



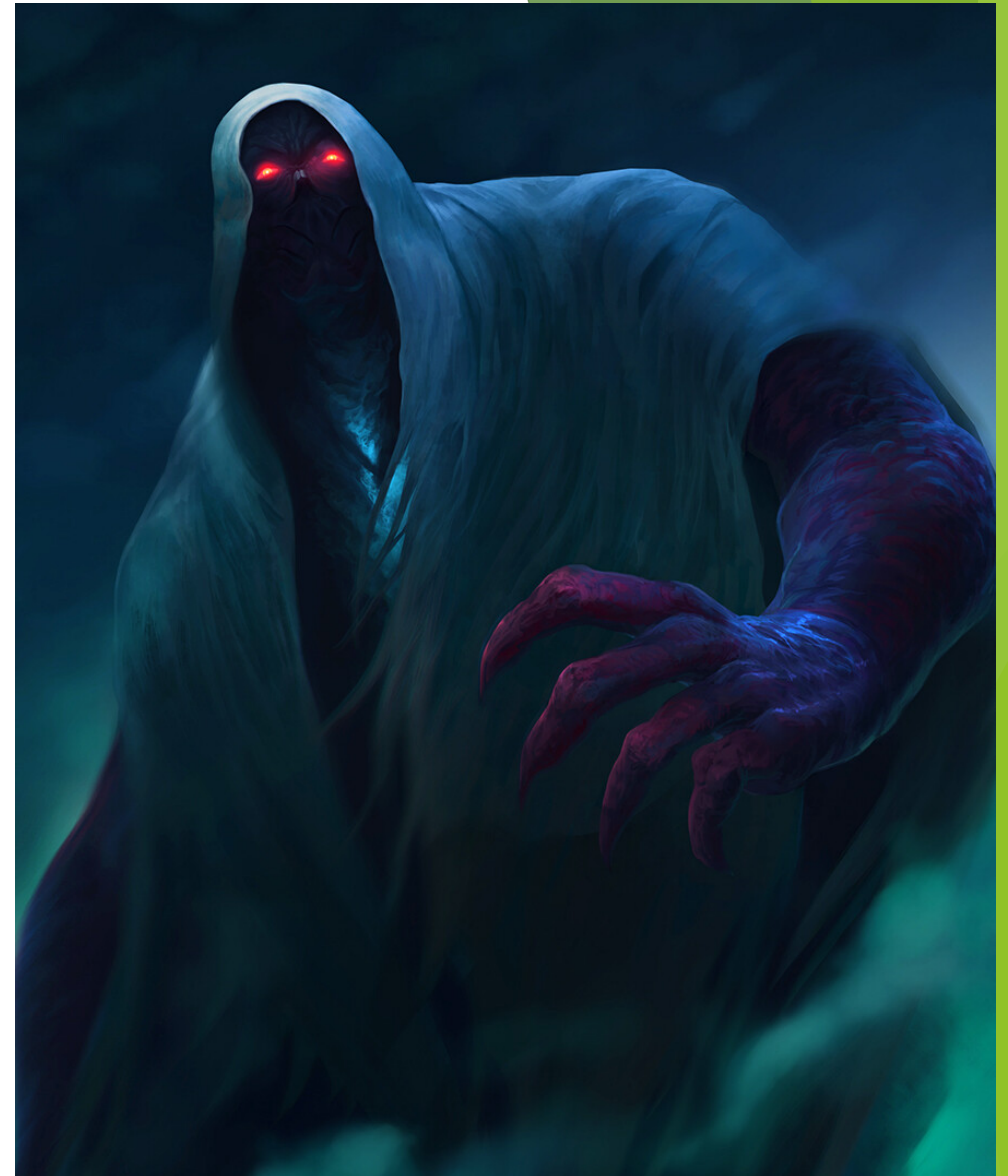
Reflective journey: Planning and abjection



Phil Jones
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Theory as bogeyman

- ▶ Practitioners arguing there's too much theory in university programmes
 - ▶ And yet here I am writing theory
- ▶ The idea of 'planning theory' makes even some academic planners uncomfortable
- ▶ See it in the reviewers dismissing the theoretical discussion and picking up on questions of interpretation around the SA case



Why write more theoretical material?


- ▶ Cultural geographers tend toward using (often post-structuralist) theory
- ▶ At its worst, it's self-indulgent, exclusionary, REF-bait
- ▶ But can offer an opportunity to zoom out from a case study to think about wider socio-cultural processes


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Negotiating polyvocal strategies: Re-reading de Certeau through the lens of urban planning in South Africa

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Abstract
The Practice of Everyday Life (de Certeau M (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press) has become a canonical text in urban studies, with de Certeau's idea of tactics having been widely deployed to understand and theorise the everyday. Tactics of resistance were contrasted with the strategies of the powerful, but the ways in which these strategies are operationalised were left ambiguous by de Certeau and have remained undertheorised since. We address this lacuna through an examination of the planning profession in South Africa as a *lieu propre* – a strategic territory with considerable power to shape urban environments. Based on a large interview data set examining practitioner attitudes toward the state of the profession in South Africa, this paper argues that the strategies of the powerful are themselves subject to negotiation. We trace connections with de Certeau's earlier work to critique the idea that strategies are univocal. We do this by examining how the interests of different powerful actors can come into conflict, using the planning profession as an exemplar of how opposing strategies must be mediated in order to secure changes in society.

Keywords
De Certeau, planning, policy, strategies, theory

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Why abjection?

- ▶ Basic ideas are fairly straightforward
 - ▶ Though much more complex in its psychoanalytic nuances
- ▶ Most commonly used in literary/artistic studies
 - ▶ Offers lessons for scholars in geography and planning
- ▶ Has been used to examine the South African case
 - ▶ Quite a nice research gap to explore South African planning with this lens



What is abjection?

- ▶ On one level Kristeva (1982) talks about abjection simply as disgust in relation to the bodily
 - ▶ Leakage, stench, ooze
- ▶ More interestingly, beyond visceral disgust, abjection is anything which:
 - ▶ ‘...disturbs identity, system order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.’ (Kristeva, 1982: 4)



Abjection as a handy metaphor

- ▶ Things which are seen as so problematic/disgusting that they need to be contained/controlled
- ▶ Brings into sharp relief questions of who determines if something is problematic and needed to be cordoned off
- ▶ Has a particular resonance with planning because it has qualities of spatial control
 - ▶ X is a problem if it's *here* so it should be moved to a designated space over *there*
- ▶ Think of the modernist impulse to separate dirty polluting industries from places where people live
 - ▶ i.e. this is not automatically a bad thing



Spatially contain the threatening Other

- ▶ Policies both de jure and de facto
- ▶ King Louis IX of France revokes the Edict of Nantes in 1685, which had granted Protestants the freedom to worship in specified areas
 - ▶ Charles II of England gives settlement rights to French Huguenots, who concentrate in London, esp. Spitalfields
- ▶ National Socialists in the 1930s confining Jews to Ghettos and later, concentration camps
- ▶ Restrictive covenants and white flight in C20 USA
- ▶ And, of course, various formal and informal policies in South Africa leading to the Group Areas Act of 1950, establishing Apartheid



Policies of spatial confinement need forms of planning

- ▶ South African planners were required to create the spatial reality of Apartheid policy

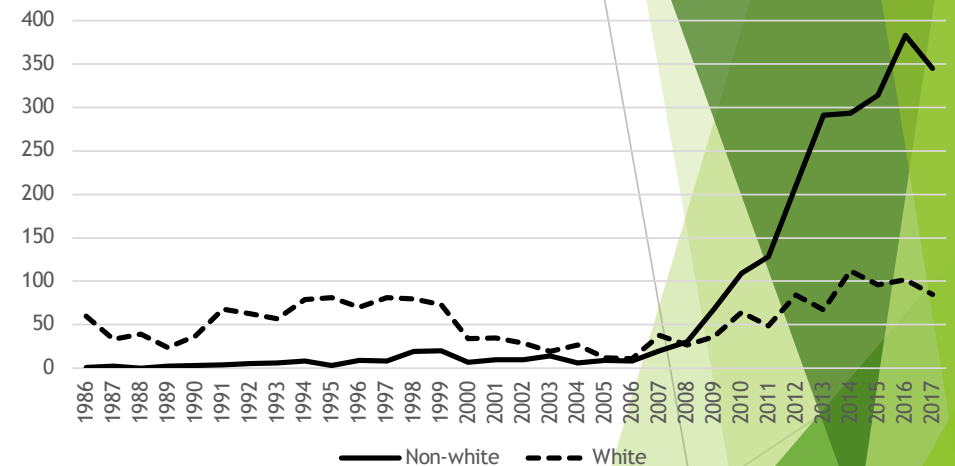
I planned milk farms that are now Lotus Gardens in Pretoria, which was destined to be an Indian suburb... so I was then complicit to apartheid planning, so then you'll have to sue me. [...] But yes, then it was probably morally wrong to put my hand to paper there. [If] I had to say to [my manager] at the time, “Sorry, it’s against my principles. It’s apartheid planning” then he said to me, “Well, bye”. Then I would have been without work.

(Participant 75, white, male, interviewed 25/4/18, translated from Afrikaans)



In 1994 the planning profession could be perceived to be complicit

- ▶ Risks planning as a profession looking abject because it literally helped to build the apartheid state
- ▶ After '94 the profession does a huge amount of work to remove that abject status
 - ▶ acknowledging its complicity
 - ▶ diversifying its membership
 - ▶ playing an active role in attempts to overcome grotesque inequalities in South Africa.



New practitioner registrations with the South African Council for Planners
Source: sacplan.org.za

The evolving abject

- ▶ Post-94 change in legal status
- ▶ Non-white skin was no longer legal basis for abjection
 - ▶ But poverty continues to be racialised
- ▶ Constitutional commitment to a right to adequate housing
- ▶ 4.8m new subsidised housing opportunities 1994-2019
 - ▶ Households living in informality *increases* from 1.5m in 1996 to 2.2m in 2018
- ▶ Turok (2014) argues that much of the new housing being built reinforces spatial segregation, trapping the poorest on the urban fringes.



Tension within the profession

- ▶ South Africa's has characteristics of both the global north and south
- ▶ What is the purpose of planning?
 - ▶ Facilitating investment in wealthy areas to drive economic growth?
 - ▶ Active engagement with the poorest communities to enhance social justice?



Eradicate informality?

- ▶ Slum clearance schemes in the global north
 - ▶ E.g. disappearance of 'back-to-back' homes by the 1970s
- ▶ Backyard shacks/extensions in newly built formal housing areas
 - ▶ Source of income and survival strategy in context of neoliberal economic inequality
- ▶ Replacing 'abject' housing does not solve structural poverty



...change planning education to say, let us embrace informality and stuff like that. So, you've got all these planners wanting to do those things, but no South African government would ever allow that because people view that as being backwards.

(Participant 23, black, male, interviewed 18/4/18)

Coming back from abjection?

- ▶ Kristeva and others don't tell us how one comes back from abject status
- ▶ The planning profession in SA was briefly seen as problematic but is now an unremarkable part of the multicultural state
 - ▶ Easier for a middle class profession to lose temporary 'abject' status as it shifts to a new way of doing business
- ▶ Planning has successfully positioned itself as being the guardian of good practice in setting out new developments as well as spatially regulating existing settlements and infrastructures, reinforced by new legal frameworks
- ▶ Black/coloured/Indian populations no longer abject in law, but in practice spatial segregation continues



Understanding abjection

- ▶ The SA case allows us to think about abjection works as a *mechanism* within socio cultural processes
- ▶ Allows us to think about how we can apply abject to understanding these mechanisms in other case study contexts
- ▶ Key lesson is the *resilience* of the abject in the face of legal changes
 - ▶ Evolving its emphasis/language but still excluding those without power - implicit/explicit racial exclusions
- ▶ Significance beyond SA, e.g. using land use zoning to exclude 'unwanted' groups despite laws banning such discrimination (e.g. the US case see Pendall, 2000).



Reflection

- ▶ Traditional concern for planners in the Global South is the inappropriate use of ideas from the Global North
- ▶ Similar issue in academia, need to decolonise theory
- ▶ The SA case gives important insights into a theoretical frame from the Global North that can be used to help understand a range of socio cultural phenomena
- ▶ BUT open to criticism of inappropriately applying northern theory and *extracting* insights from a Global South case study in a colonial mode

