The Miner’s Ear

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The miner’s ear is attuned to the sounds of catastrophe: sirens, rumbling, explosions, a gush of water where only a dripping should have been heard, coughing, the burble of fluid in the lungs . . . or too much silence.

The miner’s ear is attuned to what will destroy him, what is already destroying him in the moment that he hears, if he hears. The miner seeks signs. He is at least prepared for them, for he has rehearsed their arrival. Most modern mines include in their training preparatory drills in which the feared disaster is staged as actuality. But the miner is endlessly confronted by symptoms that arrive belatedly—when the rock is already falling, or the lungs are already scarred and filling with blood.

And, what is worse, the miner is in the process of going deaf. Miner’s deafness, caused by repeated exposure to loud, often repetitive and percussive noise, emerges as a gradual attenuation of the frequency range that can be neurologically detected. It manifests itself, among other ways, as the transformation of voice into mere sound, and of many voices into constant but diminishing noise. The peculiar deafness of the miner thus annihilates his capacity for differentiation. Sounds become ever more indistinct, unclear. The deafness is itself the symptom of an injury. But it is also the cause of greater risk, for it increases the miner’s vulnerability to yet more injury. This spiraling deafness extinguishes the miner’s receptivity to communication, including, and most dangerously, the sounds of warning.

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The history of modern South Africa is, as many have remarked, indissociable from the history of mining. To be sure, the original motivations for colonization by the Dutch and British were linked to the ambitions of merchant capitalists, and especially their desire to secure maritime routes between Europe and Asia. Other interests were represented as well, including those of dissident religious groups fleeing Europe in search of new holy lands. But the development, capitalization, and industrialization of mining—as well as the organization of the labor that sustained it and the practices of population regulation that ensued—defined the path to modernity that South Africa took. The pursuit of
mineral wealth galvanized internal migration, prompted land expropriation, incited technological innovation, and motivated the Anglo-Boer War, among many other violent conflicts. So, too, the kinds of anticolonialism and oppositional politics that arose in that country must be understood at least partly in terms of its domination by mining capital.

Much of this history is to be explained by coercion, fear, and forced movements. But not all. Other forces traversed the landscape to draw men to the mines, or to persuade chiefs that commoner men should be sent there: the possibility of acquiring power through money, the possibility of purchasing rifles, the need to pay taxes in cash. But the promise of wealth or, quite simply, value for labor was largely a deception concealed in a rumor. This is one of the reasons why the half-spoken, half-sung autobiographical narrations called sefela of Sotho migrants are so full of references to lies. In his remarkable account of this tradition, In the Time of Cannibals (1994), David Coplan records the bravado-suffused but lamenting auriture of these travelers, in which the idea that poverty can be ameliorated with hard labor is ridiculed, and where Satan is said to be a black miner because “only black miners ‘work like the devil.’” In this world, the composer of sefela has as his task the “stealing” of secrets, which is to say the revelation of truth in words. But for truth to be heard, the ear must be open. As Mabote Nkoebele phrases it, the listener must “dig out the earwax / And listen to the wonders and evils of the world.” Otherwise, one is vulnerable to that which is merely overheard.

To understand the significance of mining—initially of diamonds, and then of gold—in South African history thus requires an attention to the significance of overhearing. For what incites the rush to prospecting and then investment in joint stock companies, what lures rural men from their homesteads and herds to the mines in the hope of cash salaries, is largely hearsay—however mediated it may be by formal discourses of knowledge (geology, geophysics, cartography), the state, and the media. Much credit is attributed to those who can distinguish between ersatz and real gold, between the rumor of wealth and the knowledge
of its location, between lies and true speech. Conversely, contempt awaits those who would be duped by the simulacrum of gold. Minerals such as pyrite, chalcopyrite, and biotite mica, which can be mistaken for the precious metal, are thus fool’s gold. And gold plating or alloyed metal makes a fool out of anyone who thinks he is paying for purity.

The nature and form of the gold rush varies according to the ears that receive the rumor of the precious metal. The prospector and the capitalist seek the value that they imagine inheres in the earth and its secret treasure, whereas the miner seeks that for which his own labor can be exchanged. Gold is not the object of the miner’s alchemy; it is the catalyst for transforming his labor into livelihood. Like every other act of sorcery, life is sustained for the miner only through the flirtation with death.

On the surface, everyone appears to be responding to the unequivocal call of gold. But wherever there is gold, there lies a possible confusion of signs. The very word invites such confusion. In the innocent ear, homonymy masquerades as etymology, as the aural (what can be heard) is falsely linked to the auriferous (the gold bearing). In one, the root—obscured by time—of an ear: aurilis (Latin). In the other, the root of (evil?) gold: aurum (also Latin). Reflecting on South African history, we find that if there is no ear in aurum, there is nonetheless an ear for aurum, after all. To understand the history and nature of gold mining—in South Africa and elsewhere—one must listen for both different
and false or “accidental” resonances, the mere coincidence of frequencies that amplify each other.

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The story of mining in South Africa is an accidental history. It is also the history of accidents, and of the displacement of other histories by the idea of accident. The story I narrate here begins with a particular accident in August 1964: the Blyvooruitzicht sinkhole disaster, in the mining community of Carletonville, not far from Johannesburg. That event assumed iconic status in the white South African imaginary at the very moment when the question of white supremacy sustained by mining capital was being put to its most radical test. In the same year, the Rivonia trial would come to a conclusion, with Nelson Mandela and his comrades of the African National Congress (ANC) being sent to Robben Island, where they were forced to engage in the impotent mimicry of mine labor: breaking limestone. This mimicry reveals an affective truth about mine labor, that the miner—unlike the capitalist to whom surplus value accrues—does not experience his work as a process of accumulation, with productivity enabling consumption. Rather, the miner himself is consumed in time. And this lost time, as much as any gold, is what the miner exchanges for money. We eat the mines, and the mines eat us rings true for South Africa as well as Bolivia, the subject of June Nash’s 1979 book. In many South African languages, the mines are referred to as the place of cannibals.

In Mine Boy, Peter Abrahams’s 1946 novel about the life of a black miner in South Africa, the new recruit is told that, if he is to survive in the mines, he must learn to stop fearing that his work may lead to nothing. In time, tomorrow, he is told, he will begin to stop thinking of the future. In time, he is told, he will stop worrying about the fact that the pile of rock at which he labors never seems to grow or diminish. Only when that occurs, advises his mentor, will he be liberated from the fear that possesses him in the mines. Still, learning to overcome the fear of producing nothing cannot, in the end, save the miner from the other horror, the collapse of the mine in which his comrades are swallowed by the earth. And only time will release him from fear of the violence that is labor in the mines. The “in-a-file-people,” who already resemble the “corpses forming a line,” make “drill boys [defecate] in their mine overalls,” sings Ngoana Tooane Motsoafi, in Coplan’s In the Time of
Cannibals. But it is perhaps the specter of the catastrophe—the rock burst, the underground fire, or the gas explosion—and its status as the most exceptional of events, that finally banishes the everyday fear of the miner, whose labor constantly disappears, ensuring that the miner remains captive in the cave of another’s desire for gold.

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Even the awful if also frequently erupting event of the mine accident can be displaced by other, purified figures of an even more exceptional accident. One of the most dramatic of these exceptions occurred on August 3, 1964, when the home of the Oosthuizens, an Afrikaner family, disappeared into an enormous subsidence as they and their domestic servant vanished in a cloud of flame and red dust, buried alive in the hole’s unreachable depths. Soon thereafter, three other houses fell into the pit, though their residents managed to escape. This was neither the first nor the last such incident. A few years earlier, a crushing plant at the mine, along with twenty-nine workers, had been sucked into oblivion. In 1970, the local recreation club’s tennis court plummeted, along with one of the game’s spectators, into the hellish underworld of water and stone. Today, the landscape is pocked with myriad holes and depressions, testaments to the ongoing reality of sinkholes in the region.

Local newspapers reported that some of those who survived the 1964 catastrophe had dreamt of the event before its arrival, which was why they were able to save themselves. But those same survivors also reported having heard from those now among the dead, that they, too, had dreamt of the catastrophe. The dream image had not saved the dead. It had not helped them to recognize the sounds of impending disaster when it arrived, as it did. Perhaps they imagined that they were merely hearing things. Those who escaped the collapse of their own houses were able to do so because they interpreted the sound of earth falling as a warning sign and not a mere symptom. A deafening swoosh or roar, some of the survivors had likened it to the sound of “wagon wheels on a dirt road.” But it had been a long time since any wagons had rumbled across this landscape.

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The image of the blissful domestic unit of white patriarchal order, rent from the world by such a violent and specific event, gripped the imagination of the white nation and especially the dominant community of Afrikaners in South Africa. In no time, it became a metaphor for the predicament of Afrikanerdom and white rule more generally: vulnerable to an undercurrent that emerged from the very economy on which
it had built its fledgling, racialized nation. In retrospect, it assumed the force of prophecy.

Afrikaner nationalism, and the logic of apartheid by which it sustained itself, would fall. Moreover, efforts to repress the emergent force of anti-colonial nationalism did not eliminate dissent so much as force it to go underground, especially after the Soweto uprisings of 1976. The highly politicized National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), formed in 1982, would officially embrace an “underground” movement as one of its four strategic pillars of action, along with mass mobilization, armed struggle, and international solidarity. The outlawed ANC Youth League—forced to leave Soweto, where even clandestine activity had become too dangerous—found one of its new homes in the township of Khutsong, adjacent to the mining town of Carletonville. The town would later be the scene of a bitter rivalry between the League members and vigilantes armed by the South African police and local white business interests. In the course of this bitter and brutal conflict, many youths died, some as a result of torture perpetrated by the local police. Later, thanks to an investigation led by Sally Sealey of the Independent Board of Inquiry, and evidence brought at the Truth and Recognition Commission (TRC), the full extent of the conflict, which one ANC member termed an outright war, was finally vocalized. It had been the subject of rumor and evasions—despite the stubborn testimony of the deaths it caused—for decades, and it remains oddly illegible across the country despite ongoing conflict in the area. During the years of the bitterest fighting, the war itself was camouflaged in dominant discourse by the rhetoric of “black-on-black” crime.

Thus, one underground came to metaphorize the other. Not only did the space of mining provide a name for the space of subversion, but the violence of a state-sponsored repression came to appear as self-destruction. For many Afrikaners, the new threat of an underground which was itself the by-product of apartheid’s violent law—partly aimed at the protection of rights in gold—had been fearfully anticipated. But because fear itself can be a symptom of weakness, it had to be displaced by one to which another cause, another form could be ascribed. The death promised by the underground had to be reconfigured as natural disaster. So people gossiped about those who had died in sinkholes, whispered about their own uncanny proximity to the disasters, and told their children didactic tales: bad behavior would result in an exile to the abyss of Carletonville’s sinking meadows.

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These events took place in the Far West Rand, a space of rolling hills interrupted by outcrops of auriferous quartz. In the 1880s, it was
irrevocably transformed by the discovery of what geologists call “payable” gold. Gold in this place was unlike most of that inciting gold rushes around the world at the time, for here, in South Africa, the precious mineral was buried very deeply within the earth. To be “payable,” such gold must occur in extremely large deposits, or else the value of gold must be very high relative to other commodities, including the labor needed to mine it. South Africa’s deposits are often low-grade but copious. The cost of extracting gold deeply embedded is, of course, much higher than for “placer” deposits—those on the surface, which can simply be panned. Even in 1912, there were several shafts from 6,000 to 7,000 feet in depth, and today shafts of more than two miles’ depth are common in the area. Problems arise here because the auriferous rock is nestled in porous dolomite ridges, the caverns of which are supported by water. Digging deep requires the evacuation of water from underground, lest miners be drowned in the rivers that would rush in to fill the voids beneath—as sometimes happens. This evacuation leaves the caverns empty and thus vulnerable to collapse. When such a cavern collapses, the surface of the earth caves in to form a sinkhole. Sinkholes also occur naturally, but they can be precipitated by artificial dewatering.

Not all accidents are completely accidental; “natural disasters” do not always have only natural causes.
For a long time, the Chamber of Mines attempted to blame the increasing rate of sinkhole occurrence on the West Rand on improper land use: the excessive watering of lawns, broken and ill-tended sewer pipes, unpredictable natural events such as flooding by rain waters—anything but the dewatering of the mines. And the number of deaths due to sinkholes was relatively small compared to those which occurred in other mine accidents. According to official corporate statistics, between 1911 and 1994, 69,000, mostly black, miners were killed and more than a million injured in South African mines. This number does not include those who have died or been severely impaired by illness caused by conditions in the mine: the victims of phthisis or silicosis, tuberculosis, and other lung diseases. Still, the sound of wagon wheels on dirt road and the image of families suspended in midair, plummeting downward, transfixed the people of Carletonville and deafened them to the warning signs of what was about to occur.

Perhaps if they couldn’t have seen it coming—for “it” was both the disappearance of the earth and the falsely legalized ground of apartheid—they could have heard its trembling warning signals. But instead of the warning signs of their own catastrophe, they heard the sound of “wagon wheels on a dirt road.” That sound has a history, too, and forms a part of the remembered experience of the Great Trek, when white settler colonialists, their forebears originally from the Flemish lowlands, traveled inland from the Cape in search of a New Jerusalem. The improbable route of their journey, its hardships, and the battles fought along the way with indigenous peoples, are now a part of Afrikaner lore, rehearsed in folksongs and poetry, and etched in the marble tableaux that adorn the walls of that people’s great self-memorializing temple, the Voortrekker Monument.

It is surely ironic that the white residents of Carletonville should have heard the arrival of their own catastrophe as the literal echo of an event disastrous not only for them, but for the indigenous peoples who had inhabited South Africa and been displaced. The residents of Carletonville to whom official history has given voice heard the arrival of disaster as the repetition of a trial which they thought they had survived. Even so, it is extraordinary that, in 1964, they did not perceive the repetition of an event which had visited them so frequently in the past. L. M. Nesbitt recorded the ordinariness of sinkholes a full fifty years before the Oosthuizens were swallowed by the earth. And, what is more, as a mining engineer, Nesbitt knew their cause. In Gold Fever (1936), a memoir of his three years as a mining engineer on the Rand, Nesbitt recalled:
The daily salvos of dynamite charges in the deep levels, and in the workings of adjacent mines, also tended to bring down the crumbling masses in the old shafts; and one often heard the muffled roar of tremendous falls of rock, leveling dark abysses and filling up old gullfs, closing galleries and stopes, and effacing passage-ways, and sending repercussions up to the very surface. After these subterranean collapsings, great crevasses would sometimes be found in the meadows, furrowing the face of the earth as with a sudden frown. The tremors caused by these subsidences shook houses and everything in them, breaking the windows, and even cracking the walls. Indeed, the ground was sometimes cleft under a house or a tree, causing it to collapse entirely.

One might say that the affliction of Carletonville’s white residents was something akin to “tone deafness.” For the most part, the inhabitants failed to fully register the significant dissonant tones preceding the disaster. They filtered them out, as innocuous background noise.

Tone deafness is distinct from noise deafness, the latter of which refers to a diminishing capacity to detect sound at all. Noise deafness remains one of the chief occupational hazards of working in the mines—even today, with the machines much quieter than they were in decades past. Tone deafness annihilates the capacity to correctly read signals, while noise deafness is the destruction of the capacity to receive them. In the mines of Carletonville, those with noise deafness finally demanded that they be listened to.

Anyone who has ever been down a mine shaft knows that it is a hellish cavern of noise. Thus Nesbitt describes the sounds of the machines in the battery house, where quartz is ground in order for gold to be extracted:

The drill . . . strikes with the rapidity and noise of a machine-gun in the confined space. Another machine starts up, adding its din to that of the first, and together they make nerve-shattering havoc of the uneasy peace which had preceded work. A third starts, but is hardly noticed, for already the first two could not be distinguished separately; and so with the fourth and last. Now there was nothing but a deafening crackling of rapid blows, interspersed with the more
metallic clangs of the boys’ iron maces beating on those stabbing chisels, as thick as the arm of a man. A chisel became stuck, the machine could not turn it; a hissing and shuddering, a crunching and whistling, most uneasy and terrifying, was heard.

Abrahams observed in *Mine Boy*, “Only the startling and terrifying noises around. And the whistles blowing. And the hissing and the explosions from the bowels of the earth.”

Such descriptions, though less frequent than those emphasizing the deprivations that afflict vision underground, occur repeatedly throughout the South African literature on mining, affording its readers a palpable sense of the dark and din-filled environment in which the miner works daily. These conditions did not change much over the course of the twentieth century. In 1986, South Africa’s National Union of Mine Workers (NUM) published a small, plainspoken book, *A Thousand Ways to Die: The Struggle for Safety in the Gold Mines*. The guide was written mainly to assist recruitment for the NUM. One of its most poignant observations regards the paradox of “noise deafness” and ear protection. The use of ear coverings or plugs to protect hearing not only simulates but actually produces in a temporary fashion the very deafness that the measure is intended to avoid, thus depriving miners of the sensitivity that they require in order to stay alive. With ear coverings, miners cannot hear “moving rock” and other warning signals. And most refuse to wear them.

Cheaper than silencers, which would be applied to the machines rather than the men, earplugs and coverings were the mining companies’ favored ameliorative technology. But here, their own failure to listen to those who were going deaf and those whose deafness led to accidents would finally incite an increasingly voluble response, one that gave the NUM a central place in the history of South Africa’s anti-apartheid movement. The predicament is captured in Vilakazi’s great poem “Ezinkomponi,” which begins ekphrastically with an address to that which will not hear him, the deafening sound that makes his own voice inaudible:

> Roar, without rest, machines of the mines,  
> Roar from dawn till darkness falls;
Roar, machines, continue deaf
To the black men groaning as they labour.

The opening line, “Roar, without rest, machines of the mines,” is an invitation to sounding. It recurs with the rhythmic repetition of a machine throughout the poem, driving to the prophetic conclusion, the moment when the white mine owners will have to listen to the men whom they tried to reduce to mere boys:

Growl more softly, you machines!
Because the white men are as stone,
Can you, of iron, not be gentler?
Hush your roaring in the mines
And hear what we would say to you.

... ...

In the middle of Vilakazi’s poem is an original myth about the mines, which also commences with sound:

one day a siren screeched
And then a black rock-rabbit came,
A poor dazed thing with clouded mind;
They caught it, changed it to a mole:
It burrowed, and I saw the gold.

For Vilakazi, it was precisely the noisy rumor of gold that blinded black men with the spectacle of wealth. And his long sequence works in this way to perform a series of inversions, revealing the metamorphoses of history by which black South Africans had taken on the manias of their white counterparts:

We agreed to leave our kraals:
In herds we came—castrated cattle!

But the inversions and mutual transformations extend to the white miners as well. The whites, observes Vilakazi, were rendered stone by the love of gold, devoid of human affect in their holes, as the (black) moles sent down were reduced to an animal status through the murderous magic of displacement and wage labor.

Vilakazi’s poems call to mind Walter Benjamin’s conception of the mimetic faculty as that which inheres not only in the organic but in the
relationship between the organic and the inanimate. In the mines, the strange unity of polarities is first achieved through language. A crucial moment in the silencing of black humanity was the naming of black miners for the tools that they used. In the same moment that the black workers came to be identified with the instruments to which they were themselves subjected, the machines acquired the aura of animality. Nesbitt described the engines as a “huge structure [that] looked like some strange beast, with windows in its back and stomach, permitting a view of the complicated viscera.” When repairing the great machines, “The men measured and calculated with as much care as a surgeon might take in setting a broken bone.”

Perhaps the most telling inversion of the opposition between the organic and the inorganic occurs, according to Nesbitt’s account, in the moment when rain begins to fall and sounds, to the fatigued and noise-deaf men, like hammers. Here, then, is the sensory register for the process described so well by Marx as the mutual substitution of animate power and thingness brought about through the logic of the commodity and the exchange relation.

Even when one is “stone deaf,” one can feel the body’s vibration, the tremor of a cough. The miner’s lung is the soft tissue on whose surface the explosion must ultimately be written. It is the place of an inversion, even an introjection, where the man-made disaster will be experienced as the awful effect of mining’s “second nature”—its being accident-prone.

What kinds of accidents occur in the natural order of things? According to company reports, 90% of AngloGold’s South African miners suffer an accident during their working career. This high probability of violence—the normalization of accident—acclimatizes the miner. The violence is structural and economic, but also representational. The opposition between accident and normalcy is not overcome by statistics attesting to its regularity. Naming or numbering the accident does not annul its eventfulness.

The miner’s lung absorbs the stone pulverized by the drill, and in the lung’s spasmodic effort to guard the body’s sovereignty, it converts the muteness of stone into the “language” of coughing. The miner’s lung, soft, pink and fading to grey, scarred, torn, and clogged with fluid, is the unlit stage for the drama of Death. Nesbitt recalls an awful scene from the hospital rooms of miners from the Rand during the years of World War I. Those who could afford to had their lungs periodically X-rayed, charting the progression of their bespeckled organs in an effort to estimate the time remaining until death or disability. Perhaps these miners
thought they could outwit fate this way. They hung the images of their lungs on the wall, next to framed pictures of movie stars and loved ones. In one set of frames were images of that which lies beyond reach; in the other, that which was doomed to disappear.

One must distinguish, as Gilles Deleuze once said, between the sound effect of the body and language. But making such a distinction is not so easy when the sound effect is the miner’s cough. It is not only the medical apparatus that transforms the cough into discourse, reading it first as event and then as symptom, converting it to testimony through X-rays and CAT scans. It is the lover, too, who hears the cough that “rolls me over on my left side,” as Muriel Rukeyser wrote of the silicosis victim in *The Book of the Dead* (1938).

The miner’s cough, that most polysemic of sound effects, is written as catastrophe through a myriad of gestures, each more minute than the next. In an accumulating but mainly silent discourse, the cough gathers its meaning from fearful attention and dread-infused hearing, the everyday symptomatology of the untutored but knowing attendants of miners and their lungs: “That sounds terrible. Are you sick? Does it hurt?” But care is not yet interpretation, and the polysemy of the cough
gets refracted by fear and stigma to mean phthisis, tuberculosis, or AIDS—depending on the context, depending on the sphere where it emerged. And each diagnosis has its own unique set of social consequences. Not the inevitability of death but the form of it: this is what the fearful ear seeks to know when attending the coughing chest.

The miner’s lung hungers noisily for air; it sucks and wheezes, gasps and sighs. It is the withering, deflating double of the ear, complete with canals and echoing spaces. The lung is heard best by the miner’s ear, which, even while deaf, trembles sympathetically, in concert with the wounded body. Nesbitt heard the coughing constantly in the mines, and associated it with the gathering fatigue that would make death seem like sleep, compelling the miners to seek respite in the oblivion of alcohol:

The voices would die away one by one, until at last the silence was broken only by the constant murmured grinding of the battery at the top of the mine. . . . I was often awakened suddenly by the sound of raised voices, by the screams of somebody under the influence of nightmare, or by the coughing of others. . . . At night, their dry coughing echoed under the zinc roof, and it seemed to become continually more harsh and rasping as the night wore on, until, try as one might, one could not wholly free oneself from the feeling that it was one’s own body that was being convulsed and shaken, and one’s own lungs lacerated by splinters of quartz. Many a time I was awakened in the middle of the night by that tragic interminable coughing.

The miner who hears well enough, and who is lucky enough to avoid accident, is subject to this slow but relentless catastrophe: the destruction of his lungs. Between 1977 and 1991, autopsies of the more than 17,000 black men killed in mine accidents revealed that 9.7% of them suffered from silicosis. And the rates continued to increase. In 1991, the American Thoracic Society reported that 12.8% of the miners killed in accidents in South Africa suffered from silicosis. The country’s own Chamber of Mines admitted a rate of from 17.2% to 22.1% for gold miners—rates which have not changed since 1975. In the same report, the Chamber of Mines indicated that its own research found rates of silicosis in former miners from labor-sending regions to be between 22% and 37%. It also found that only 8% of the twenty-eight mines surveyed maintained dust levels within the acceptable risk range.
According to the report: “Silicosis is incurable, irreversible, and progressive.” This much has been known for a century. As early as 1915, Nesbitt could write:

Everybody was working in conditions which could only result, sooner or later, in his contracting phthisis. . . . No one was immune from the gradual accumulation or quartz dust in the lungs, and he was a strong healthy man indeed who lasted longer than eight years.

And yet, there has never been a successful suit for a silicosis victim against a South African mining company. In 2003, the British legal firm Leigh, Day, and Co., successfully resolved a class action suit against British asbestos mining companies, and obtained £7,500,000 for former miners or their surviving dependents. In 2004, ten miners brought the first test suit against Anglo American, seeking up to 20,000,000 rand in damages. Today, a new urgency presses upon the mines and the miners. Death grows more impatient by the day, it seems. For now HIV has been associated with much more acute forms of silicosis, and with the accelerated progression of the disease. Silicosis itself increases the risks of contracting tuberculosis fourfold.

In the belly of the earth lies the beast, one might say, the beast that Nesbitt saw. Half organic, half architectural, Nesbitt’s house with viscera provides an uncanny image of the sinkhole disaster of 1964. Nesbitt described the huge machine as needing the kind of care that a surgeon might provide, but the world of the mines was not one in which the well-being of miners was an object of investment. It was not a part of Michel Foucault’s biopoliticized order. Or, if there was biopower, it was unevenly distributed among people of different racial categories in apartheid South Africa. The regime that Foucault describes as biopolitical in later writings is one in which society is managed for productivity, not through repression, but through the organized cultivation of life: through the management of populations and via institutions of public health and hygiene, using discourses that ethicize well-being and self-care. The biopolitical supplants a system in which sovereign power demonstrates itself as the capacity to distribute death.

In South Africa, such an epistemology and its attendant procedures of corporeal rationalization were implemented only partially, and primarily for white populations. Black miners were treated as expendable and
received relatively little biopolitical investment. They worked until illness made them, from the mine company’s perspective, useless, at which point the miners were abandoned to fate, fate usually taking the form of phthisis or tuberculosis. Measured at the beginning of a contract period and at the end, the miners were released from employment when it was found that their bodies could no longer renew themselves. Nor were the compounds, initially male social formations, allowed to become the scenes of social reproduction. One is tempted to say that, for black miners, the mines were like death camps, the spaces in which these men lived in anticipation of their own deaths. In the *sefela* by Lethetsa Malimatle recorded by Coplan, the perfunctory assessment of the miner’s capacity for work is spoken thus:

> At ten I was taken to the doctor:  
> It was “Mokose,” my companions.  
> He put a metal [stethoscope] on the chest here,  
> I breathed twice he was satisfied:  
> “Alright! Child of Malimatle,  
> There is nothing my brother,  
> Go and drive them at the mines yonder.”

But it is Vilakazi’s poem that reflects the otherwise unspeakable truth about the gold mines, alternating as it does between the sounds of the machines and the recounting of bodily breakdown. What begins as an awful but animating mimesis between technology and the body turns out to be the origin of a deathly exchange:

> We, too, grow old and rusty in the mines;  
> Our strength soon goes, our lungs soon rot,  
> We cough, we cannot rest—we die!

Only death releases the dying from their predicament. Hence the brutal irony that led to the belated generalization of biopolitics in the South African mines only *after* the entrenchment of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Initially, mining companies treated AIDS like other illnesses. AngloGold (now AngloGold Ashanti), for example, simply fired those who tested positive during the first years of the epidemic. But, as the full extent of the epidemic became known (in Carletonville/Khutsong, infectivity rates are now estimated to be at about 28% of the mining work force), the economic cost of lost skill and the difficulty of both maintaining epidemiological statistics and tracking individual infectivity status is thus the specter of economic death that has ironically subjected the dying to life management—by the corporation, not the state.
have led to a change in policy. Most mines now provide testing and anti-retroviral treatments to those who choose to undergo and can maintain that therapy. It is thus the specter of *economic death* that has ironically subjected the dying to life management—by the corporation, not the state.

The catastrophe of AIDS awakened the corporate world of mining to the relentless exposure to disaster that working in the mines has always entailed. Yet, it began in a confused effort to discern the origin of a cough: phthisis, tuberculosis, AIDS. Confusion itself enables evasion. The symptom is a poor sign, at times. What’s more, it is a somnolent culture that slowly responds. If history appears to become possible by virtue of an accident, it is annihilated in a space where normalcy includes rehearsing for disaster. With what sadness one must admit that the only seemingly viable response to epidemic has been the demand for treatments that permit continued exposure to injury. This is the catastrophe of the mines, a catastrophe that transcends in every way the question of accident.

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In 1936, Owen Letcher published his monumental tome, *The Gold Mines of South Africa*. There, in a chapter on “Miners’ phthisis,” Letcher observes the liability costs confronting the mines and provides a brief but admiring history of institutional, technological, and legislative efforts to mitigate the disease. Amid the enthusiasm for biopolitical rationality, there is the shocking observation that in the early days of mining on the Rand,
unchecked inhalation of dust particles bore results as devastating as the gas first liberated on the Western Front in April 1915, and probably amongst Europeans and natives phthisis has claimed up to date as great an army of underground employees of the mines as shot and shell, enteric and dysentery destroyed of the combined Imperial and Republican Forces in the War of gold (Anglo-Boer War) of 1899–1922.

This imagery of war suffused the depiction of life underground for much of the twentieth century. For Nesbitt the scene below ground was reminiscent of war not because of the traumatic visions but because of the resonance between drill and gunfire. But the war of the mines is not merely an auditory hallucination, not just a matter of “hearing things.” Over the course of the years, the Rand had been the scene of several actual battles, including the Rand Revolt of 1922, in which white miners staged a strike in protest against their displacement by cheaper black labor. The newly formed South African Air Force bombed the strikers into submission, but the fight for fuller participation of blacks in the labor force, and for equality under the law, had only begun. Between 1917 and 1948, a series of efforts to organize black labor produced the non-racial South African Trades and Labor Council, and the explicitly non-white Council of Non-European Trade Unions. With the entrenchment of apartheid under the National Party, steps toward integration of the labor force were reversed. In opposition, black miners became increasingly organized throughout the 1950s, but after Sharpeville (in 1960) they were forced to “go underground” until 1982, when the NUM established itself as the primary voice of black labor opposition to apartheid. In 1986, NUM made it possible for 1.5 million miners to put down their tools.

The strike reverberated as a silence below the surface, one that incited in the mine owners, and in white capital more generally, a panic not unlike that described by Nesbitt so many years before:

Such was the frenzy produced by the gold fever that whenever it became necessary to stop one of the machines for any reason, the minutes of its idleness were impatiently counted and registered. Rhythmic delirium degenerated into thwarted and excited delirium, and so remained until such time as the machine had once more resumed its labor.
But the fear generated by the silence of the machines was itself a response to having heard the promise of the ANC in 1964, when Nelson Mandela addressed the world from his dock. At Rivonia, Mandela acknowledged what the mining companies feared most, that the ANC intended to nationalize the mines, banks, and monopoly industries. This was not, he said, a matter of communism, but of extending the concept of nationhood under which the monopolies in South Africa already functioned. For these words, as much as any others, Mandela and his comrades were silenced in the limestone quarries of Robben Island, forced to while away their time in the image of the miners. Ultimately, the goal of resource nationalization would be relinquished or at least radically revised in favor of the creation of black capital. Since 1994, the legislatively mandated transfer of mine ownership from whites to blacks has proceeded slowly, though the mines are still spoken of in many South African languages as the place of the whites, and the lowest, least remunerated positions in that economy remain the exclusive domain of black workers. Surely one of the most astonishing ironies of this long and complex history can be discerned in the fact that the still-impoverished township of Khutsong, a township that has been perched precariously at the edge of the underground since its creation under apartheid, is now attempting to access much-needed economic resources by having itself declared a site of natural disaster because of sinkhole vulnerability. By embracing the mythology of accident, it hopes to save itself from the politics of inequality. And despite the wisdom of Tsokolo Lecheko’s *sefela*, which remarks that “If poverty were contested, God would be tied up endlessly in court,” the township makes its claims through the very rule of law that made its people captives of mining.

It has been remarked that Mandela’s release from prison was a compromise, another strategy for deferring more political violence, and insofar as he incarnated a respect for Law, this emancipation was no doubt also an effort to legitimate that which had only clothed itself in the trappings of legality. The confusion between law and legality had reached its apogee in the mines, as Nesbitt observed. Horrified by the inequality between the black and white miners, and much harsher about the English than the Afrikaners in this respect, Nesbitt observed that, on the Rand, “Equity must give place to industrialized justice.” In 1994, Law remained as abstract and remote as ever, but the laws of the land, at least, were made universal. Perhaps the most extraordinary sign of this fact can be found in the concept of multilingualism embedded in the constitution, which includes sign language for the deaf as an official language and which grants rights to all its users. An improbable token of both the capaciousness of South African conceptions of democracy, and the recognition that mining has been at the origin of so much of the nation’s deafness in every sense, this last provision seems appropriate for a regime that came to be under a man who was once called, in Xhosa praise poetry, the “Trembling Earth.”

In these works, which convey not only the artist’s own unique vision but also traces of the traditions of both European modernism and South African township graphic art, Kentridge uses drawings for narrative purposes and tells the story of South Africa’s fractured history through the twin characters of Felix Teitlebaum and Soho Eckstein. Though they are alter egos, Soho Eckstein provides the figure of economic power—especially mining capital—inhabiting a world of extravagant wealth which is however socially desolate, dependent as it is on the brutal exploitation of both the land and the people forced to extract its wealth. The ghosts of Max Beckmann and Käthe Kollwitz are present in the shadows of these drawings, as is the cinematic imagination of Fritz Lang. Yet these works bear the unmistakable signature of William Kentridge.

Having come of age in an era of abstract expressionism and conceptual art, Kentridge insists on the figurative and narrative inscription of South African history, reflecting his sense that political discourse requires a descriptive gesture, and that pure abstraction always risks losing the capacity for signification. At the same time, the artist’s continued elaboration of personal narratives and his repeated invocation of memory’s shifting landscapes indicate the importance that he accords the question of subjectivity. In the space between these burdensome poles—of political description and personal testimony—Kentridge’s art makes visible what the ear must still attend to: the mournful tale of a violent history and the possibility of surviving it.