





VI

SEAN O'TOOLE

# THE LEFTOVER CHRYSLIS

STEIDL

THE WALTHER COLLECTION



[1]

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On weekday afternoons, after she had finished her lessons, Therese would sometimes visit my Braamfontein flat to talk about whatever came to mind: cheese samoosas, the sculptures of Claudette Schreuders, growing up in Berlin, her mother's fatal poetry, a love interest in Rome, the death penalty, the hazards of negotiating Johannesburg on foot. We didn't ever speak about the south-facing view from my apartment, a view of stymied high-rise ambition, humming rooftop air conditioners and everywhere sprawl. A view not dissimilar to those obtained from some of the cake-slice apartments in Ponte City, two suburbs east on the Berea Ridge. We were always looking far outwards (to cities I'd never been in) or minutely inwards (at books still writing themselves). On one of her visits, I read Therese a work-in-progress story about a briefcase and weather-beaten dictionary I had found in a vacant piece of land on Klipriviersberg, a rocky outcrop on the southern end of the valley that Ponte City looms over as a northern sentinel. Therese said she wanted to see it, the veld, and the silver lollipop-shaped water tower that it bordered on.

Driving in Johannesburg, a city imagined and built in the age of the car, is a habituated function. Whether one is headed from Alberton to Benoni, Atholl to Bez Valley, Alexandra to Bryanston, driving is how one gets to know the temperament and topography of this undulating and traffic-congested city. Driving is also how residents come to know themselves, not just in relation to others, but in the context of the immobile fixtures and fleeting landmarks that constitute Johannesburg. Beyond knowing, which is not a forceful impulse in this vast agitated capitalist marketplace, driving also offers a way to do something while doing nothing. It is how lovers dawdle.

I took a circuitous route to Klipriviersberg, stopping first at Top Star, a former drive-in cinema situated on a disused mine dump. T O P S T A R . Seven sun-baked red letters, each held in place by Hollywood-style scaffolding cemented into excavated mining waste. Built in the early 1960s, shortly before a bombastic and vertical sense of architectural mission gripped Johannesburg, Top Star, with its optimistic curvilinear white entrance gate and asphalted



# THE BLACK PEOPLE OF SOUTH AFRICA AND THE IMPORTED RELIGIONS

by  
Sheikh Abdur-Rahman Wright

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summit, was both a naturalised geographical feature and an unmistakably artificial promontory. Even after the drive-in's decline in the early 1990s and eventual closure a decade later, Top Star retained a function, of sorts.

In July 2005, a week before Therese and I headed off south to Klipriviersberg, and five years before terrestrial miners searching for leftover gold finished recycling the site, razing one of the city's key landmarks, executives from Coca-Cola hosted a private function at the defunct drive-in. The syrupy soft-drink brand was returning to the city. For a number of weeks, workmen from XTRA Light Trading – some wearing blue overalls, all of them green safety harnesses – had been installing a four-sided LED display on the roof of Marble Towers in Jeppe Street. After fitting its 12-meter frame, they laboriously placed the individual white LED tubes that would project fizzing motion graphics by digital artist Mike Fourie across the city.

The hoarding represented Coca-Cola's second foray into urban rooftop branding. In the late 1990s, Coca-Cola became an ambiguous cipher of change in Johannesburg when it erected a huge circular hoarding on the roof of Ponte City. In 2000, a low ebb in Ponte City's history, Coca-Cola relinquished this prime location to Vodacom, a mobile phone company. The host venue for the company's ambitious re-entry into the city was an undistinguished 32-floor office block that shared some of the DNA of its taller, hilltop cousin. Opened in 1973, two years before Ponte City, Marble Towers is a relic of what Clive Chipkin, in his book *Johannesburg Style*, describes as white Johannesburg's aspiration to replicate 'curtain-wall' corporate America on the Highveld.<sup>1</sup>

At some point, it is hard to say exactly when, but definitely towards the middle of the 1980s, this dream stalled. By 2005, Marble Towers, like Ponte City before it, was doubling as both a people capsule and a commercial totem. 'Jozi's Biggest Turn On' is how Coca-Cola marketed the unveiling of its new LED hoarding. A few days after the launch function, a 200-km/h wind – a rarity in Johannesburg, even during its bellicose summer thunderstorm season – extensively damaged the tall gee-whiz sign. Ponte City, with its unvarying green and blue advertising sign, however continued to beam its message. Every night. All night.



[2]



If the Johannesburg Zoo in Forest Town is a relic of the city's first gilded age, Ponte City forms part of a leftover gilt menagerie of objects from Johannesburg's post-war boom. This period of increasing white prosperity and systematic racial oppression is the South African correlative of that American era of 'sudden opulence' described by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner in their book, *The Gilded Age*.<sup>2</sup> During this period of concentrated more and nothing, Johannesburg sloughed off – as much as was possible, which is to say selectively – the look and feel of Imperial England in favour of a New World optimism and efficiency. More so than Brazil, the United States was its model.

Johannesburg loves America, has always done so. This love affair has shaped not only the city's distinctive musical traditions, which early on synthesised vaudeville and big band jazz with indigenous rhythms and dance forms; it also lent the city a me-too visual aesthetic. Aside from drive-in cinemas and drive-through eateries, residue of this everywhere apparent Americana includes Mannie Feldman and Rodney Grosskopff's Ponte City, which reads like a reduced and budget version of Marina City, architect Bertrand Goldberg's multi-level apartment complex in Chicago.<sup>3</sup>

But Therese was neither an architect nor a musicologist. She wanted to see the veld where I'd found the abandoned book of meanings. We drove in silence. Therese disliked music; she described herself as *untanzbar*, undanceable. It is not uncommon for people to describe flames as dancing. The advancing line of a fire, its orange flames hungrily burning up the yellow grass, had already charred a large section of the veld by the time we arrived. I kicked about the clearing, walking a few paces ahead of the advancing fire, while Therese looked on from my car. Writing, possibly more so than photography, crops reality, recomposes it, makes it legible by reduction. The smoky winter landscape on the southern edge of Johannesburg bored Therese. Nothing was filtered; every-thing was, unavoidably, random, banal, confusing, there but seemingly unknowable. Which is perhaps a truer version of Johannesburg than some writing about this city admits to.

I suggested we return home via Ponte City. The building, a kind



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of Ellis Island symbol to a generation of Congolese migrants fleeing Mobutu Sésé Seko's Zaire, was easily identifiable 10 km north across the smouldering veld, beyond the mine dumps and the roofs of houses and factories. It is a measure of Nadine Gordimer's achievement as a writer that she was able to pithily summarise this unlovely urban landscape in just two words: 'industrial rusticity'.<sup>4</sup>

Before Top Star was 'rehabilitated,' the drive-in's dramatic entrance gate – which is memorialised in a photograph by Graeme Williams and a charcoal drawing by William Kentridge – was abandoned in favour of a fibreglass hut installed near the summit. This sort of retreating threshold is everywhere apparent in Johannesburg. Ponte City had none. I simply drove into the parking garage. No randomly stationed man in a camouflage uniform armed with a ballpoint pen appeared, demanding that I record my business in a stiff-back ledger. No boom gate impeded our progress. The threshold was purely mental.

In this city of visible borders and electrified barrier walls, of fingerprint access systems and bureaucratised visiting protocols, this lack of interest in the policing of threat (which is as imagined as it is real) could seem strange. It is explicable. We had entered Ponte City by car. For the most part, it is entered on foot, through fortified and secured gates. I parked in an unmarked space.

The parking garage, which forms a circular podium beneath the apartment block, was naturally lit. We explored the place, tentatively, wandering from the garage into the retail precinct, which was untenanted but for a gym supervised by Congolese boxers. We found a zigzagging staircase opposite the central lift shaft and climbed to the top, where it opened out over Ponte City's empty centre. The laagered vista was unremarkable, offering up neither a Central Park nor a suburban garden. Only an outcrop of rock lit by a circle of sunlight 54 floors up. Strewn across the bedrock, here and there, bits of litter. If it is possible to attribute to garbage a character – vile, putrid, organic – this debris was something else – everyday, ordinary, neither a metaphorical mountain nor a physical insult.

There is a commonplace legend about Ponte City, one that remains indelibly lodged in the white imaginary: it tells of a dustbin-like centre filled with all the accumulated flotsam ever described



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and tabulated by Italo Calvino in his stories. It may well have been like that at one point, but I never saw it, not on any of my visits.

Litter and ideology are narrowly twinned in the narrative of contemporary Johannesburg. There is a strand of popular white thinking that reads into the evidence of urban litter – which is real, but also overstated – a metonym for the failure of black majority rule. Right-wing blogs like *The Death of Johannesburg* and *The Death of Durban*, which present drive-by photos of inner-city blight with impressionistic captions, typify a particularly nasty strand of this thinking. 'Trash is just everywhere, and the whole place really does stink to high heaven,' reads a typical description accompanying a deadpan photograph made at the corner of Catherine and Esselen streets in Hillbrow, three blocks west of Ponte City.

With its unseen cylindrical core, Ponte City, which does vaguely resemble the bombproof concrete dustbins that became a feature of urban pavements as the ANC intensified its urban bombing campaign in the 1980s, is an exaggerated site of projection and myth making. Possibly because of the endurance of unchallenged narratives around its central core, fact and legend have become irreducibly mixed up at Ponte City. So much so that legend is now construed as fact, the passing phase as fixed reality. 'After the fall of apartheid,' writes Krzysztof Nawratek, a left-leaning urban scholar, in his new book *Holes in the Whole*, '[Ponte City] was taken up by local gangsters and later became an abandoned ruin, covered in rubbish up to the fifth floor.'<sup>5</sup>

This stratified richness, which even Therese had heard spoken of in expatriate circles, was, however, nowhere visible in July 2005. The only tangible fact, for want of a better way of putting it, was the striated pattern of the corridor windows in the inner core extending up towards the blue of the sky. Like the veld across the valley, a disappointment: Therese asked me to drop her off at home.

[3]

During their prolonged investigation of Ponte City, which coincided with the mass eviction of residents and failed redevelopment of 2007/08, Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse gathered up a welter of items left behind by the building's former occupants.





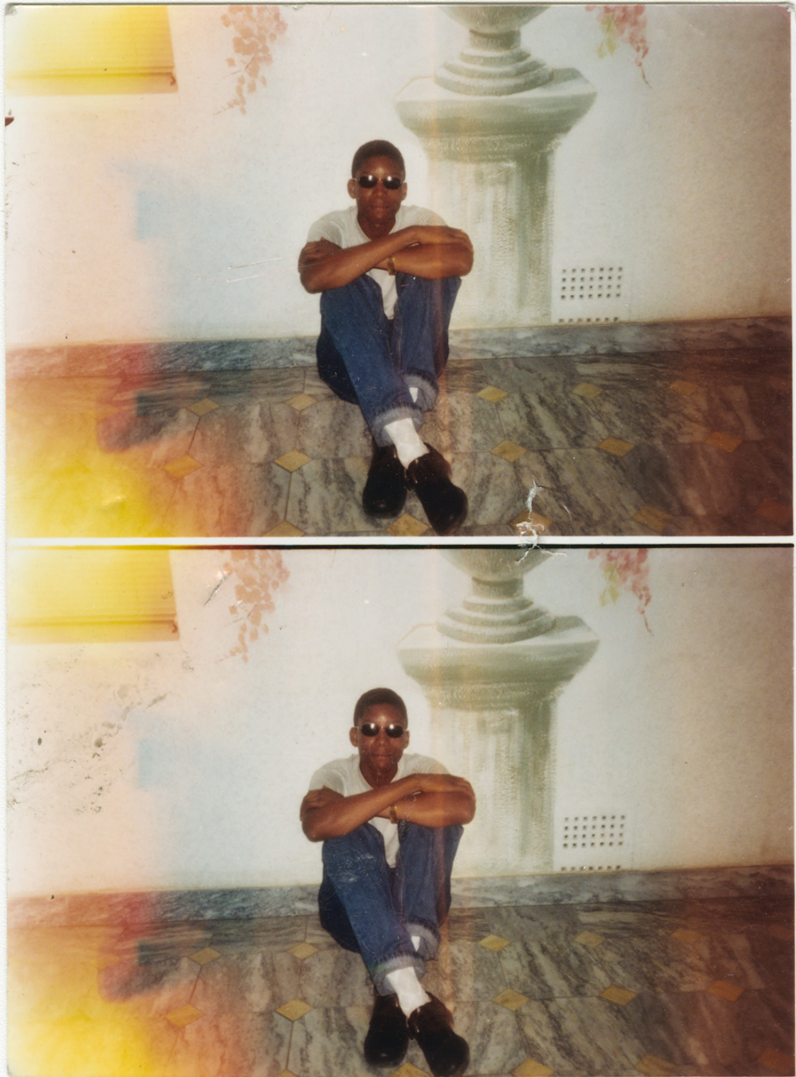
This leftover junk offers a counterpoint to all the imagined garbage hidden inside Ponte City's empty core.

Included in this residue were many photographs. One of these depicts a man in his early thirties. Seated on an olive couch, he wears a tan-coloured suit and gold medallion. But for his race, he would not look out of place in a 1970s Hillbrow nightclub or a 'conversation nook' in one of Ponte City's bachelor pads. Most of the photographs are of young men. One poses solemnly in front of a certificate of merit, another beneath the centre point of Nelson Mandela Bridge in Braamfontein. Cars and mobility recur as subject and theme. A photograph of an ostrich is *sui generis*. Stripped of context, the photographs are for the most part cryptic, banal, but somehow still understandable. There is, for instance, a photo of a misted-over view of Johannesburg taken from inside a Ponte City apartment. I once took a similar photograph. It too tried to record the feeling of encountering something, a wet fog, while looking at nothing as it erased somewhere.

Photographs aside, Subotzky and Waterhouse's archive of leftover things includes notebooks and training manuals, typed CVs and access cards, also medicines, X-rays and an orange comb. An invoice dated November 2006 declares that the rental due on flat 3607 is R1359, excluding sewerage (R50.57), water (R199.50) and parking (R80). The archive also extends to a library of useless literature that includes blockbuster novels (Wilbur Smith) and lost correspondence. Amongst the latter, there is a handwritten letter of congratulations from a parent to a newly 18-year-old son: 'The opportunity you got of furthering your studies is not every Tom, Dick and Harry got, so use it wisely.' Also an undelivered note of thanks addressed to the commandant of the Honeydew police station: 'I was victim of assault on and attempted murder on third of September 2006 and my case number is XXX/XX/2006 and that person who did abuse me, was arrested after few weeks. I really appreciate it for the hard work.'

All these things fit into a few stackable boxes, but tell stories taller than five floors of imagined garbage. Stories as fecund, if you allow the garbage an opportunity, as those conceived by Jorge Luis Borges or Donald Barthelme. For example. Amongst the detritus is a discarded membership card to the South African Intellectual





Workers Union. This compellingly named organisation, once domiciled at Sheffield House on Kruis Street, was deregistered in 2009, along with 37 other unions, including Die Predikante en Kerklike Werkersunie van Suid-Afrika (the Priests and Ecclesiastical Workers' Union of South Africa) and the Job Satisfaction Workers' Union. The imaginative possibilities of this juxtaposition are endless: a newly non-unionised priest encounters a similarly disillusioned group of workers in search of job satisfaction. The proposition is not entirely fanciful. Also there in the archive of junk left behind by a Stallion security guard and former Ekurhuleni West College student who lived in Ponte City circa 2008 are various cassettes, one featuring choral hymns, another the moralising sermons of a Baptist minister.

This recombinatory method could yield infinite results. But it is also unnecessary. Amongst the written documents – letters, affidavits, testimonials, undertakings – left behind by a former Ponte City resident is an unsigned letter of resignation. It is as if its author, possibly aware of the imminent evictions, took one big breath and punched out his single-paragraph letter. Sentences run on, one to the next, without punctuation. 'I am resigning for personal reasons... thank you... I wish you all the best in your life... keep in touch,' he writes. 'I don't have much to say,' he ends. 'May God bless you.' All that remains is the undelivered letter. It is like an empty chrysalis. Which is one way to think about Ponte City, and also about lost love. We fixate too much on leftover junk, the hard shell of evacuated things. The butterfly, a tropical blue *Charaxes* perhaps, is flying away, has gone.

1. Clive M. Chipkin, *Johannesburg Style: Architecture & Society, 1880s–1960s* (Cape Town, David Philip Publishers, 1993), p. 311.
2. Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* (New York, Meridian, 1994), p. 349, based on second and corrected printing of the first edition published in 1873.
3. Ponte City was originally designed to be 64 storeys, one floor less than Marina City. However, planning permission was refused due to concerns around access during emergencies.
4. Nadine Gordimer, *The Conservationist* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1983), p. 255.
5. Krzysztof Nawratek, *Holes in the Whole: Introduction to the Urban Revolutions* (Alresford, Zero Books, 2012), p. 53.











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