly community. Certainly the trends noted above should be read as preliminary observations, and not as universal either within South Africa or the Global South more generally. More research, not closure, is precisely what we aim for here. Nonetheless, we believe that there is merit not only to reflexively examining empirical and theoretical differences between Northern and Southern cities, but also to consider discursive differences and the norms and values embedded in how everyday terms are used. While our experiences are South African, the discursive disjunctures (and their implications) are like to exist in other post-colonial contexts. We suggest that a broader conversation about the geographic and historical contingency of international analytical terms about urbanization and cities will enable more rigourous urban studies, and call for further research which may clarify some of the impacts of this disjuncture and identify real-world consequences of people and contexts where thinking and narrating the urban proceeds so differently.

Notes

1 In a recent example, when seeking to code the location of stories in a South African newspaper for a re-search project, Author Lawhon quickly realized that it would be impractical to depend on the terms used in the news articles to categorize the locations of the stories given inconsistencies in the use of terms such as municipal, rural, township and village (see *Lawhon* and *Makina*, 2016)

2 Illustratively, the Wikipedia page describing this act (Wikipedia, 2016) declares that black Africans contravening the law were sent to "rural areas", meaning everywhere outside the legally defined (white) city.

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