

AT NIGHT,  
THEY WALK  
WITH ME

SIBUSISO BHEKA



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With an essay by Sean O'Toole































# Magical Realism

By Sean O’Toole

Johannesburg, a restive city of can-do aspiration and everywhere sprawl, was founded in 1886, nearly a half century after the invention of the camera. The camera, with its ability to arrest and flatten moving reality, has been a useful tool in recording this city’s awkward lurch from get-rich mining encampment to cauldron of cosmopolitan possibility. Curiously, though, given the great many photographs made about this city since its start as a tented encampment of prospectors and labourers, the story of Joburg told by photographers has tended to be a daytime one. Partly this had to do with the limitations of technologies available to early photographers, but given the endurance of this omission into the present one has to wonder. Is Joburg defined by natural light and daytime enterprise? What about its other moods and character traits, the ones that emerge at night? To be precise, what about Joburg after dark?

Photographed in late twilight and early night, Sibusiso Bheka’s essay ‘At night, they walk with me’ sets out to answer these questions, albeit on this young photographer’s own terms and not in the grandiloquent way summarized in the introduction. “I was watching TV and saw some amazing nights shots,” offers Bheka on his project’s origin. “They showed the beautiful lights of Joburg at night. I had an idea that I’d like to do something like that, but I wanted to do it in a township style.” Of course, Bheka is not the first South African photographer to make the night a subject of enquiry. Late one night in the mid- 2000s, while making his way east across Joburg’s CBD from the Market Photo Workshop, Sabelo Mlangeni saw a group of women sweeping and bundling rubbish into plastic bags. He recognised a relationship between these “invisible women” and the clean city that greeted morning commuters. Shortly

afterwards, he began to document the lives of Joburg’s black women street cleaners.

Mlangeni’s photographs, which link across time to the photos of black working women in the city from the late 1800s, offer one way of knowing this city after dark. Much like during the day, Joburg after dark is a place of labour and minimum wage. But Joburg after dark is also a time of diversionary pleasures, when the sobriety of a city characterised by discipline and work, also exploitation and alienation, yields to other things. Sometimes violence, as is suggested by Peter Magubane’s celebrated night-time photo from 1956, showing township thug and knifeman Boy Mangena lying dead on a pavement outside a cinema in Alexandra. But the city by night is when family’s get together, children are told stories, and televisions pimp information with entertainment. For many, especially on Friday and Saturday nights, it is also a time of pleasure, of drinking and dancing. The reputation of the Drum magazine archive partly derives from the commitment of photographers in the 1950s to show black life in Joburg as involving more than just struggle.

But the night is a far richer subject than even this. The dark and its many associative qualities make it a time of myth and intrigue. It is this imprecise territory, the night as a place of projection and unseen otherness, that is the subject of Bheka’s essay. Begun in 2013 during his participation in the *Of Soul and Joy* photography project, initiated by Rubis Mécénat, his essay revisits a childhood impulse. “I used to be one of those kids who enjoyed playing outside at night more than during the day,” says Bheka, who was born in Kathlehong in 1997 and lives with his mother and grandmother in Phola Park. Evening is a sociable time in the townships as workers return from work and the silence that pervades these labour compounds by day abates.

It wasn’t that Bheka only played at night. Growing up, he would regularly explore Thokoza on foot. “I would go to those places where my parents told me I am not supposed to go,” he says. To fulfil a simple childhood impulse: to see what was being prohibited. “There is a dam nearby, which I used to go to with my friends and try to catch fish,” he reminisces. “There is also a train station that I was warned not to cross the tracks of.” During these wanderings he would scavenge for pieces of metal to sell to a scrap metal dealer. “I used the money to play video games.” These early mappings of Thokoza later played an invaluable role in his photography project. “I got to know where the dangerous places are, where to avoid, especially at night. If an area doesn’t have electricity, it isn’t safe.”

The relationship between light and safety in Bheka’s photographs is worth pausing on. “It is safer to make photographs where there is light,” he says, but in the same breath admits, “I avoided places where there are a lot of people because you get robbed.” Light is only a possible beacon of safety in his photographs, not a guarantee of it. The light sources in Bheka’s essay vary: from the last filigree of daylight on the horizon to various forms of electrical sources. Electrical light pours from the hatch of a “spaza shop” (convenience store), spills from an open doorway to a cement-block RDP home (government-built starter home), is filtered by curtained windows (most with burglar bars), and seems strangely isolated in the impossibly tall streetlights. A hangover from the apartheid years, these were nicknamed “UFOs” for their strange hovering appearance. They were once amongst the few indicators of electrification in townships, where coal was the dominant fuel. Up until 1990, access to electricity was a privilege linked to race. Less than a third of South Africans, most of them

white, enjoyed the benefits of electrification. By 2008, 70% of South Africans had access to electricity. Bheka’s essay describes this turnaround, although it is not his focus.

Bheka’s subject is mythical, not infrastructural. He recalls being reprimanded and told not to play at night. “I was told, if you play at night you are playing with ghosts,” he says. In part, his essay is a playful exploration of “the idea of ghosts, whether they exist or not”. In a community where rural superstitions are less than a generation old, the existence of a spirit world is an important anchor in a context created out of desperation, in a region where hospitality is often lacking. But stories of spirits and ghosts achieve more than creating continuity with the older customs of the village, for adults they are a way to negotiate the real-world context of cramped townships, where neighbourliness rubs up against poverty, struggle and criminality. A ghost story is a good way to keep a child off the streets, out of harm’s way.

In his 2009 book *Native Nostalgia*, journalist Jacob Dlamini recalls the ambiguous mix of community and threat posed by the same dusty street where he lived in Katlehong, a community bordering Thokoza in the east. Close to his home there was an open plot of land, which he describes as “a place of anxiety, a notorious mugging spot, especially on Friday nights when labourers would be returning home with their pay-packets for the week, fortnight or month.” He adds, “Our street was a terrain of encounters between neighbours and strangers, mostly friendly but sometimes violent, even deadly.” This ambiguity endures. It also underlies Bheka’s essay, which explores the changing attitudes of Thokoza youths to the use of public space amidst the endurance of hardship and criminality.

“To be honest, growing up as a child was tough,” concedes Bheka. “You witness a lot of things happening in Thokoza.” He says xenophobia has been a constant feature of his upbringing. Of course, none of these facets of Thokoza’s character are pictured. But they are nonetheless imprinted into the time signature of his photographs. Bheka’s photographs only describe a defined period of dark, an early dark. None of his photographs were made late at night. “That is a dangerous hour,” says Bheka. “At that late time there is too much alcohol drinking. I have never thought of photographing at that time.” Despite the optimistic claim his subjects make to public spaces at night, Bheka’s photographs are defined by a prescribed working method. “I usually work alone because people know me here, but if I have to go on the outside section of Phola Park where I live, then I get people from school to join me.” Bheka is completing his studies at Buhlebuzile Secondary School in Thokoza.

While Bheka’s essay invites sociological readings directed at the meaning of electricity, crime and the changing role of public space in South Africa’s slowly transforming townships, he is not a documentarian in the manner of Brassai in 1930s Paris, or Weegee in New York of the same period. His is a playful and autobiographical project. Many of Bheka’s photographs include him as a protagonist. “The reason why some of the pictures are staged is so that you don’t get that actual feeling of real events,” he says. “I am trying to describe my neighbourhood in a way I see and experience it. I am kind of creating my own scenario of what you would see in Thokoza – its atmosphere. I want you, when you look at the pictures, to experience the atmosphere.”

Understood in this sense, the strange off-colours, long shadows, constant blurring and ghostly auras that surround his human subjects are integral to the meaning of his photographs, not mere by-products of shooting at night. They are expressive attributes, not simply examples of photography's on-going struggle to record events in low light. "When I show people who live in my neighbourhood my pictures, they don't believe it is actually Thokoza," he says. This constitutes praise for Bheka, who likens his photographic method in his essay 'At night, they walk with me' to storytelling. "It is like a novel about an old lost town," he says. A forgotten place that has been found and reimagined by an alert young mind.

## SIBUSISO BHEKA

Sibusiso Bheka was born in 1997 in Thokoza, South Africa. In 2012 he was introduced to photography in high school through the *Of Soul and Joy* project. He then joined Live magazine as a part time photographer. In 2013, Bheka was part of the group show 'In Thokoza' organised by Rubis Mécénat Cultural Fund at the Ithuba Arts Gallery in Johannesburg. His work was exhibited in 2014 at Addis Foto Fest in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

### OF SOUL AND JOY PROJECT

*Of Soul and Joy* project is a social art initiative undertaken in 2012 by Rubis Mécénat Cultural Fund in Thokoza, a township located in the southeast of Johannesburg in South Africa. The project aims to expose the students of Buhlebusile Secondary School to Photography as a vocational skill and as a means of engagement for meaningful employment. It acts as a visual platform and a skills development programme through workshops led by renowned photographers.

Sibusiso Bheka joined the project in 2012.

The project was initiated in 2012 with Easigas and in partnership with Nikon South Africa.

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