On any weekday in any street in Johannesburg one might encounter a lean, bowed person straining to pull a vast load up a hill, round a bend or across a busy traffic intersection, cramping to the side of the road out of the way of impatient cars and trucks, or pausing to lean on the trolley handles to catch a breath. Bulky brown hessian bags squatting on flat platform trolleys are stuffed with cardboard or paper, metal or plastic, making their trundling way by human muscle power alone to a recycling depot where their contents can be exchanged for cash.

Daily the waste discarded by businesses and residents of Johannesburg is actively salvaged in the transition between private property and public landfill. In the dark early hours of the morning, empty trolleys and deflated bags rumble briskly from central areas to the suburbs, scheduled for the city’s refuse removal service that day. The journey out can be many kilometres and several hours of walking. Reclaimers must arrive at bursting wheelie bins before the Pikitup trucks do, before the formal recycling companies collect their hauls, before pedestrian competitors arrive with rattling trolleys hungry for loading. Bins and bags are systematically trawled for particular goods: white A4 paper perhaps, PET plastics or scrap metal. When hessian bags are full enough to make the long journey back worthwhile – today, or perhaps only tomorrow, after another suburb is scoured – the back-breaking journey to the depot begins.

Both physically and institutionally, recyclers operate in in-between places and spaces: recycling businesses use their hauls – indeed depend on them for source material – but the recyclers are self-employed, without wages, job protection, insurances or medical aid.
Their strenuous manual labour, eye for the cash value in rubbish, diversion of volumes of material from landfills, and low carbon footprints are not lauded and applauded. City residents and businesses generating waste are mostly ambivalent – occasionally recognising and facilitating the reclaiming process on their doorstep, sometimes complaining and chasing away ‘dirty vagrants’, but mostly ignoring their fellow residents and road users. City authorities, too, mostly overlook recyclers while they do their work – indeed, appear blind to their existence and their labour. A different response, however, is provoked at the gathering points for sorting and storing accumulated materials, and by the recyclers’ nightly sleeping arrangements. These attract censure and harsh rebuke from law enforcement officers.

This then is the ambiguous world of the informal recycler or reclamer in Johannesburg. Interviewed in Newtown in 2010, Sizwe and Danny’s stories reflect this complexity. Sizwe entered recycling work based on the experience of his close friend Danny, a recycler for more than ten years. Sizwe was struggling to make ends meet from his job as a once-a-week gardener in Vereeniging, earning R200 a month, and from hawking of loose cigarettes in his own neighbourhood of Evaton West.
The spatial range of their recycling work is wide. Sizwe and Danny trawl Rosebank on Mondays, Westcliff on Wednesdays, Northcliff and Cresta on Thursdays, and Booysens to the south of the CBD on Fridays. They also salvage from businesses in central Johannesburg in the late afternoons, and they sell their stock to a depot in Newtown.

In addition to these working ranges, they divide their living time between Newtown and Evaton West, some 40 km to the south-west of central Johannesburg, in the neighbouring municipality of Emfuleni. Living conditions in the two places contrast sharply: both men are property owners in Evaton West, owning small, formal, government-sponsored low-cost houses acquired between 1995 and 1997. The houses are permanently occupied by spouses and children, and Sizwe and Danny join their families for the weekend on Friday nights and Saturday afternoons respectively.

During the week, however, they sleep rough, on leftover public space under a freeway bridge in central Johannesburg. This is their response on being asked about sleeping arrangements during their working week:

SIZWE: Oh well, no it’s a difficult question. There’s just … we just sleep.

DANNY: What we do, then we get some cardboard, ne? Then maybe … big cardboard, then we make it … something like a wall, yeah, just to … you know, just to keep the wind … and then, you’ll make a bed, and then you put your blanket.

SIZWE: Before you write, before you write [what he said], you are going to fight with me – he has got that box, he is alone, mine I don’t have a box and I will sleep over on top of the trolley. So he’s one that has got that box … He found it on Friday last week, so he say … yeah, we are just sleeping right there, on top of our trolleys, yeah.

DANNY: Open sort of … like this.

By contrast, their homes in Evaton West, although cramped and of poor physical quality they say, have electricity and flush toilets. They represent, too, a form of security and stability:

what is good for me is that I have my own place … And I own at least the soil …

But what Evaton West doesn’t offer them is a way of earning an adequate income. Sizwe and Danny speak of extensive poverty and unemployment in the area: ‘People are not working’. In the central areas of Johannesburg they can provide for their families through harvesting the waste of a much more affluent society. But why does this involve sleeping most days of the week in Johannesburg, and why in such rough living conditions?

A key factor for staying in Johannesburg on week nights is the cost of transport between Johannesburg and Evaton West – at R32 for the return journey, a daily commute would be a considerable expense relative to earnings. Recyclers also start their outbound journeys to the suburbs very early in the mornings. But there are other reasons for needing to remain in the city and close to their goods during the week. Recycling work involves both gathering and later sorting the load prior to having it weighed at the depot. Recyclers need space to
separate and sort bulky items – which depend on volume to attract value – and they need
time to do this. They also need a place to stockpile items until they have amassed enough of
a particular material to make the exchange at the depot worthwhile. Then there is the trolley
and hessian bag to store. Danny explains that when he goes home over weekends, he tries to
find a way to secure the trolley that he leaves behind:

Like last week, I used to ask somebody, I say ‘you must look my trolley’ they say ‘give
me RS’, I give them. When I come Monday, I’ve got no trolley any more. I have to go
anywhere until I get the lucky, get another trolley.

While recyclers are on the move much of the time, therefore, essential to their business
is space for sorting and a secure spot for stockpiling and storage. Add to this the long
working hours, the early morning start times and the transport costs, and the week night
stay-over in Johannesburg makes sense. So too does sleeping with your trolley and your
goods, even if this is on a bleak patch of ground under a freeway flyover, close to the
buy-back depot.

One such piece of land is marked by the huge concrete pillars of the motorway overhead,
and is rough and unlandscaped. It brings to mind words such as ‘wasteland’ and ‘leftover
ground’, appearing desolate and uninviting. But the recyclers’ use of it is not uncontested.
Sizwe and Danny explain that the Johannesburg Metropolitan Police Department (JMPD)
officers frequently raid the area and burn their belongings – their reclaimed stock ready to
be sold, and their personal possessions. They burn

the whole … whatever, whatever, even our belongs, our belongs, because we just put our
belongs there. Like now, there is a bag of mine where there is my clothes, everything, ID
and everything, they just burned everything.

If you don’t have anywhere to leave your bedding where it will be safe from these raids, you
must take it with you, even if it interferes with the collecting process:

you see, so when you sleep there, you must sleep there, then early in the morning [go]
and take everything out. So you can imagine if you got some blankets and everything
in your trolley and going to collect some other stuffs again, together with [all your
possessions] ...

Sizwe says the recyclers are not treated well by the police:

So they don’t … regard us as human beings … When they see us, they just think maybe
you are just the hobos, somebody just kicked out and (unclear).

Typically, the recyclers are dispersed with pepper spray before their goods are burned or
confiscated. Danny reflects on the impossibility of saving and of bettering their circumstances
under these conditions. His strategy for budgeting and accumulating savings rather than
spending his earnings every day was to amass a quantity of material before cashing it in, but
this plan literally went up in smoke:
I promised my child ... I would buy him clothes for winter. So from March, from March beginning, ne, I used to make plenty stock, because I make budget, because end of March, I wanna buy clothes for my child ... it was 22 of March. So ... I used to put too much stock outside, no I don’t want to sell it, because if I sell me like that ... that money I can use, you know, for food. Now, that 22 they came, they just burn everything.

INTERVIEWER: All your stock?

DANNY: Yeah. All my stock. I think it was R1 500 they took down. Money. If I sell that stock I can get that money. So my child ... I’ve got four child, that I can buy everything, if I’ve got R2 000 I can buy shoes, jackets, even now, I never reach that money, because I can’t work. If I work, I must work little bit and hardly to come to the recycling and I must sell quickly because that people they can burn. I can’t make that money like this ...
We are making a mess (unclear), we are not needed here because 2010 is coming ... tourists they are coming here they are going to see us suffering, so [the Metro Police] don’t want us to be seen [by] those people, that we are suffering. So they have to chase us away.

The JMPD tells them to go back ‘home’ and stay there, Sizwe says.

This attitude appears to cast recyclers as synonymous with down-and-outs, vagrants and scavengers which the city needs to rid itself of. But while they do sleep rough or informally on a regular basis, recyclers are engaged in regular, productive work involving long, strenuous working hours. This resonates with Tipple and Speak’s observation that large numbers of people who sleep on pavements, under bridges or in their pushcarts in developing countries are not ‘vagrants’ but are ‘working and productive members of society’ (Tipple and Speak 2009: 140). By contrast, visible homelessness is frequently assumed in society to be a function of personal characteristics and failings, captured in terms such as ‘villain’, ‘beggar’, ‘immoral’, ‘transient’, ‘loner’, ‘helpless’, ‘non-citizen’ (Speak and Tipple 2006).

The recyclers’ activities of scavenging through bins, their sometimes rough appearance, their makeshift trolleys and the lack of interaction typical between them and home owners, contribute perhaps to their being dismissed by some as ‘unproductive vagabonds’. Not only are they largely unsupported in their efforts – they are actively overlooked as the city leapfrogs over them in introducing recycling initiatives. The city’s separation-at-source pilot scheme, which gets households to separate waste items into different bags, partners with private truck-based companies for the collection of this waste. Sizwe comments that recyclers have been doing the hard labour of this work for years, picking through the unsorted mess of bins, but now count for ‘nothing’ in the new scheme:

We started this long time ago, [but] because we don’t have somebody to help us, then the people with their power and their money, they just come and overcome us and tell ... and we are nothing, the very same people who started the job.

Informal recyclers in Johannesburg are by and large invisible to the state in their daily work of salvaging and transporting waste – omitted from the city’s ‘non-motorised transport’ policy of 2009/ 2010, for example, although hundreds of trolleys are pulled precariously through city streets every day. But in their sorting, stockpiling and sleeping arrangements, they run foul of those tasked with enforcing regulations for an ordered, regulated city – they become visible through activities in contravention or that are mismatched with the space they are practised on.

The activity in itself is not necessarily illegal or even unwanted; indeed, in a context of dramatically high unemployment, self-employment is one of the few possibilities encouraged in the abstract by the state. Self-employment that also fulfils environmental agendas should be a win-win for the individual, the buy-back companies and local government. But with the strange combination of unsupported invisibility during the day and vulnerability to sanction at night, efforts at economic growth and self-development
falter. A spatial focus on the activity chain can help illuminate these facets of city life as well as the intersections and clashes informal recyclers have with fellow citizens, city management and the wider state.

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**Note**

1 Interview with Sizwe and Danny, informal recyclers, Newtown, 22 April 2010.

**References**
