

City on Fire: An Ethnography of Play and Politics in Johannesburg Nightclubs

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Abstract : Academic research has often neglected the city after dark. Surprisingly little consideration has been given to the every night life of cities: the spatial tactics and creative insurgencies of urban residents when night falls. The focus on 'pleasure' in the nocturnal city has often negated the subtle politics of night-time play, embedded in expressions of identity, attachment and resistance. This paper investigates Johannesburg nightclubs as sites of quotidian political labour, through which young people contest social space and their place in it, thereby contributing to the city's effective and socio-political cartography. The tactical remodelling of the nocturnal city through nightclubbing traces lines of desire (material, emotional, sexual), affiliation, and fear. These in turn map onto young people's expressions of their social and political identities, as well as their attempts at place-making in a 'post-apartheid' context. By examining the micro-politics of the cities' nightclubs, this paper speaks back to an earlier post-94 literature, which regularly characterised Johannesburg youth as superficial, individualist and idealistic. Similarly, some might position nightclubs as sites of frivolous consumption or liberatory permissiveness. Yet because nightclub spaces are racialised, classed and gendered, historically-signified and socially regulated, they are also profoundly political. Through ordinary encounters on the cities' dancefloors, young Jo'burgers are imagining, contesting and negotiating their socio-political identities and indeed their claims to the city. Meanwhile, the politics of this generation of youth, who are increasingly critical of the utopian post-apartheid city, are being increasingly inserted and coopted into night-time cultures. Data for this study was gathered through five months of ethnographic fieldwork in Johannesburg nightclubs, including over 120 hours of participant observation and in-depth interviews with organisers and partygoers. Interviewees recognised that parties, rather than being simple frivolity, are a cacophony of celebration, mourning, worship, rage, rebellion and attachment. Countering standard associations between partying and escapism, party planners, venue owners and nightclub audiences were infusing night-time infrastructures with the aesthetics of politics and protest. Not unlike parties, local political assemblies so often rely on music, dance, the occupation of space, and a heaving crowd. References to social movements, militancy and anti-establishment emerged in nightclub themes, dress codes and décor. Metaphors of fire crossed over between party and protest, both of which could be described as having 'been lit' or having 'brought flames'. More so, young people's articulations of the city's night-time geography, and their place in it, reflected articulations of race, class and ideological affiliation. The location, entrance fees and stylistic choices of one's chosen club destination demarcated who was welcome, while also signalling membership to a particular politics (whether progressive or materialistic, inclusive or elitist, mainstream or counter-culture). Because of their ability to divide and unite, aggravate and titillate, mask and reveal, club cultures might offer a mirror to the complex socialities of a generation of Jo'burg youth, as they inhabit, and bring into being, a contemporary South African city.

Keywords : affect, Johannesburg, nightclub, nocturnal city, politics

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