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Jozi Rhapsody: Tracing a City's Legacy through Time

Ncomi Nzimande



Figure 1 Aerial shot overlooking Johannesburg's Bree taxi rank, the Metrorail, and skyscrapers located in the central business district (Jozi Rhapsody, 2020). Courtesy of the artist.¹

¹ Ncomi Nzimande's *Jozi Rhapsody* (2020) can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/379095821>.



Figure 2 Jozi Rhapsody, 2020. *Courtesy of the artist.*



Figure 3 Camera swerving in the dark streets of Newtown at night (Jozi Rhapsody, 2020). Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4 Zandi in Jozi Rhapsody, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5 Zandi and Lwandle taking in a panoramic view of Johannesburg city from what was until recently the tallest building in Africa, holding this title from 1973 until 2019. The fiftieth floor of the Carlton Centre in the inner city (Jozi Rhapsody, 2020). Courtesy of the artist.

Artist Statement

In 1960 Lionel Rogosin released his film *Come Back, Africa*, which showcases the sights and sounds of Johannesburg through the eyes of Zacharia, a native migrant who comes to the city looking for work.¹ This film was one of the first to give a visceral expression of Joburg, in its light and its shadow, combining fictional film and documentary techniques to create the hybrid genre known as docufiction. Sixty years later I endeavored upon my own exploration of Johannesburg through my short experimental film *Jozi Rhapsody*. The impetus for this work was to use film to reflect on the heritage that has been bestowed on this city and how it is expressed in both past and present time.

Johannesburg rose from a small mining town to a burgeoning African metropolis, the largest in South Africa. With the discovery of gold in 1886, Joburg became the hub of capitalist activity. Loren Kruger notes that,

on the one hand, the rising gold price enabled a building boom, the transformation of the skyline, and the employment of black as well as white workers in the renovation of the city. On the other hand, the implementation of the Urban Areas Acts (1923, 1930) and the Slums Act (1934) made it more difficult for Africans, dubbed ‘temporary sojourners,’ to find housing within city limits, even as they contributed in increasingly large

numbers to building that city.²

Through oppressive laws enacted by the apartheid regime, black aspirants like Zacharia were relegated to the outskirts both spatially and economically. The mass segregation that forced black people into cities to work for capital and then out into townships on the periphery reflected greed and dispossession shrouded in white assertions of morality.

As many new buildings and other signifiers of cityness arose, so did the disparities between the black and white populations. In *The Elusive Metropolis*, Sarah Nuttal and Achille Mbembe suggest the vertical organization of this city. They note the underground and the surface as two distinct spaces in Johannesburg; with the gold that is extracted below through toil, and the superfluous agendas lived above on the surface. They write,

the vertical and racial segmentation of the Johannesburg urban world was given structure and order by what it relegated beneath. As far as Johannesburg is concerned, more than the surfaces of the vertical city with its skyscrapers, the underground seems to hold the keys to unlocking the secrets of its modernity.³

The image of Johannesburg presents a duality that has been built into its bones, calcified and unyielding. Black and white, crowd and isolation, privilege and struggle, labor and leisure, access and restriction: these and many more hard boundaries the city allows. This has been the case since its birth and is arguably still the case in today's postapartheid city. Documenting these experiential extremes from a position of straddling both makes for a fragile and easily eruptive endeavor that this process explores (fig. 1).

Charles Dickens, writing of two great European cities, offers a harrowing insight that the nature of a city and its soul is a pendulum that constantly swings from one extreme to the other:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief; it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness.⁴

Adaptation and ever-continuing metamorphosis become necessary when moving in a world of extremes. A city takes no sides, suspending assertions of good and bad or righteous and evil, its movement the rhythm within which a city's inhabitants sway. A great part of city identity is to "modernize" its residents and keep them in flux, always ready for new imaginings of self. In

this sense, Johannesburg is truly a modern city. It is an alluring place born from a history of racial oppression and segregation that spawns many fragments of reality that may seem opposed yet seep into each other in the oddest of ways to create colorful juxtapositions, a kaleidoscope of multiplicities continually erupting, filtering through Joburg's stern mask and bringing with them unknown new forces that the city absorbs.

Acknowledging this aspect and relaying it in film means that both the world presented and the characters are constantly shape-shifting. There are no justifications or explanations for Johannesburg's untethered nature. Nuance and shade of change take precedence over inciting incidents and narrative motivations in *Jozi Rhapsody*.

My short film follows four characters who inhabit different parts of city identity. Lwandle is the first person we meet; she is a figure who defies conventions of what a woman should be, smoking a cigarette and indulging in quarts of beer in a tavern. Having no traditional demands of her body and being, she is so immersed in the pleasures of city life that they seem to have her trapped. The city appears for her all-consuming; she has been engulfed.

Zandi is the lead and the receptacle through which all other city lives find themselves to us on-screen (fig. 4). There is nothing indicating toil or physical struggle about Zandi except the robustness of her curiosity. Her primary tasks seem to be musing about, writing, thinking, listening, imagining, being. She cannot be described as passive; rather, she is in a haze, working to make sense of her reality without much luck but persistent nonetheless, absorbing all that is given her, ingesting and imprinting it into her being.

We meet Phumlani in a restaurant where he has after-work drinks with Zandi. His flawless black suit, eyeglasses, and white-collared-worker appearance indicate he is a man on the rise. He tells of a dream he had of his neighbor from home who is up to some dubious activities in the darkness of night. This has him so concerned that he calls home to check on his family. His character suggests the tenuous relationship between the city and one's place of growth, where family resides. Home is still the township or countryside where Phumlani feels a sense of belonging, and the city becomes a parallel universe divorced from an essential self where he can create a new reality. He is unable to reconcile his current world from his former, yet strongly desires to do so. Understanding that such an endeavor would be futile because of the irredeemable changes that have happened to him through time in this city, his only solace lies in the nightmares he shares with Zandi.

The final character is Genesis, an enigmatic man with beads who, in an interaction with Zandi on a rooftop, is suddenly revealed to inhabit a different and intersecting reality (fig. 2). Genesis has existed in this city from its inception; he bears its scars and memories, has incredible access to Johannesburg's past and present, and appears branded by his knowledge to

know no levity. Genesis has the ability to physically move from above to below, but his home lies in the ghostly in-between. He understands and in many ways embodies the desires of the city and also its dangers.

Each character provides a unique and at times extreme perspective to thread the tale of this metropolis. When these characters' lives intersect, the film leaps into a different realm of city life where new strange situations await. This method attempts to document the many faces and experiences that the city holds, as well as navigate them successfully with a deep curiosity and malleability, allowing the city to take shape, morph, mutate, alter, and transform.

In *Come Back, Africa*, the opening visuals reveal a bustling landscape with skyscrapers and a hive of activity in the streets. Zacharia arrives in Johannesburg to build a prosperous new life for himself like the many we see on the city streets among him. His journey begins in the gold mines, where work is hard labor and doesn't pay well. Zacharia decides to try his luck in Joburg city, altering his life absolutely with a series of sensational and tumultuous occurrences that soon overwhelm him. He encounters many hardships shuffling from one job to the next, never stable. There are also dangerous gangs looming in the crevices and dark corners of his Johannesburg experience, ready to capitalize on any weakness displayed. Even so, there is dynamism and wonder created by the many interesting people he meets, and he finds himself enamored with the daring and excitement that new friends introduce. His character lives a dual life of freedom and pleasure from the city's temptations, and of uncertainty and fear about continually changing fates. *Jozi Rhapsody* finds a deep resonance with this perspective/duality/experience, reflecting on this city's contradictions and documenting them in a modern context.

To capture the city's energy and aura, *Jozi Rhapsody* showcases sharp contrasts between the dark insidious heart of Johannesburg city and its beauty and promise of endless delight. To introduce this sinister pulse, the first scene is a shaky handheld shot taken at night, designed to be emotive rather than offer logic and narrative (fig. 3). This crazy movement gives no characters, faces, or clarity of space. There is only sheer darkness with a haze of lights. As we watch the handheld shot, we hear the sounds of feet running, seemingly in distress, with no real sense of direction. Alongside the darkness and hazy lights, the footsteps allude to a restlessness, an unsettled stance that the film will conjure through a range of mechanisms. Jarring movement through this dark den sets the tone for a film filled with oddities of experience and fluctuations of state and stability, a continuous bewilderment to both the characters and the viewer.

The film also does not shy away from the beauty that Johannesburg inhabits. It represents the glittering gold metropolis and the experience of

living in its splendour coveted by people from all parts of the country and outside it. Overlaid above the opening scene's rough, dark, grainy texture is an expression of the city as a bright and vibrant world. Here people move about, singing in celebration, communing with statues of late great jazz musicians, or at work in their various occupations. Attractive people are on display alongside a flurry of exciting activity, joy and young opulence, a people with many disparate hopes and intentions that are encouraged and nurtured by Johannesburg city. In effect, the film demonstrates the tension of living in the ghostly in-between of these two perspectives of threat and pleasure, darkness and light. In the process, Joburg's soul is revealed.

Nine years after the birth of Johannesburg, the era of cinema began in the city streets of Paris. Beginning with Louis le Prince's two-second film clip from 1888, the *Roundhay Garden Scene*, an outpouring of a great many new, lengthier films emerged in the mid-1890s. *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1895) by the Lumière brothers recorded forty-five seconds of employees leaving after a day's work in the Lumière factory. These early films, characterized by their black-and-white aesthetic, showed everyday Parisian life through a new prism that offered a refreshed mediation on reality. There have been many iconic monochrome movies since that reflect on city life, and *Jozi Rhapsody* keeps in this tradition. My short film uses the medium of black and white to relay the many interwoven narratives of Johannesburg. This is the original motion picture format, and its use echoes a history of its beginnings. The medium is stylistically transformative, taking everyday sights and conceiving a new visual interpretation. Black-and-white imagery immediately transports us to an alternate world, one that feels familiar but is just out of reach. It also preserves the history of cinema, in communion with the pioneers, who developed the medium and explored their environments with this game-changing method of documentation.

In addition to its black-and-white aesthetic, *Jozi Rhapsody* creates a strong slice of life feel through the use of nonprofessional actors just as *Come Back, Africa* and *Workers Leaving the Factory* do. Three out of the four actors in the film are novices, but all four contributors share the common experience of urbanites who daily engage the city from different vantage points. This cast offers raw and unvarnished performances and a strong familiarity with the world they already inhabit. Other figures in the film, like kids dancing on the street or construction workers, are real situations encountered and captured in the documentary mode of shooting.

A great portion of the film was shot in actual settings significant to the city's identity such as the Top of Africa in Carlton Centre (fig. 5). This building was the tallest skyscraper in Africa for a little over forty-five years (until 2019) and offers wondrous views of Johannesburg. Other settings for the film, such as Niki's Oasis jazz restaurant and Nelson Mandela Bridge, showcase iconic

sites that have been part of Johannesburg city identity for decades. Outside of Genesis's green screen shoot, all scenes and visuals were captured in the inner city and Newton district of Johannesburg.

In Rogosin's film, Zacharia is at once enchanted and confounded by his experiences. Realizing how ill-equipped he may be to tackle the sensitivities and shifting tides that Joburg brings, his resilient and enduring spirit continues to meet challenges and surprises with the intention to succeed. Similarly, *Jozi Rhapsody* documents this city's legacy and presents it as a shifting landscape, the embodiment of old, worn tensions that seek release through a constant flurry of bizarre and spontaneous events. The city's character is made incarnate in residents who contort and change in alignment with its own nature and who leave fragments of themselves behind, to be devoured and rebirthed by enduring Jozi.

* * *

Ncomi Nzimande has a master's degree in film from the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, where she is based. Nzimande has worked in broadcast television and film for the past decade, initially as a video editor and now as managing director of Kriptych Films. Her interest is in merging classic cinema conventions with African griot culture, the poetry, movements, rhythms, mysticisms, folklore, and spiritual traditions of the continent.

Notes

¹ Lionel Rogosin, dir., *Come Back, Africa* (1960).

² Loren Kruger, *Imagining the Edgy City: Writing, Performing, and Building Johannesburg* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 27, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199321902.001.0001>.

³ Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe, *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 22, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822381211>.

⁴ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 1859), 3.