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Ethics of Freedom, Pragmatics of Constraint:
Theatre in a Post-Mandela South Africa

by

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation, an ethnography of South African theatre artists, traces the moral and ethical contours of a “post-Mandela” South Africa. While “post-apartheid” South Africa is marked by ethical nation-building projects like racial reconciliation and the push for a nonracial “rainbow nation,” post-Mandela South Africa is characterized by a growing skepticism of these projects and a sense that many South Africans have yet to enjoy the freedoms promised by Mandela and others. In dialogue with the anthropology of ethics and Foucauldian ethical frameworks in particular, I examine the implications of a post-Mandela South Africa with regard to processes of shaping and forming self and community. What moral and ethical resources are available for imagining and enacting a good life when moral nation-building projects collapse? What new moral exemplars and pedagogues emerge from a context where former icons of struggle are now seen as collaborators with a colonial past and an insidious neoliberal present? How has this moment mutated those things most integral to understandings of self, like race, class, kinship, and politics? What forms do freedom and constraint currently take in this context? These questions and others are answered through an ethnographic study of South African theatre, drawing on fieldwork from Johannesburg, Soweto, and Grahamstown. Rather than undertaking a study of audience reception or conducting close readings of plays, I focus on the artists themselves, contextualizing their aesthetic sensibilities, the ethical journey of becoming and being an artist, and the inescapable historical entanglements with which they grapple. As I
explore the freedoms and constraints at the heart of South African ethical life, I engage their implications for classic and contemporary conversations in anthropology, including kinship, political economy, epistemology, pedagogy, and whiteness. At the same time, the dissertation contributes new conversations to the landscape of South African anthropology, charting emergent ethical subjectivities, diverse understandings of freedom, and the shifting significance of race in South Africa and beyond.
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Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to the lives and memory of two incredible, talented, and strong women: my grandmother Catherine Vlachos and great-aunt Dr. Mary Dochios Kamberos. The daughters of Greek immigrant farmers who insisted that their children receive an education, Catherine and Mary fought their way into the professional world at a time when few women were able, becoming an attorney (Catherine) and a doctor (Mary). They made Chicago a special place to visit, and though they did not live to see me complete my PhD, they supported me in countless ways. They were my biggest fans, and remain my steadiest sources of inspiration and strength. I strive to carry their legacy of generosity, good humor, kindness, persistence, and hard work forward and thank them for their countless sacrifices for myself and the rest of my family. May their memory be eternal.
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Introduction

Ethics of Freedom, Pragmatics of Constraint:

Theatre in a Post-Mandela South Africa

A Post-Mandela South Africa

In November of 2013, I attended a conference in Soweto titled “The Unfinished Business of Truth and Reconciliation: Arts, Trauma, and Healing,” sponsored by the “Drama For Life” program at University of the Witwatersrand. The conference, taking place nearly twenty years after apartheid, was a recognition that there was indeed much unfinished work to do in the country’s transformation to a “new” South Africa. Delivering a keynote address at the beginning of the conference, John Kani, an aging icon of apartheid-era protest theatre, bemoaned the political trajectory that delivered democracy—rather than freedom—to the people of South Africa. Many of the panels beyond this keynote address were similarly concerned with the ways in which South Africa had not only failed to progress socially, politically, economically, and racially, but indeed had failed to sufficiently process and heal from the wounds of apartheid.

To South Africans and careful observers of South Africa, there is little new in these narratives. The shortcomings of “Truth and Reconciliation” and other stalled processes of transformation have indeed constituted the central points of departure for critical analysis in and of the country for the last twenty years (e.g. Ashforth 2005; Fassin 2008; Gillespie and Dubbeld 2007; Robins 2010). At this point, the assertion that South Africa is not the “rainbow nation” that Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu worked hard to build is not only obvious but becoming

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1 An institutionalized form of white supremacy, Apartheid was officially in place from 1948 to until 1994 in South Africa. Among other things, it included mandated racial segregation and restricted the areas where non-white South Africans could live and work.
increasingly hackneyed. I certainly did not need to go far to hear that there was still a lot of work left to be done.

At the same time, there was a new narrative emerging at the conference, and during my eleven months of fieldwork in Guateng and the Eastern Cape more broadly. After twenty years of governance, the ruling African National Congress—the party of Nelson Mandela that rode a wave of good will and high expectations during the transition from apartheid and since—was increasingly the target of criticism for the ways in which South Africa’s democratic revolution seemed perpetually suspended (Habib 2013). It is not particularly surprising that the ANC had come under increasing scrutiny in recent years. Since taking office in 2009, president Jacob Zuma in particular has found himself in the midst of numerous scandals large and small, most recently accused of misappropriating some 215 million rand (approximately sixteen million dollars) for dubious “security upgrades” to his home (Public Protector 2014). Before Zuma, there was Thabo Mbeki, who ran afoul of activists in his own country and the international community more broadly for expressing skepticism that HIV was the cause of AIDS (Fassin 2008). The ANC’s legitimacy, politically and morally, had been under popular fire for some time, and not only by conservative white South Africans who remain deeply suspicious of the ANC. What was new—at the Drama for Life conference and during my fieldwork more broadly—was the extent to which Mandela himself was an increasing target of criticism.

One of the more provocative performances at the DFL conference, for instance, was a short twenty minute piece called “Mandelema,” the title a mash-up between the names Mandela and (Julius) Malema. The play staged a fictional confrontation between old and new, youth and

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2 The leader of the ANC Youth league who had recently been ejected from the party and had gone on to form the Economic Freedom Fighters (a populist and leftist party that continues to fight for the appropriation of land from white South Africans and the nationalization of major industries like mining).
elder, as the two engaged in argument about the past and the future of South Africa. Malema was caricatured as a vapid ideologue whose slogans were spoon-fed to him by sycophantic members of the radical intelligentsia. Mandela, though, was equally caricatured as a doddering old man who spoke in empty platitudes about reconciliation and forgiveness. South Africa’s past and future, the play suggested, are both contested and contestable in the present.

Nelson Mandela died less than two weeks later, initiating a nationwide flood of celebration and mourning, and more fundamentally, renewed assessments of Mandela’s legacy. Over and over again, particularly from my interlocutors in Soweto, I would hear of the ways that Mandela “sold out,” in favor of a constitution that favored white South Africans. Unlike Shaka Zulu who fought hard for his culture and his people, they told me, Mandela “left culture behind” through compromise in pursuit of a form of reconciliation that has not changed much of anything. Throughout the course my interview with them, Mandela would emerge again and again as a central locus of blame for losing focus of the real fight and compromising his principles.

This dissertation is thus a study of “post-Mandela” South Africa: a period that is adjoining but also divergent from what is frequently called the “post-apartheid” period. To say that South Africa is now post-Mandela rather than post-apartheid is not to suggest that Mandela’s death constituted a radical rupture or state of transition from the past to a new present. Indeed, one thing that characterizes the current zeitgeist is the sense that South Africa has never been post- anything, but instead, to borrow from Jean and John Comaroff’s description of modernity, “a complex product of things old and new, things continuous and discontinuous” (1998, 10). Or even more accurately, one could deploy Achille Mbembe’s description of the postcolony to say that post-Mandela South Africa “encloses multiple durées made up of discontinuitites, reversals,
inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another, and envelope one another: an entanglement” (Mbembe 2001, 14). These entanglements, and the ways in which ordinary South Africans are making sense of them, shape the contours of a post-Mandela South Africa and are what lie at the heart of this dissertation. Rhetorically, I demonstrate and perform entanglements in a number of ways: tracing the legacies and mutations of Black Consciousness in South African theatre (chapter one), showing the continual relevance of classic British Social Anthropology to South Africa (as in chapter two, where Isaac Schapera and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown are important conversation partners), and arguing that the events that occurred during my fieldwork set the stage for events currently unfolding (as in chapter four).

Throughout the dissertation, I track the implications of a post-Mandela South Africa with regard to processes of shaping and forming self and community. What moral and ethical resources are available for imagining and enacting a good life when nation-building projects like reconciliation and the “Rainbow Nation” collapse? What new moral exemplars and pedagogues emerge from a context where former icons of struggle are now seen as collaborators with a colonial past and insidious neoliberal present? How has this moment mutated those things most integral to understandings of self, like race, class, kinship, and politics? What forms do freedom and constraint currently take in this context?

These questions and others are answered through an ethnographic study of South African theatre artists, drawing on fieldwork from Johannesburg, Soweto, and Grahamstown. A study of South African artists—and theatre artists in particular—may strike some as an odd choice indeed. One might suppose that I could have found answers just as easily by looking at social movements (Robins 2006, 2010), infrastructure (Von Schnitzler 2013), migration (Owen 2015), or the ever-popular topics of HIV (Fassin 2008; Thornton 2008) and witchcraft (Ashforth 2005;
Niehaus 2013). A few words are in order from the outset about what the study of South African theatre—and South Africa itself—offers to anthropology.

**Why Study South African Theatre?**

The question “why study South African theatre?” has been posed to me numerous times by family, friends, colleagues, and wary grant reviewers. Depending on where one puts the emphasis in the sentence, it is actually two separate questions. One—“why study South African theatre?” is a question about the legitimacy of South Africa as a locale for an anthropological study, whether of theatre or anything else; a question of South Africa’s “place-in-the-world” (Ferguson 2012) within the discipline more broadly. A second question: “Why study South African theatre?” is a question of the social scientific utility of theatre as a point of departure for an anthropological study of South Africa. Giving a cogent answer to both questions is important, and the answers to both questions are mutually reinforcing.

**Why Study [South African] Theatre?**

Why should an anthropologist from the Global North study South African anything, for that matter? South Africa is no longer a Cold War proxy or a notorious bastion of institutionalized white supremacy. Political violence on a massive scale came and went during the transition from apartheid; it is no longer a state mired in open and deadly conflict. All that remains to be studied, the story might go, is found in the exotic: persisting beliefs in magic and witchcraft; the scourge of AIDS and the rampant misinformation that continues to perpetuate it; the occasional “service delivery” protest that might get a bit out of hand from time to time; the occasional outburst of horrendous xenophobic violence with an African twist. Poor competition indeed amid global terrorism, new iterations of authoritarianism in Europe, the deepening crisis
of climate change, and shifts toward post-human ontology that are (perhaps) better studied elsewhere.

Responding (albeit more implicitly) to some of the same questions, Alex Golub (2016), discussing the global “crisis of liberalism,” resists the exoticization of Papua New Guinea and argues instead for the ways in which the country runs parallel to—and diverges in interesting ways from—the United states. “We are seeking to understand a contemporary country as it exists in the present,” he argues. “To imagine that ‘we’ have crisis while ‘they’ have culture is to deny the coevalness of a country whose people are actively and successfully—perhaps more successfully than we are—navigating the crisis that marks our current moment” (2016, para. 9).

Much the same could be said of South Africa. The exotic is certainly within reach; what is far more interesting, however, are the ways in which South Africa, as a contemporary country, not only mirrors the Global North but has indeed foreshadowed, numerous times, developments that are currently taking place in Euro-America (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012).

In years past, for example, I often explained South African president Jacob Zuma as “the George W. Bush of South Africa” to North American friends and colleagues. But given the recent election of Donald Trump as president, the comparison between Trump and Zuma is a good deal more apt. The order of the comparison must now be switched, however: Trump is the Zuma of the United States, for Zuma came first as a national political figure: on trial for rape in 2009; suspected of inappropriate financial relationships and shady business dealings; accused of misappropriating funds for dubious security upgrades to his private residence; a populist champion who came to power by ousting the elites of his own party (former president Thabo Mbeki among others). Beyond Zuma, foreshadowing abounds. South Africa has long wrestled with a level of xenophobia that the United States is (disturbingly) coming to mirror, not only
with regard to immigrants but also refugees, and South Africa has also long been confronting economic inequalities that only recently have become nascent on a popular level in the United States with the rise of Occupy Wall Street and politicians like Bernie Sanders. South Africa does not embody the Global North’s past or its culturally exotic other. It is the future of the Global North unfolding in the present (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012), and certainly worth studying for that reason among many others.  

This response only constitutes a partial answer to one iteration of the question—some of the reasons why, as an anthropologist, I find South Africa a compelling context. There is another sub-question embedded here though: why study South African theatre in particular, rather than theatre in Brazil or Greece? Or, staying on the African continent, why not study theatre in Nigeria or Ghana, both of which also have compelling and provocative performance traditions that are deeply engaged with sociopolitical realities (Boh 2015; Odam 2015; Shipley 2015)? The short answer is that I came to the ethnographic study of South African theatre as a scholar of South Africa, rather than as a scholar of theatre. I am attracted to South African theatre because of the racial, social, and political contexts in which it unfolds; contexts that, in my experience, are always just under the surface of performance if not completely explicit.

South Africa is not the only place where one might find Physical Theatre, Theatre of the Oppressed, or high-concept performance art. It is, however, unique for the questions that its theatre practitioners actively engage: questions of the body shaped by the specific historical context of apartheid; questions of race, refracted through persisting privilege and inequality and

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3 At the same time, I do not intend here to tell a story laced with Afro-pessimism (Mbembe 2001) about South Africa. Throughout the dissertation, I point to salient areas of constraint in South African ethical life to the extent that they throw into relief the ethical strategies through which South Africans attempt to transcend them. As Elias Bongmba argues of Africa more broadly (Bongmba 2006), one should not write off South Africa for its problems, but instead see hope in the rich moral and ethical resources that South Africans make use of in response to them. The “dialectic of optimism and pessimism” at play in Bongmba’s work thus animates this dissertation as well.
in dialogue with a rich black intellectual history; questions of how a history of colonialism and apartheid and a neoliberal present converge toward constraint or allow for greater freedom. It is likely the only place where one could find an artist like Brett Bailey (discussed in chapter five), whose provocative ethnographic exhibitions have toured Europe to spark violent protests and equally violent arguments about privilege, whiteness, and representation. It is an artistic context that has long been political. It is still political in many ways, though it is consistently generating new relationships to politics and new conceptions of the political itself. South African theatre, simply put, is an artistic form deeply engaged in telling the story of South Africa’s past, present, and possible futures.

**Why Study South African [Theatre]?**

Theatre occupied a central place in protest culture during apartheid. Particularly during the height of the Black Consciousness movement, Black Theatre in particular (discussed in chapter one) was a powerful tool for the affirmation of blackness and a way of giving voice to experiences of life under apartheid. Internationally touring productions by white and black South African artists alike helped bring apartheid to the attention of Global Northerners in compelling ways, and protest works like *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* continue popular revival productions. Stalwarts of Protest Theatre like Mike van Graan and John Kani are currently revered not only as icons of theatre but as public intellectuals, and their critiques carry weight. The importance of theatre not only as entertainment but as social commentary persists, in many ways. Grahamstown, for instance, hosts the annual National Arts Festival each year, a ten day explosion of theatre that is the largest in the Southern Hemisphere and second only to Edinburgh globally. My attendance at three National Arts Festivals and my observations of theatre in Johannesburg, Soweto, and Alexandra were more than enough to convince me that the end of
apartheid has not dulled, in the slightest, the sharp edge of theatre as a form of public critique. South Africans continue to take their theatre seriously, and theatre continues to have serious things to say about South African life.

At the same time, even when South Africa enjoyed periods of more intensive anthropological focus, ethnographic studies of theatre and performance in South Africa have always seemed to proceed from a position of defense and apology. If it was questionable to focus on performance in the waning years of apartheid (Coplan 1985:1), what makes it any more appropriate at this point and for this study? Why, given all the anthropological avenues to studying South Africa, from HIV to witchcraft and from migration studies to political economy, use theatre as an ethnographic vantage point into processes of shaping the self in a post-Mandela South Africa?

It is important to note, at this point, that my interest was drawn to a particular kind of theatre in South Africa, marked by a particular set of histories, practices, and concerns. I was certainly not interested in globally touring Broadway productions or their South African equivalents, which offer all the glitz and glamor of show business that one might expect. I encountered one such environment when I accepted the invitation of a contact to see a work that would take place in the basement of the Joburg Theatre in downtown Johannesburg. His work happened to be occurring at the same time as a large-scale production of Aladdin, and when I arrived at the theatre’s lobby, it was bustling with children holding slushies (and their exasperated parents who had paid upwards of thirty U.S. dollars per ticket), costumed men whirling flaming batons, and couples dining in the theatre’s restaurant. Once the production began, I imagined, children would be squirming in the seats of a darkened theatre, watching the show unfold passively as though watching a movie—escapist entertainment at its best. Rather
than join them, I made my way to a dimly lit basement through a partially-opened security gate, not even sure if I was in the right place. My contact’s production, titled *Boom Bap vs. Swag Rap*, was a one-man show staging a confrontation between the materialism of “swag rap” culture and the revolutionary ethos of hip hop. It asked the audience to participate in numerous ways, inviting us all onto the stage at the finale for a dance party. It was, in short, the opposite of the type of theatre that was transpiring directly above us. It drew deeply from the artist’s own journey and philosophies of art, which were both in dialogue with the rich history of Black Consciousness in South Africa.

*Boom Bap vs. Swag Rap* was itself on the periphery of a stream of South African theatre that is emerging in a post-Mandela South Africa: one in which artists use theatre as a technology to form and shape the self. Through processes of production and performance, the artists I studied actively engaged the creation of theatre as a transformative process and as a way to imagine and enact new ways of living and being in the world. I found this type of theatre across the racial and aesthetic spectrum: from black and white artists, and from elite and “community” theatre. Far from being aesthetically distanced in form or content from self and society, these works are the culmination of intimate forms of struggle and are attempts to answer the question of how one ought to live in a post-Mandela South Africa. Aesthetically speaking, the lineage of this theatre is as diverse as its practitioners: among its progenitors are indigenous performance traditions, the European avant-garde theatre of Bertholdt Brecht, the physical theatre of Jacques

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4 Although ‘Aesthetics,’ refers on the most general level to the domain of inquiry surrounding the appreciation and criticism of artworks, “aesthetic” is a broad and nebulous term that is used in a number of different ways. As a branch of philosophy, Aesthetics is concerned with questions as many and as varied as other branches like Metaphysics and Moral Philosophy. This being the case, it is important to note that I use the term ‘aesthetic’ in two different senses. Primary, I use ‘aesthetic’ to refer to the set of principles and artistic choices that shapes the construction of an artwork (e.g. “the modernist aesthetic” or “Black Consciousness aesthetics”). Phrases like ‘aesthetic judgments,’ ‘aesthetic evaluations,’ and ‘aesthetic devaluations’ refer to judgments about the value of an artwork and the types of qualities that can or cannot be predicated of it. Saying that a particular work is ‘good,’ ‘bad,’ ‘hackneyed,’ ‘original,’ ‘gaudy,’ or ‘grotesque,’ are all aesthetic judgments.
Lecoq, and the theatre of Black Consciousness that found its voice at the height of apartheid. This diversity certainly manifests itself in a variety of different forms of theatre; what unites them is a fundamental concern with an ethics of self.

For a study of ethics in a post-Mandela South Africa, I found emerging theater artists to be a compelling research population to study. They are explicitly occupied with questions of ethics, taking the materials at hand around them to continually fashion selves that are worthy of the esteem of others (Faubion 2011). They take as points of departure questions of the body, of apartheid, of race, and of self-becoming, though not always in ways that are didactic or obvious. Collectively, they provide an avenue for exploring the ways in which South Africans are processing a post-Mandela moment, and generating new subject positions in response to it.

Given that the practitioners of this theatre of ethics are distributed across spectra of race and class, studying these artists allowed me to probe the social configurations of this post-Mandela moment. In this sense, the dissertation is, in part, a study of distinction (Bourdieu 1984) that uses theatre to probe the ways in which understandings of art—and the self—are shot through with the particulars of race, class, and history. The white artists I studied at an elite university (the University Currently Known as Rhodes) had radically different conceptions of what theatre is and the freedoms that it offers than their black counterparts in the township of Soweto. They also labored under different (and far less daunting) constraints. For both groups, these freedoms and constraints shape the possibilities of the kind of self that they could reasonably hope to become. They also have implications for distinctions between good and bad, high and lowbrow art, and designations like “community theatre.” A study of theatre, in short,

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5 Rhodes University is currently in the midst of a lengthy process to formally change its name in response to protests aimed at the colonial legacy of the university and the colonial magnate for whom the university is named. I refer to Rhodes University as “the University Currently Known as Rhodes” (shortened to “the UCKAR” in the usage of my informants) throughout the dissertation in deference to this movement.
illuminates something of the current shape of distinction and current forms of habitus that have continued to evolve since apartheid.

The dissertation, taken as a whole, answers the question: “Why study South African theatre?” by showing, through ethnography, the utility of theatre for studies of race, of kinship, of political economy, of pedagogy, of ethics, and of epistemologies of expertise. Theatre, I argue, has the power to illuminate these issues and others not only because it holds a mirror to them, but because it changes and configures them in an empirically observable way. Theatre, in other words, has agency in the world—a proposition that requires further explication below.

**Theatre’s Agency: Research Design and Methodology**

As an anthropological study of theatre, this dissertation is in dialogue with the anthropology of art more broadly, especially studies that proceed from the assumption that art can be an agent of social change. In the last twenty years, the anthropology of art has developed significant momentum, especially to the extent that it has moved away from its earlier impulses to focus exclusively on extending western aesthetic categories, formulating alternative aesthetic frameworks, or engaging in cross cultural aesthetic comparisons. There is nothing particularly wrong with these aims in themselves, but the anthropology of art can be (and is) more ambitious than this. The anthropologists to which I am most indebted are those who have worked to show, in all of its complexity, the ability for art to act on the world in an empirically observable way. Many of these anthropologists engage the intersections of art and politics, showing how, among other things, art can be a form of direct action or protest (Askew 2003); how art gives shape to
social movements (Adams 2002; Santino 1999); and the role of art in the production of alternative citizenships (Chaffee 1993; Fernandes 2003; Lee 2013).  

While artworks remain ethnographically significant for the facets of culture to which their form and design might attest, their importance encompasses much more than this. It also includes the social relationships into which they are thrust and the varying ways in which they circulate (sometimes quite far afield from their original centers of production—see Marcus and Myers 1995). Art has a power beyond mere representation or aesthetic pleasure that is undeniable; it certainly cannot be reduced to its semiotics alone (Eves 2009; Gell 1998). Anthropologists of art are at their best when they show, as concretely as possible, how this is so. Such is my intention for South African theatre as well, situated as it is in a history of protest and in a post-Mandela moment, both of which are inescapably political.

Many of the anthropologists of art to which I am indebted are equally indebted to—or at the very least, thinking and writing consistently with—the work of Alred Gell, whose anthropological theory of art is among the most robust and programmatic theories of art the discipline has to offer. For Gell, any anthropology of art worth its salt must take the sociality of art as its primary point of the departure, examining and engaging the social world in which a work of art resides. Art exerts agency in the world, Gell argues, and for that reason it is a “system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it” (1999, 6). Gell does not predicate agency in the well-worn sense of a capacity to resist some or another hegemony, but by virtue of the fact that artworks are able to initiate “causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by acts of mind or will or intention, rather than the

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6 If media like television shows, films, broadcasts, and recordings are also counted as “art,” the reach of this engagement is expanded exponentially. See Abu-Lughod (2005), Ginsburg (2002), Hirschkind (2006), Howe (2008), and Turner (1992) for a few select examples of what is truly an enormous body of literature.
mere concatenation of physical events” (1999, 16). Though the genesis of agency always resides in a work’s creator, the agency exerted by an artwork once in circulation can, of course, be quite different than the original intention of the artist. Whatever the trajectory a work of art takes, and however interpreted, artworks can be agents, in much the same way that people or animals or other objects can be7: they can initiate and produce action in the world.

Gell’s arguments about the agency of art undeniably breathe life into this study. At the same time, there are at least two reasons for leaving Gell’s broader theory behind. First, Gell’s focus is entirely on the agency of visual art: objects like shields and statues, paintings and sculptures—in short, “real, physical things, unique and identifiable, not performances, readings, reproductions, etc” (1998, 13). Gell wants to theorize the agency of artworks qua objects, and his dismissal of performative art is a handy way of restricting the conversation “because the difficulties can [only] be surmounted one at time” (1998, 13). The difficulty to which he refers is ontological in nature: what kind of thing, exactly, is a work of theatre, and how can we point to it? Its existence cannot be found in the script alone (and which copy of the script at any rate?) because a work of theatre is, at a bare minimum, also found its performance. Theatre is of a different order of existence than the works that Gell wished to examine, and it—along with music and literature—were summarily banished from his study.

Another reason this study cannot fully proceed from Gell’s theoretical assumptions (even while ascribing to his broader commitments about art’s agency in the world) has to do with some of the implications of his theorization of agency. Gell’s account seems to necessitate, in every case, the presence of at least two entities: an “agent” and a “patient” (1998, 21-22). An exertion

7 Gell’s theorization of agency has an obvious parallel to Actor-Network Theory (Latour 2005), though he never mentions it explicitly. Whether this is the result of his untimely death in 1997 (prior to ANT’s growing prominence in anthropological work) is unclear. At the very least, one can surmise he would have found analytic purchase there.
of agency, that is, always involves an agent acting upon a patient in some way, and this relationship for Gell is never anything smaller than a dyad. There is some complexity to agent-patient relationships in Gell’s theory: the artist acts (as agent) upon the artwork (as patient) during its manufacture, but later the artwork itself can be an agent that acts upon other patients, most often the audience of the work. Presumably, then, one could be an agent in one moment and a patient the next. Agents and patients, however, are always discreet. Secondly, Gell assumes that artworks are always manufactured for someone other than the artist. Whether they go to a patron or a broader public, being made by an artist is only the first in a series of transactional lives that will be led by an art piece. This movement is never cyclical or circular; once an artwork leaves its place of origin (for Gell at least), it does not return, at least not in the same form it left.

This dissertation proceeds from a rejection of these assumptions. There are reasons for believing, as the ethnography that follows will illustrate, that an agent and a patient can be the same entity,\(^8\) reasons for believing that an artist can be a patient of his or her own artwork, and reasons for believing that works of art do not have to leave their place of origin to exert agency. Making these theoretical moves also allows for a solution to a problem that has plagued studies of theatre in anthropology. It is a question about the agency of works of theatre in particular, and it is to that question—and its implications for my methodology and research design—that I turn next.

\(^{8}\) I specifically have in mind autopoesis—the work of shaping the self. In such cases, the agent and the patient can be the same. Though of course other agents can be involved, this does not always have to be the case.
**Finding Social Change Behind the Scenes**

Like anthropologists of art more broadly, anthropologists of theatre have recognized that theatre, as a work of art, also has agency: it acts in the world as a catalyst for social and cultural change (Beeman 2011; Turner 1988), it can create new forms of political identity and community (Kondo 1997), and even transform consciousness itself (Schechner 1985). Claims of the transformative potential of theatre abound, but as often as such claims are made, they are rarely substantiated in any robust way. Theatre’s agency—including its ability to precipitate any significant social or culture change—has to be accepted at face value, though the empirical evidence is often missing or weak. What exactly does it mean for instance, to claim that “successful performance represents the accomplishment of cultural representation resulting in transformations in society” (Beeman 2011, 3)? It is unclear how such transformation can be validated empirically, and what research methodologies are available to assess how individuals or groups could be transformed in tangible ways by performance.

Some compelling strategies for studying theatre’s agency in a more robustly empirical way come from studies of audience reception. Studies of reception have offered useful conceptual and methodological tools in anthropology more broadly, particularly within media anthropology (e.g. Abu-Lughod 2005; Spitulnik 2002), and similar approaches in theatre have indeed produced some tangible, empirically-grounded experience. The most successful and convincing of these attempts is Karin Barber’s research on Nigerian theatre (2000). Barber shows that it is not only possible to situate works of theatre in a broader social and cultural context, but to meaningfully study how audiences respond to the lessons they contain (in her case, the plays were quite didactic). It is clear, when reading Barber, that works of theatre do indeed impact audiences in observable ways.
At the same time, as I have argued elsewhere (Vlachos 2016), approaches to theatre through audience reception run afoul of two significant problems: one methodological and one conceptual. Performances are ephemeral events, and any impact they may have had is likely to fade in the years, months, days, or even hours after a performance. Observations of an audience during a performance and interviews conducted immediately after may offer some ethnographic insight, but they are not an adequate basis for a sustained long-term ethnographic study of theatre. Conceptually speaking, it is hard to parse any impact that theatre might have from the ways in which a particular audience member might be shaped and influenced outside of the theatre experience. This difficulty is present in media studies as well. Discussing television in Egypt, Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin argue that “even those viewers most involved with television participate in other social institutions and engage in other practices, most notably of contemporary religious groups, that powerfully reorient subjectivity” (2002, 14). This is also true of theatre. Unlike a television show, most audiences will only see a performance once, while engaging in other activities on a repeated and daily basis. The “other social institutions” mentioned by Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin point to a problem of overdetermination: if an individual learns that drug use or xenophobia is bad at school, from his or her parents, or as part of a national campaign, for example, how can one compellingly argue that a theatrical performance has played a significant role in shaping his or her opinion? The causality is weak at best.

To work around this methodological and conceptual impasse, I found it necessary to study “a social crossroads of performers, participants, styles, categories, materials, and occasions of performance”—what Coplan calls “performance culture” (Coplan 1985, 4)—rather than simply focusing on performances as isolated events. As I did so, I privileged a focus on the
artists themselves and the broad range of activities in which they participated that stretched beyond performance: rehearsals, production meetings, informal gatherings, and daily life. Observations of these contexts—along with interviews of the artists—allowed me to probe more deeply the ways in which theatre acts as a catalyst and agent for change. The performance of theatre is only the tip of a much larger iceberg (Fabian 1990), and there is a wealth of avenues for observation when one turns an analytic gaze toward artists rather than their audiences. This is not to say that audiences are unimportant—they certainly make plenty of appearances in this dissertation. But the artists themselves are changed by the practice of theatre in far more tangible ways. Theatre, that is, exerts agency over the artists who create it, and not only in moments of performance where they get to embody other lifestyles and personalities but in processes of production as well. Mental and physical exercises, phases of intense contemplation, and the care of others are found in moments behind the scenes when no audience is watching. It is all a part of theatre, and collectively allows for a more robustly empirical examination of theatre’s potential to be ethically and politically transformative.

These theoretical and methodological orientations are situated at the edge of a nascent shift in anthropological studies of theatre. A recent volume by Flynn and Tinius (2015), which focuses specifically on political performance, proceeds from similar assumptions about the ethnographic value of rehearsals (Tinius 2015) and the need for a shift in how transformation is conceptualized in performance more broadly. Transformation, for the scholars in this volume, is rooted in what Flynn and Tinius call “relational reflexivity,” a term that indexes the contemplative and reflexive work that takes place in the context of the publics that are gathered.

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9 Fabian’s (1990) conception of what counts as “performance” is quite a bit wider than mine, operating as he was in dialogue with figures like Victor Turner (1988) as well as performance studies more broadly. Nonetheless, the methodology at play in Power and Performance, which privileges a range of contexts beyond performance events themselves, undeniably shapes my approach.
through the creation and performance of theatre. While contributing to further momentum in this productive and exciting new line of anthropological inquiry, this dissertation also extends it, bringing theatre to bear on a broader range of historic and contemporary conversations in anthropology including kinship, race, political economy, and expertise in addition to politics.

**Performance Studies?**

As an ethnographic study of South African theatre artists, this dissertation addresses theatre *qua* theatre and performance *qua* performance. The language of performance is not harnessed in any significant way as a theoretical framework for the analysis of political events, social movements, or rituals. Such analyses have been conducted in the context of South Africa multiple times already, especially with regard to South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (e.g. Cole 2010; Goodman 2006). The language of performance (and in particular, Turner’s “social drama”), does provide a useful framework for studying the TRC as a performance, calling attention to the symbols, metaphors, and moments of high drama that helped a nation process the trauma of apartheid. Frameworks drawn from performance studies might be useful for examining more recent events as well: the significance of a handshake between Presidents Raul Castro and Barrack Obama at Nelson Mandela’s memorial service; the deployment of the grotesque as a rhetorical strategy through the application of feces to a statue of John Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town; the powerful images of religious resistance to state power that unfolded as a Catholic priest took a rubber bullet to the face while offering shelter to protesting university students (Whittles 2016).

Performance studies, for many of my interlocutors in the Department of Drama at the UCKAR, has been revolutionary for the study of theatre in theatre departments themselves. After decades of having to study theatre as just another genre of literature, performance studies opened
a vast range of new possibilities (Finestone-Praeg 2011), allowing theatre scholars to pay attention to bodies and forms of movement in ways they hadn’t before. The strong anthropological streak in performance studies, among other things, allowed for a more concrete focus on raced bodies, gendered bodies, and classed bodies within moments of performance itself. I was unaware of the extent to which figures like Victor Turner and Richard Schechner were now commonplace in academic drama departments, to an extent that (at the UCKAR, at least) students were growing bored with them, having heard about “liminality” enough times that subsequent mentions (some from me) produced a visible glaze in their eye.

In keeping with a healthy sense of disciplinary chauvinism, it will suffice to say that anthropology, via performance studies, has enriched studies of performance outside the discipline, urging a more intensive focus on issues of embodiment and the visible evidence of culture at work in performance. At the same time, the danger of performance studies, when imported back into anthropology, is an overly reductive approach that drains artistic performance of any of its significance. Victor Turner (to whom any anthropological scholar of theatre is indebted on some level) is especially guilty of this reductive tendency. His *Anthropology of Performance* spends far more time discussing “social performance” (of which the “social drama” is the most weighty category) rather than what he calls “cultural performance” (which would include theatre). Cultural performance is given a reduction to a kind of social performance by Turner’s argument that “the major genres of cultural performance (from ritual to theatre and film) and narration (from myth to the novel) not only originate in the social drama, but also continue to draw meaning and force from the social drama” (1988, 94). Despite his argument that cultural performances “may themselves be active agencies of change,”
(1988, 24) there is little discussion of what this process might look like—which, in part, leads to the empirical, methodological, and conceptual problems discussed above.

This dissertation is invested in the idea that there is something singular about South African theatre itself as a point of ethnographic focus and that practices of theatre are worth looking at in their own right as part of an ethnographic study. Etic as well as emic understandings of performance play a role in my analysis of performances as well as rehearsals and the various exercises that support them. But performance is far more than a metaphor here— theatre itself casts light on the broader social and cultural facets of a post-Mandela South Africa, and theatre itself is a tool for crafting and shaping the kind of self that one hopes to become.

The Anthropology of Ethics

The questions with which this dissertation is fundamentally concerned—those of shaping the self and others in a post-Mandela South Africa—participate in a stream of anthropological scholarship that has called the discipline to take ethics and ethical life more seriously. In contrast to earlier anthropological and sociological accounts that reduce ethical life to the machinations of social structure (e.g. Durkheim 1953), anthropologists working in the anthropology of ethics (sometimes called moral anthropology) have argued that “the ethical dimension of social life—the fact that everyday conduct is constitutively pervaded by reflective evaluation—is irreducible” (Laidlaw 2014, 45), and that ethics is a worthwhile object of analysis in its own right. The theoretical and philosophical precedents of this steadily burgeoning stream of scholarship are diverse, drawing from figures like Aristotle, Foucault, Heidegger, Levinas, Kant, Alasdair McIntyre, and Nietzsche. The avenues for exploring ethical life are just as diverse: studies of how and why humans work to become one or another kind of subject have enriched analyses of
language (Sidnell 2010), religion (Laidlaw 1995, 2014; Robbins 2004), postcolonial development (Pandian 2011), and psychiatric care (Davis 2012) among other traditional and contemporary concerns of anthropology.

My analysis of South African theatre and ethics in a post-Mandela South Africa relies on theoretical frameworks that bear a distinctly Foucauldian stamp. In *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault’s inquiry into the history of sexuality takes a genealogical turn to examine “how, for centuries, Western man had been brought to recognize himself as a subject of desire” (1985, 6). This project, which would lead Foucault to a study of ancient Greek ethics (and eventually Roman ethics in The Care of the Self) brought him to the questions of “how, why, and in what forms was sexuality constituted as a moral domain? Why this ethical concern that was so persistent despite its varying forms and intensity? Why this ‘problematization?’” (1985, 10). For Foucault, this ultimately became a study of the “arts of existence,” the means by which individuals performed the work of transformation on themselves to order their existence in certain estimable and aesthetically valuable ways. The analytic framework that Foucault develops to probe the domain of ethics is fourfold, focusing on 1) the ethical “substance;” the part of the self that is the object of ethical work or transformation, 2) the desired end of ethical work on the self, or telos, 3) the “mode of subjectivation,” which Foucault describes elsewhere as “the way in which people are invited or incited to recognize their moral obligations” (1997a, 264), and 4) askēsis, the form of training or exercise that facilitates the work of ethics on the self. Using this fourfold analytic, Foucault investigates the cultivation of the self and the ways in which practices of ethical formation came to bear on questions of sexuality.

reworking of Foucault, Faubion (2010) argues for a more explicit emphasis on the mode of ethical judgment, which includes ethical valuation—a stipulation of who or what is the recipient of ethical regard and consideration—as well as justification—“the apparatus of the defense of ethical evaluations and ethically marked decisions” (2010, 116). Greater attention to the mode of ethical judgment allows for a deeper analysis of the specificity of the semiotics of normative criteria from one context to another, and also allows for an analysis of the dynamics between these criteria and the ethical subject who utilizes them as part of a singular ecology. Put more simply, attention to the mode of judgment allows the anthropologist of ethics to probe the ways in which ethical subjects constitute—and are constituted by—normative criteria rather than assuming that ethics is always or everywhere the same thing (2010, 69-70).

Adding a greater analytic emphasis on ethical pedagogy, Faubion also posits the category of “the mode of the determination of subjectivation” to Foucault’s framework. This category further breaks down into two areas of attention: recruitment, which describes “the conditions that encourage and compel an actor toward becoming and being an ethical subject of a qualitatively distinguishable sort,” and selection, the ways in which a subject is assigned the task of becoming one or another type of ethical subject (2011, 60). The telos of ethical activity for Foucault, broadly speaking, is the occupancy by the actor of a particular “subject position” (2010, 4). One does not, for instance, become an expert in something overnight. He or she goes through countless hours of training, practice, and whatever else may be required to acquire expertise and thus occupy the subject position of “expert.” Individuals come to occupy a particular subject position through what Foucault calls “technologies of the self,” which “permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to
attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault 1997b, 225). Even as one makes use of technologies of self to occupy a particular subject position, one does not do so alone. “It is one thing to be born a son or daughter, an aristocrat or commoner,” Faubion argues, but “it is another thing, and something always requiring the services of the pedagogue, to develop the competencies required to be good at being a son or a daughter, an aristocrat or even a commoner as the case may be” (2011, 61). In examining the processes through which an individual works toward a particular subject position, pedagogy thus occupies a central role.

The virtue of a Foucauldian framework of analysis for ethics in the context of South African theatre is, among other things, its easy fit with emic artistic conceptions of what theatre is and how artists describe the benefits they derive from it. Time and again, I heard artists speak of who they are and who they hope to become, and of the ways that theatre acts as a powerful avenue to achieve these hopes. Such projects of self-fashioning are underpinned by a variety of exercises (which Foucault calls askēsis) for both body and mind; part of an aesthetic process that is integral to the production of theatre. My South African interlocutors—as artists and as human beings—actively wrestled with the implications, the freedoms, and the constraints of the subject positions that they hoped to occupy, and the subject positions they hoped to help others occupy as well. This framework was not at odds with local understandings of ethics or artistic processes, but enriched and came alongside them. In chapter two, for example, I bring this framework alongside the figure of the *malume*—the “mother’s-brother” made famous as a term of kinship by Radcliffe-Brown—to show how, through teaching theatre to children, two men actively worked to embody this subject position despite the constraints they labored under.
Ethics, for Foucault and those who have extended his framework, is a domain of “the development of one or another competent and conscious exercise of the practice of freedom” (Faubion 2011, 36). I take seriously the challenge to extend and broaden anthropological conversations and theorizations of freedom (Laidlaw 2014), and for that reason, freedom and constraint both play central roles in the account of ethical life that unfolds throughout the dissertation. They feature most centrally in the work that artists choose to conduct on themselves and the obstacles (whether structural or interpersonal) that arise as they do so.

A condition of radical and absolute constraint marks one border of the ethical domain (Faubion 2011). Radical freedom—a complete absence of any constraint—marks another border. Empirically speaking, we are not likely to find anyone or any group possessing such freedom. At a bare minimum, ethics are undertaken with the cultural materials available at hand, in conversation with local moral frameworks and the constraints of social structure. Ethical life more broadly falls in the terrain between these two borders, and the characters in this study are situated in various locales there. No one in South Africa or elsewhere can truly be whoever they want, doing whatever they want whenever they want, but some can be more and do more than others, and can do so at a time and place of their choosing. On one level, then, a study of ethics provides a way of examining the privilege, with regard to ethical life, that white South Africans continue to enjoy, and the constraints that black South Africans continue to wrestle with. But there is far more complexity to the dynamics of freedom and constraint, as the chapters that follow will establish.

Following Foucauldian frameworks of ethics means taking the characteristics of freedom and constraint as open ethnographic questions, for neither are the same in all times and all places. I do not set out (and did not set out in the field) with the assumption that “liberal,” “anti-liberal,”
“Western,” or “non-Western” conceptions of freedom were or are operative. Nor is “metaphysical freedom” given priority over more social and tangible forms of freedom. In the field, I asked instead what freedom meant emically and in situ to the artists I studied, and I do my best to honor that same impulse here. The meaning of freedom itself is one of the fundamental questions of a post-Mandela South Africa, and for that reason it was not surprising that my interlocutors’ understandings of freedom varied widely—much more, I suspect, than they would have twenty or thirty years ago.

In a similar way, constraint emerges in all of its complexity in the ethnography that follows. At times, it is abstract, impersonal, institutional, or structural. In other cases, it comes from intimate relations of kinship and community. It is insurmountable in some places, and in others simply merits inventive forms of workaround. It is exacerbated by racial dynamics—for both white and black South Africans. On the whole, it plays a constitutive role in shaping ethical possibilities in a post-Mandela South Africa.

South Africa’s history and present are deeply animated by themes of ethics, freedom, and constraint. They are not “just under the surface” but are often in plain sight, discussed openly, accepted or rejected through local and national conversations. Apartheid, at its core, was about much more than generating and facilitating the movement of cheap labor to the industrial and urban cores of South Africa: it was also a fully-fledged model of human capabilities and human flourishing that posited differing ethical teleologies based on race (and in its practical

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10 While the phrases “human capabilities” and “human flourishing” evoke the work of both Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (1988), I do not mean here to suggest that apartheid was an extension or application of their ideas, which would be both inaccurate and anachronistic. I use the words “capabilities” and “flourishing” here because they capture something of the moral essence of apartheid: the idea that black South Africans ought not to aspire to a life beyond their alleged aptitudes; and that doing so would only confuse and frustrate them. Introducing the Bantu Education Act of 1953, for example, Hendrik Verwoerd argued that: “The Bantu must be guided to serve his community in all respects. There is no place for him in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour…For that reason it is of no avail to him to receive a training which has as its aim absorption in the
implementation, sought to prevent most of the population from undertaking the work of ethics for themselves). Post-apartheid nation-building projects like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Thabo Mbeki’s African Renaissance were put forward as alternative moral frameworks after apartheid’s demise, simultaneously promoting a set of Afrocentric virtues like *Ubuntu* and nonracial conceptions of citizenship and belonging (Bongmba 2006; Herewitz 2003). At the same time, the persistence of constraints of varying kinds—economic, racial, structural, political, kin-based—make these projects increasingly frustrating, untenable and undesirable. What emerges in their place are more diffuse understandings of freedom, leading to more diffuse possibilities for shaping and forming the self. This is the story of ethics that unfolds through the dissertation.

**Fieldsites and Characters**

The fieldwork for this dissertation was conducted from October 2013 to September of 2014, along with two months of preliminary research in the summer of 2012, and was based primarily at two fieldsites. The first was Dobsonville, a residential neighborhood of Soweto in Guateng province, where I conducted research for approximately six months. Along with Dobsonville, I interacted with a number of artists in and around the Johannesburg metropolitan area, including the nearby townships of Alexandra (which bordered Johannesburg) and Katlehong (some 30 kilometers Southeast of Johannesburg). The bulk of my time, however, was spent in Dobsonville, where I interviewed, observed, and sometimes even performed alongside members of the Khulumani Forum Theatre Group, described in chapters one and two. For three

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European community while he cannot and will not be absorbed there. Up until now he has been subjected to a school system which drew him away from his own community and practically misled him by showing him the green pasture of the European but still not allow him to graze there” (quoted in Feinstein 2005, 159).
months (the bulk of one academic semester), I was embedded at a second primary fieldsite within the Department of Drama at the University Currently Known as Rhodes, where I attended lectures (and gave a few of my own), observed rehearsals and performances, and interviewed students and faculty. The two primary fieldsites—one in Soweto, one in Grahamstown; one in a context marked by what many would call “community theatre,” the other an elite and nationally recognized theatre department—allowed me to probe a range of different attitudes and approaches to theatre, as well as a range of attitudes and approaches to shaping the self. Observations of the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown—a yearly event that draws theatre artists from all over the country and elsewhere—brings together these diverse approaches to art and ethics, and served as a more ephemeral third fieldsite.

Like a series of short plays, each of the chapters in this study focus narrowly on one or two theatre artists to tell stories that examine different facets of ethical life in South Africa. My focus on specific persons, broadly speaking, reflects an ethnographic commitment to contextualizing larger social structures, histories, and processes through the lived experiences of the people embedded in them. As a study of ethics in particular, it also reflects commitment to a “first-person perspective” in discussions of ethics (Mattingly 2014) that privileges the subjective and intersubjective facets of ethical life, in contrast to ethics understood deontologically (and thus impersonally) as a series of rules, codes, or duties.

My discussions of ethics in the chapters that follow are neither abstract nor particularly prescriptive but focus on the concrete and the embodied. At the same time, the constraints and freedoms encountered throughout this work involve larger histories and structures. The characters are nodal points through which the workings of structure, history, politics, constraint, and freedom unfold through ethical life. In this sense, my focus on a smaller number of persons
also shares something of a theatrical impulse: to use characters that tell stories with themes that have a relevance that transcends any particular person.

My focus on specific actors is also underpinned by a theme of pedagogy that threads its way throughout the work. It attempts, on one level, to honor the pedagogical role that my interlocutors played in teaching me about life in South Africa, and what it means to live well there. The framing of their words and actions is undeniably my own, but the lessons they taught me are undeniably theirs. At the same time, several figures in the work are also chosen for their status as exemplars (Humphrey 1997) who model particular forms of living and being in the world. Much of what they exemplify is worthy of esteem; yet there is, as I learned from one interlocutor, a certain power in the study of negative exemplars—an impulse I follow in chapter five. Collectively, they are compelling pedagogues whose voices should not be obscured by abstraction to broader levels of scope.

The Chapters that Follow

The first chapter of the dissertation takes up varying orientations to and understandings of politics among theatre artists in South Africa. Taking as a point of departure a question posed somewhat insensitively by a Norwegian visitor to Soweto—“why do you keep voting for the ANC?—I trace the history of Black Consciousness theatre into the present through a study of the Khulumani Forum Theatre Group (KFTG). The members of KFTG, I argue, understand freedom and constraint in ways that only involve a sideways glance at politics. Although they participate in a lineage of theatre that is manifestly political in its origins (Theatre of the

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11 In a similar way, Johannes Fabian was inspired to conduct the ethnographic project that would result in *Power and Performance* after hearing the phrase “*le pouvoir se mange entier* (power is eaten whole)” in casual conversation (Fabian 1990, 3).
Oppressed), they also bear the legacies of the Theatre of Black Consciousness, for which the work of ethics was central. Unlike their Black Consciousness predecessors, however, they do not seek the transformation of their audiences but instead their own self-transformation—it is through this avenue, I argue, that freedom is found for them. The second part of the chapter transitions to a radically different context to examine practices of Physical Theatre through the First Physical Theatre Company, housed in the department of drama at the UCKAR. Like KFTG, the First Physical Theatre Company eschews conventional understandings of politics. In this context, they do so in favor of a more “intimate revolt” that opens new spaces of freedom for the body. In examining this approach to politics, I also probe the limitations of Physical Theatre as a genre that, at this point, remains mostly white and elite. Both forms of theatre, I argue, suggest that conceptions of “the political” are undergoing a shift for artists and South Africans more broadly.

Continuing my comparative use of two fieldsites, chapter two presents two case studies of kinship and political economy in the context of the theatre industry. Theatre, I argue, is marked by kin-based relationships that substantively shape the ways in which artists relate to each other and to the communities they hope to help. At the same time, competition for government funding of theatre, a process marked by corruption and nepotism, puts immense pressure on these forms of kinship. In the first case I examine, the strain of living out the role of malume (the mother’s brother) led to the dissolution of a children’s theatre program, as the search for funding pushed two men to increasingly present themselves as entrepreneurs rather than as artists and community development workers. As they did so, the original impetus for their project—grounded in fostering kinship—became increasingly obscured. The second case analyzes a white South African who played the role of “mother” to a community theatre
company in Grahamstown. The sense of frustration and exhaustion that she came under while playing this role showcases what I call “ethical fatigue”: a state of resignation characterized by tenacious clinging to a role that seems to make one a worse person rather than a better one. These examples, I argue, show that in a post-Mandela South Africa, kinship is constituted by forms of constraint that bear an uncanny resemblance to South Africa’s colonial and apartheid past. Entanglements between past and present complicate the idea that South Africa is a “new” country after apartheid. Significant forms of constraint—economic, political, and cultural—weigh heavily on projects that would seek to create new forms of family.

Chapter three puts epistemology and expertise in dialog with freedom and constraint in an institutional, academic setting. Agon: Conflict and Catharsis by Athina Vahla was a theatre production that cast a local boxer and his coach in the central roles. Their training activities and exercises were choreographed artistically, and became a ground for reflection on themes of power, discipline, and the shaping of self. As a theatrical study of boxing using real boxers, Agon was intended to break epistemic and institutional barriers to become a broader interdisciplinary study of the work’s central themes. But institutional constraints at the UCKAR meant that the event itself was poorly attended, and the panel discussions meant to be part of the work played to mostly empty rooms. Drawing on my observations and participation in the work, I examine how institutional and professional boundaries work to police forms of thinking that seek to cross disciplinary and racial borders, and reflect on the implications of this fact with regard to student protests that are currently unfolding across the country.

In the fourth chapter, I take up the question of pedagogy in spaces of theatre. Post-Mandela South Africa has seen the surprising emergence of counter-pedagogues: teachers who deny they are teaching and instead strive to cede control of the learning environment to students.
This counter-pedagogy, I argue, emerges out of the dual legacies of white paternalism on the one hand, and the more recent emergence of “top-down” political structures led by corrupt and nepotistic black elites. My examination of pedagogy unfolds through a study of two teachers, both located in Grahamstown. The first, who is white, draws on a model of pedagogy shaped in the context of a totalitarian Europe and the French student uprisings of 1968. His style is counter-pedagogical to the extent that it cedes control of the learning environment to students after a set of minimalist instructions, and in this way, allows students to engage in their own forms of exploration and contemplation. The second pedagogue, who is black, denies that he is a teacher and does not want to be seen as a role model. His form of counter-pedagogy is rooted in a view of freedom that denies the reality of any constraint: he claims to be self-made, answers to no one, and claims no mentors. I situate his counter-pedagogical stance in the broader context of education in South Africa, which in recent years has been a site of protest as South African students fight to reject a past grounded in racialism and hierarchy.

The fifth and final chapter of the dissertation engages the subject of whiteness in South Africa through an analysis of the Exhibit series by white South African artist Brett Bailey. Exhibit A and Exhibit B were re-creations of the nineteenth century “ethnographic exhibitions,” where individuals were brought from remote corners of the world to the centers of Europe to be put on display as exotic specimens. Bailey’s recreation of these “human zoos” cast black actors as specimens on display, and despite his stated antiracist intentions, the work provoked intense controversy when it traveled outside of South Africa. I examine the debates surrounding the Exhibit series with attention to how understandings of Bailey and his antiracist whiteness continually change as the work travels. Far from being monolithic, I argue, white antiracist
subject positions do not travel well—a fact that has significance not only for Bailey but for the discipline of anthropology as well.

Throughout the dissertation, dialectics of freedom and constraint reveal the historical entanglements and contradictory impulses at the heart of South African ethical life. I conclude that apartheid and colonial legacies continue to shape the ways that South Africans shape themselves and care for others. At the same time, I argue that these forms of constraint, in the context of a post-Mandela South Africa, give rise to new subjectivities, new forms of freedom, and new ways of answering the question of what it means to live a good life. South Africa continues to be site where subjects across the racial and class spectrum pursue the conscious exercise of freedom, the understandings of which are constantly in flux.
Chapter 1
Aesthetics in Black and White:
Politics, Ethics, and Freedom in Post-Mandela South Africa.

Introduction; or, “Why Keep Voting for Them?”

Dobsonville is a fairly large neighborhood of Soweto, situated to the west of Orlando, the township suburb that Nelson Mandela once called home. Much of Dobsonville, and Extension Three in particular, is lined with brick houses in neat and orderly rows; not the “matchbox” houses of the apartheid era, but rather the slightly larger RDP houses of the early post-apartheid years. These houses lend a suburban and even middle-class air to Extension Three where I spent most of my time, a stone’s throw from the more congested streets and corrugated iron domiciles of Zola township. Extension Three is as flat and dusty as any part of Soweto, but the streets where I spent much of my time were—apart from the locked and walled gates around many houses—not unlike an American suburb. The street that many of my informants called home was a short walk from sprawling parks, a vibrant community center, and a strip mall—complete with a Cell Phone Repair Shop, a grocery store, and several clothing boutiques.

On a warm afternoon in November, the side room of Umthombo Wolwazi Hall in Extension Three was unusually full. A group of white Norwegian teenagers had come streaming out of two large white tour vans just minutes before, part of a cultural exchange that would facilitate discussion between Norwegian and South African youth around common areas of concern. The South African youth, under the banner of the Khulumani Forum Theatre Group (hereafter KFTG), were excited to introduce the Theatre of the Oppressed to their Norwegian
counterparts, and also hoped to learn strategies from the Norwegians about how to resolve issues they might have in common.

After the requisite introductions and some icebreaking games, the discussions began in earnest with an introduction to Forum Theatre by Sam, who had been designated a representative of the group from Soweto. Forum Theatre, he explained, is a part of the Theatre of the Oppressed, which comes from the work of Augusto Boal in Brazil. As part of the Theatre of the Oppressed, Forum Theatre engages oppression at multiple levels, both visible and invisible, wherever it is found and in whatever capacity. In its relentless interrogation of oppression, Forum Theatre invites members of the audience to come on stage and change the course of a scene being depicted, empowering people to recognize and fight their own oppression. In doing so, it turns “spectators” into “spect-actors” (Boal 2008, xxi), making audiences active agents of change rather than passive consumers. Sam’s explanation of Forum Theatre was received with polite but slightly bored attention by the Norwegian youth. It seemed they had not heard of it or of Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed before, although they seemed impressed with Sam’s claim that Khulumani was the only group in South Africa practicing...
Forum Theatre.\textsuperscript{12} Once Sam’s introduction was over, the Norwegians were free to ask any questions they wanted.

The group’s chaperone, a middle-aged white man, began questioning the South African youth about oppression. “Do you still feel oppressed,” he wondered, “even though apartheid ended nineteen years ago?” Answers to this question—and the forms of oppression identified—were varied. Sam replied immediately that he in particular did not feel oppressed, but he was quickly admonished by Nondi, another leader of the group, to let others talk. Some felt oppressed because the only black South Africans who benefitted from the end of apartheid were black politicians and business elites. Others found oppression in more nebulous places: through mass media, which made the youth emulate Euro-American culture rather than South African culture, or through issues like teenage pregnancy and drug use. Not much has changed, Nondi argued by way of summary, for South African youth since the end of apartheid.

Continuing his line of questioning, the Norwegian man got slightly more pointed: “How do the youth make themselves agents of change? You have to take it upon yourselves. We’re oppressing ourselves by not doing anything about it,” he philosophized. Continuing to dominate the conversation, he worked his way to the topic of the upcoming elections and the question of why black South Africans continue to feel the need to vote for the ANC. “If they haven’t made your lives any better, why keep voting for them? Your vote is your power, and you can remove them from office if they’re not helping you. Isn’t that the problem? That you continue to vote for them?” Though the conversation would take various other twists and turns, including a brief excursus into the problems faced by Norwegian youth—too many choices about what to do with

\textsuperscript{12} The claim that KFTG is the only Forum Theatre group in South Africa is false (I did encounter others), though they may have been the only Forum Theatre group in Soweto.
one’s life, too little trust of others—the leader’s interrogation continued. Blind faith in tradition and elders, according to him, seemed to be the sole cause of continued support for the ANC. If youth simply stopped voting for them, things would get better.

I found the Norwegian man to be incredibly obnoxious, particularly in his presumption that he had singlehandedly arrived at a solution for oppression among youth in Soweto. He made it sound so easy—just stop voting ANC—as though it had never occurred to anyone before he arrived in South Africa. More fundamentally, he had missed the point of their diverse answers to the question of oppression, only one of which had mentioned (and indirectly at that) the ruling ANC. The issue of oppression could not be so easily reduced to this sphere of politics, nor could the promise of freedom.

His naivety makes, in retrospect, a certain amount of sense. During apartheid, art had been explicitly identified as “a weapon of struggle” (Peffer 2009, 79), a declaration that was less a prescription for artists than a recognition of an orientation toward politics that theatre artists had already had for years. Within black theatre circles, the criteria of a work’s “relevance” to current social and political struggles meant increasing boredom and frustration with artists that refused to reckon with the realities of apartheid, and increasing condemnations of artists who imagined that art and politics could be neatly separated (Kavanagh 1984, 2016). And while it is true that after apartheid, many artists felt like “a boxer in the ring without an opponent” (van Heerden 2011, 95), it is also true that the tradition of Protest Theatre continues to thrive—culture stalwarts like Mike van Graan now condemn the excesses and greed of the ANC and the failures of promised reconciliation. In the context of KFTG in particular, it makes sense to anticipate that a group aligning themselves with the Theatre of the Oppressed—a tradition deeply critical of entrenched power structures and deeply committed to the radical democratization of the public
sphere—would cast more than a sideways glance at the electoral politics of the day. To frame the white group leader’s reaction more charitably, one might say that discourses of freedom and constraint seemed, confusingly for him, to be operative on a terrain to which they did not seem to belong.

This chapter is an attempt to make sense of this moment, and more broadly, to trace some of the aesthetic contours of a post-Mandela South Africa through an ethnographic examination of South African theatre. The theatre of post-Mandela South Africa is, I argue, undeniably political. At the same time, artistic orientations to the political—and artistic conceptions of the political itself—continue to mutate and shift. Art is no longer a weapon of struggle. Rather, it is a weapon of struggles, and these unfold simultaneously on a number of disparate planes that, at any given moment, might not have anything to do with who currently holds a particular office. Contemporary South African theatre, I argue, problematizes a more intimate form of politics concerned with the self and the body. The revolutions that it proposes are not merely metaphorical but are active processes of work and ethical concern. Paradoxically, these politics are not primarily aimed at audiences. They manifest themselves most powerfully in moments of production, behind the scenes, before audiences can heap either praise or scorn upon a finished product.

The first part of this chapter ruminates more deeply on the original mystery—why the sideways or passing glance at politics?—with an examination of black aesthetics and the ways in which it is taken up by the members of KFTG. Their politics, I argue, constitute a shift from the politics of apartheid to the governance of the self—a stance that is simultaneously rooted in philosophies of Black Consciousness while moving beyond it in crucial ways. But these aesthetic politics are not the sole province of so-called “township” or “community” theatre, designations
which are often used pejoratively to index a hackneyed or lackluster approach to theatre production and performance. They are also found in elite spaces of theatre, where mostly white (and a few select black) artists train in techniques of more European origin. For that reason I examine, in the second part of the chapter, the proposed revolts of Physical Theatre, a genre that is primarily white and primarily elite both in its production and its consumption. Both of these groups mediate the dialectics of freedom and constraint on terrains that would be recognizable to apartheid-era artists, though their aesthetics and politics are the product of a post-Mandela South Africa.

**Black Consciousness, Black Aesthetics**

The history of Black Consciousness as a philosophical, political, and religious movement is well-known. Forged by black South African university students who had grown weary of the complacent liberalism of their white peers in student government—particularly in the white insistence that student life was separate from both race and national politics—it was a radical withdrawal of blacks from white political discourses into spaces of black self-affirmation (Magaziner 2012). For Steve Biko, the movement’s most visible leader and philosopher, Black Consciousness as a movement “takes cognizance of the deliberateness of God's plan in creating black people black. It seeks to infuse the black community with a new-found pride in themselves, their efforts, their value systems, their culture, their religion and their outlook to life” (Biko 1987, 49). Drawing on Fanonian psychoanalysis, Biko articulated an ethics of freedom that had as its starting point freedom for the black psyche; it was “less about explicit resistance to apartheid and more about fundamental ethical questions regarding how one should live in service of the future” (Magaziner 2012, 9). These questions were to be worked out by black South
Africans in black organizations on behalf of other blacks. It was a rejection not only of Bantu education\textsuperscript{13} but also of the paternalism of liberal whiteness.

As a philosophy, a political movement, and a theological intervention, Black Consciousness was a rigorously “contextual” movement: both pragmatically and theoretically, it drew impetus from the daily struggles of black South Africans living under apartheid, from indigenous religious and philosophical traditions, and from liberatory movements across Africa and abroad with a special focus for its relevance to the South African condition.\textsuperscript{14} The merger between lived black experience and black liberatory philosophies would bring with it a number of seismic intellectual shifts, particularly in theology, where the movement arguably had its greatest theoretical and scholarly traction.\textsuperscript{15}

The “Black” in Black Consciousness had a broad definition: “those who are by law or tradition politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in the South African society and identifying themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realisation of their aspirations” (Biko 1987, 48). This could, and did, encompass Indians and “coloured”\textsuperscript{16} South Africans as black. At the same time, being black was not necessarily a matter of pigmentation but instead, for Biko and others, “a reflection of a mental attitude” (1987, 48).

\textsuperscript{13} The Bantu Education Act of 1953 stipulated a system of racial segregation in schooling. Primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions were designated for the exclusive use of particular groups and segregated. Unsurprisingly, education for Black South Africans was oriented toward their participation in heavy manual and domestic labor. Paradoxically, “Blacks only” universities would also become the birthplace of Black Consciousness philosophy (see Magaziner 2012).

\textsuperscript{14} Biko’s writings (1978), for instance, draw not only on Fannon but also Black American intellectuals like W.E.B. Du Bois and James Baldwin.

\textsuperscript{15} The “Kairos Document,” for instance, drew on Black Theology to critique both “State Theology,” and “Church Theology,” condemning the Reformed Church’s endorsement of apartheid and calling on Christians to commit to the work of liberation (see Villa-Vicencio 1986).

\textsuperscript{16} “Coloured” was a nebulous apartheid-era racial designation that indexed South Africans who were not identifiably white, black, Indian, or Chinese. Although some “coloured” South Africans are of South Asian decent, the category was also applicable to bi-racial South Africans. I use the term in quotes here out of deference to coloured South Africans who opt to problematize the arbitrary (though not insignificant) nature of their racial position under apartheid.
African, Indian, or “coloured” South Africans who were hopelessly subservient to the command and paternalism of whites were designated by Black Consciousness activists as “non-white” rather than “black” in the movement, a distinction that indexed a failure of mental self-liberation. Blackness was earned through ethical work on the self, culminating in an affirmation of oneself and one’s community.

Given the well-trodden history of Black Consciousness and its influence on South Africa’s intellectual and spiritual history, scholarship on the aesthetics of Black Consciousness is fairly sparse, especially where theatre is concerned. This is certainly not because Black Consciousness failed to have implications for art in general and theatre in particular. Plays like *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* were and are repeatedly praised as paragons of a truly Black Theatre that evinced the liberatory ethic and liberatory consciousness that Biko strove for. Yet aesthetics never quite received the same formalization and programmatic articulation that philosophy and theology did.

The reasons why Black Consciousness birthed Black Theology and not also a programmatic Black Aesthetics are perhaps overdetermined. Biko, who had written at length on theology and other topics, noted only in passing that “the adoption of black theatre and drama is one such important innovation we need to encourage and to develop” (1985, 96). The articulation of a liberatory theatre would be the task, then, of others. But the theatre of Black Consciousness was suppressed by apartheid authorities almost as quickly as it was produced. For example, *Shezi*, a play produced by the Durban-based People’s Experimental Theatre, was repeatedly banned, their equipment confiscated, and their artists charged under the terrorism act.

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18 Coplan (1985) points out that the African National Theatre was working out this liberatory and radical theatre as early as 1939 (1985:204), though the group did not last long.
Township authorities, acting as an added local layer of censorship, could demand review of scripts before plays were performed and deny the use of performance halls, which were an extreme scarcity at any rate (Kavanagh 2016, 245). Performance events of any kind, in fact, were completely forbidden at various points when the townships were flaring with acts of open resistance, as in the Soweto uprisings (Coplan 1985).

Working under the threat of a ban or worse, artists wrote few explicitly political scripts (many works were improvised), and articulations of the aesthetics of Black Consciousness were scattered and fragmented at best.

Scholars of Black Theatre in South Africa have had to patch together, in retrospect, the aesthetics of the movement using a few surviving scripts, scattered reviews, and material from the pages of S’ketsh, the sole black publication devoted exclusively to the criticism and development of Black Theatre. For Kavanagh (1985, 2016), who founded and maintained editorship of S’ketsh for five of its seven issues, “the theatre of Black Consciousness followed the same pattern as the strategy that the movement had evolved for the resistance of cultural domination and liberation in general—withdrawal from association with whites, the creation of new structures and the conscientization of black people” (1985, 164). This is a fairly broad generalization to be sure, and much more tidy than the reality—the Black Theatre movement was characterized by a wealth of debates and approaches to theatre making with only occasional hints at a consensus position on any particular debate.

The Black Theatre movement’s orientation to whiteness is a case in point. Much like the broader student movement, the impulse to sever ties with white patrons, white directors, and white artists was certainly present for some. Those who chose to collaborate with white artists and/or directors could be labeled as “schizophrenics,” “guinea pigs,” or even as “non-whites”
Other artists did not find it necessary to completely sever ties with white artists. “Black Consciousness is not a matter of kicking the whiteman in the pants,” Adam Small argued, but more a matter of “not having our thoughts determined by the whiteman anymore” (Kavanagh 2016, 58). Some also chose to remain linked to whites for strategic reasons. An unsigned “Note on Black Theatre” in S’ketsh made the case that “there is still a lot we have to steal from the white man. The white man has to be used until such time as we are ready to break off completely from ‘white exploitation’…Let us use him while he uses us” (Kavanagh 2016, 10). Even the question of performing Black Theatre for white audiences was an open one.

Despite the heterodoxy on this and other issues, common points of agreement on Black Aesthetics did emerge in the pages of S’ketsh and in the work of black playwrights. Aesthetically, Black Theatre “makes no prescription about form, other than that function should determine form (Kavanagh 1985, 166). There was certainly an ideal way to present Black Theatre: the movement celebrated and frequently called for a return to indigenous performance forms, particularly those that faithfully re-created the traditional kraal and other sacred spaces where indigenous performances have historically unfolded. This ideal form, however, was also acknowledged as somewhat impractical and unfeasible given the constraints of township theatre halls and the difficulty of touring a work that called for intensive stage construction (Kavanagh 1985, 167). Most of the time—and in the more celebrated works like Sizwe Bansi, the theatre of Black Consciousness was a “theatre of the dispossessed” in which artists worked with minimal props and staging, emphasizing movement and gesture instead (Barrios 2008, 42).

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19 Some S’ketsh articles, for example, included full of diagrams and drawings of indigenous forms of performance and staging. See Kavanagh 2016:114-15.
While aesthetic form was less prescribed and often contingent on the vicissitudes of available resources, function—what a work should set out to accomplish rhetorically—was much more clearly defined in the movement. The function of theatre, for the theatre of Black Consciousness, was the psychological liberation of the black mind, which occurs through an affirmation of the black self and community. This “aesthetics of self-affirmation” meant that “the artist’s responsibility lies upon the reconstruction of distorted images to show the more diverse and complex gamut of characters and characteristics that are a reflection of life, such as change and movement, and not static stereotypes” (Barrios 2008, 49). This aesthetic, of course, presupposes an artist who is already liberated. “The playwrights have to be proud of their blackness first, then become playwrights”—only after doing so can they properly respond to the “moral duty to create theatre that depicts the people’s struggle in terms of black awareness and to instill in them a sense of pride,” thus liberating their consciousness (Kavanagh 1985, 171). A truly Black Theatre would be the product of a truly black (rather than “non-white”) mind, and would affirm positive images of blackness rather than harmful stereotypes, continually pushing toward affirmations of blackness.

The importance of this aesthetic principle is apparent in the increasing boredom, throughout the 1970s in particular, with the “Township Musical.” Many of these productions were light-hearted affairs that included singing and dancing with little or no overt political content. Gibson Kente, often recognized as the “father of township theatre” was thus taken to task not only for his failure to interface with S’ketsh and other black media outlets but also for the failure of some of his plays to have anything of relevance to say to black South Africans
Mainstream township musicals like the wildly successful *Ipi Tombi* often only served to portray happy and dancing natives for the delight of white audiences rather than for black empowerment, harming the image of black South Africans at home and also abroad. “Thank goodness *Sizwe Bansi* was in London shortly afterwards to correct the false impression that blacks in South Africa can only sing and dance,” one *S’ketsh* reviewer argued (Kavangh 2016, 145). Even when works in this genre did have some political relevance, the genre itself was becoming boring and losing its utility in the work of liberation. Black theatre critics and intellectuals thus increasingly came to distinguish not only black from “non-white” artists, but also between properly Black Theatre and “theatre presented by blacks”: “the former is committed to the creation of a revolutionary mood and sees black liberation as a priority. The latter does not” (Kavanagh 1985, 163).

The theatre of Black Consciousness, then, functioned as a mode of subjectivation, drawing black South Africans into an ethics of affirmation and providing a justification for those ethics through theatre. Its ultimate aim was the liberation of black conscious thought from its enslavement to white domination, primarily through celebrations of blackness and the awakening of the truly black political mind. Both of these objectives were accomplished in moments of

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20 In response to this criticism, and especially after the commercial success of *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, Kente did produce subsequent shows that ventured to comment more explicitly on politics, though his attitude to political theatre remained ambivalent (particularly after his arrest) See Coplan 1985.

21 In the Winter 1975 issue of *S’ketsh*, one artist devised a drinking game that would challenge contestants to guess what township musical production a particular photo was from. Such a game would be hard because they all looked exactly the same. “You won’t miss the old reliable trademarks,” he argues: “the rude, tough-talking cop, the slick, two-faced preacher, the rubbish bin and a raggedly-dressed man eating from it, a coffin and the ever present cemetery sequence with the agape singers, grouped in different incongruous poses, faces contorted in faked agony, mouths screwed to unbelievable shapes, eyes bulging almost out of their sockets, hands stiffly and tightly clasped, some held appealingly, heads lifted to the sky in prayers and the eyes looking up to the ceiling…If you have seen one show in Soweto, you have seen them all!” (Kavanagh 2016:219).

22 Foucault explains the “mode of subjectivation” as “the way in which the individual establishes his relation to the rule and recognizes himself as obliged to put it into practice” (1985:27). Ideally, the theatre of Black Consciousness was aimed at such a purpose, getting people to recognize and actively work against their own psychological enslavement through the radical affirmation of blackness.
performance, and these performances required crafting by artists who were themselves liberated. The commitment to a liberated form of consciousness and detraction from this ideal in performance marked the boundaries of Black Consciousness as an aesthetic.

*Aesthetics of the self in Soweto*

The months I spent alongside KFTG revealed a group that bears the legacy of Black Theatre in Soweto. In many ways, they worked as a group to carry that legacy forward by striving to raise awareness on important issues within their communities and neighborhoods. They wanted to empower the residents of their neighborhoods with knowledge of how to access government services, devised pieces about the reintegration of convicts after prison, and constantly spoke out against xenophobia. At the same time, the governance of self frequently overrode the governance of others; it was a telos toward which the members of KFTG were constantly striving.

The core of Forum Theatre training and every subsequent rehearsal included physical and mental exercises as well as intensive discussions. In addition to complex forms of stretching, the group began each session with a series of games that were designed to build group cohesion, mental stamina, and spatial awareness. Group members might, for instance, face each other in pairs and...
mirror each other’s movements, or walk together in a straight line with their eyes closed. These exercises were joined to a regimen of study and analysis: any topic being addressed by the group, whether xenophobia or domestic violence, would include a series of discussions among members of the group and research into local news stories. Forum Theatre, for the group, involved continual training for both body and mind, and their art form involved not only physical but also philosophical exertion.

These exercises, games, and conversations were what the group talked about most often as they reflected on the ways that theatre had shaped them. I consistently heard compelling stories of a before and after, narratives of a past broken or incomplete self that had been made more whole or that had transcended, to some degree, a set of imperfections. “At the time the forum theatre training was about to start,” one man told me, “I lost it by that time. Lost my character, lost so many things…I got, from the first day, the satisfaction that I had wanted for a long, long time.” Forum theatre had altered his once introverted nature: “I would never greet a stranger. It was within me that I would never talk to or greet a stranger. Even when I go to shop and they say ‘hey, can I help you?’ I would say no. Not because I didn’t want them to help me, but because I was not open to the social life. So I started to be open to social life. Within a week, we were like brothers and sisters. It made me motivated.” This was a common narrative thread among members of the group. Another man told me he used to be “too shy” and “ask too many questions: ‘is it perfect? Is it right? Is it suitable?’” The man who trained him in forum theatre told him: “No. You are good as you are. As long as you gather information, and become a better person every day by learning.” This brand of theatre had awakened the members of KFTG to their own confidence and potential.
For other members of the group, forum theatre had been a crucial awakening to the ways in which they oppress others. One member of the group, who regularly depicts “the oppressor” in the group’s productions, told me that it caused him to realize that he acted oppressively toward the women in his life. “If I felt like beating a woman I used to do that. Since I am doing this thing, that is a change. Because the questions I get from the audience are tough ones. When I respond to them, I have to respond in character but the person responding is the real me. Then I realize…this is not good.” Playing a variety of characters not only taught the men about themselves but helped them become more empathetic than before, and more conscious of what oppression looks like.

In the language of Black Consciousness, Forum Theatre was making them more fully aware of the complex forms of oppression they suffered and afflicted on others; more caring toward their community, who they hoped to help, educate, and mentor; more proud of themselves and more eager to keep learning and growing. Beyond their training in the original workshops, none of these benefits were bestowed on them. They were hard fought and earned through substantive work on themselves.

As they continued to engage issues of oppression and worked to expand their own knowledge, working to raise the consciousness of others would be the next logical step in the trajectory of Black Consciousness aesthetics. To an extent, the group certainly embarked down this path. Numerous performances, many of them occurring outside with few props or scenery, played in various parts of Soweto. For International Women’s Day in March of 2013, for example, the group gathered at Park Station Bridge in central Johannesburg for a performance that depicted domestic abuse. Passersby stopped to watch the show and comment on the images the actors were depicting, and were invited to re-arrange the bodies of the actors in ways that
changed the scene. The group also conducted a series of performances on the importance of
ing voting on behalf of the Independent Electoral Commission in 2014, and gave various
presentations through the Drama For Life program at University of Witwatersrand.

Such performances were, however, sparse. Logistical difficulties—primarily having to do
with funding to transport group members from far-flung corners of Soweto—made consistent
performances difficult. Plans for appearances and performances could not get traction, and the
membership of the group dwindled. The group I met once I arrived in 2013 was substantively
smaller than the same group a year ago. Yet this lack of performance momentum didn’t seem to
matter much to the group’s core members. Forum Theatre, for them, was certainly not a vehicle
to riches or fame. But I found a stronger claim to be true as well: contact with the public through
performance (to whatever end) was subordinate to what performance did for themselves as
artists. Theatre is, for them, a technology of the self—a means through which members strive
toward the subject positions they hope to embody. This processes does involve performing for
others. But favorable audience reception—or having any audience at all, for that matter—seemed
almost incidental.

Just over a week after the death of Nelson Mandela, for instance, I joined members of
KFTG on Vilakazi Street outside of Nelson Mandela’s former residence—now a historical
monument and tourist attraction. There, the group hoped to commemorate Madiba’s\textsuperscript{23} legacy
with a series of performances that would pay tribute to him and call attention to current sources
of oppression facing ordinary black South Africans. While the group had originally intended to
perform early in the evening, their performance did not begin in earnest until after nine. The hour
was late, in more ways than one—the street was empty of the constant stream of mourners and

\textsuperscript{23} Nelson Mandela’s clan name; a term of endearment and affection.
celebrants that had flooded Vilakazi Street for the last week, and the departure of media lighting some days before had brought the street back to the much dimmer glow of a few street lights. Foot traffic had been reduced to residents and the occasional tourist frequenting the shebeens (informal, unlicensed taverns) and restaurants that line the street.

The group did its best to adjust to the darkness, and I joined them in creating a series of images that would depict, in turn, an image of violent xenophobia, followed by a gathering around the body of Nelson Mandela and a quiet hymn in tribute to him. One man, acting as the facilitator, attempted to draw audiences in and begin dialogue and conversations on the images, inviting, as usual, people to join or change the images they were seeing. But the attention of weekend revelers was hard to come by. Indeed, only two women stopped to engage our group, and only then to try and determine how I, as a white person, found myself in Soweto on a weekend night. One of them promptly lost interest to answer a call on her cell phone. The other politely listened to the facilitator’s explanation, but seemed uninterested in participating or dialoging about the image of violence we were trying to portray.

I remember vividly the frustration I felt that day: the sense that the performance was a day late and a dollar (or rand) short. Had the group done this same performance a week before, or even four days before, and several hours earlier in the day, there would have been a completely different crowd with a much more receptive attitude. They likely could have generated some really interesting conversations and attention for their work. Instead, I felt, we were performing in the dark to an audience more interested in drinking. The performance, in my mind, was not at all a successful one.

The members of the group felt differently, and were not at all fazed by the lack of any audience participation. “We are artists,” one of them told me, “we have to get out there and
perform.” They we happy that they had done so, and felt they had done well. Far more important than any visible impact on the public was the occurrence of the performance in the first place, and their virtuosity in performing. Those were reasons for celebrating. We did so into the late hours of the night, as the once-liminal spaces of Vilakazi Street and Nelson Mandela’s house continued to cede ground to typical weekend activities.

Outside of rehearsals and the occasional performance, members of the group poured significant time and creative energy into pedagogical activities—particularly training others in the principles and techniques of Forum Theatre in local schools and, at one point, a nearby prison. They might perform for purposes of demonstration, but many of these visits would spend far more time on the kinds of games and exercises that the group regularly practices in rehearsals. Rather than delivering a performance, they wanted to deliver a method of self-cultivation.

The members of KFTG understand themselves to be artists. They pride themselves in identifying as such, and consistently work to be better at it. Yet KFTG’s brand of theatre constitutes an odd aesthetic indeed: not at all commercially viable, and not primarily aimed at audiences. Theatre production (processes of devising plays and rehearsing) is where they feel most connected to the ways in which Forum Theatre as an art form makes a tangible difference in their lives. Performance is not the primary mode through which the group works toward liberating others, but instead via pedagogy, through which they impart a set of exercises and techniques for forming and shaping the self. Performances do happen and audiences do matter, but only to an extent. They are further opportunities to work toward the more robust occupation of an artistic identity.
These artists, of course, find themselves in a political environment that is substantively different than the Black Consciousness artists of the apartheid era. Bannings and arrests do not loom over them for performing, and oppression is no longer the province of a system of legally instituted white supremacy but something more nebulous and multifaceted; something that unfolds in a variety of scenarios for a variety of reasons. Oppression can take the form of a husband beating his wife, a township resident attacking an African migrant, from Euro-American standards of beauty and taste that put pressure on the youth to give up their “South African culture,” or from local (ANC) leaders who need to be held accountable. Oppression, if anything, has not gone away but has become much more diffuse in a post-Mandela South Africa.

“Isn’t that the problem? That you continue voting for them?”

To respond to the Norwegian group leader in a word, no. Or in two words: not necessarily. The supposition that the ANC could potentially operate an oppressive political regime is not mistaken. Indeed, members of KFTG were not unaware of problems like corruption, nepotism, and the failure to deliver basic municipal services in some areas—we talked about these issues often. It is also not mistaken to assume that electoral politics can be one mechanism of dissent to give voice to those who feel a sense of oppression. The ascendance of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party and the recent loss of ANC municipal control of nearby Johannesburg are two examples, although the governance of the newly elected Democratic Alliance party in that city remains to be seen. The fundamental errors of the Norwegian team leader were in his reduction of oppression to the sphere of (conventional) politics, and in his reduction of freedom to the civic exercise of voting. Electoral politics are important to be sure, but are far from the only or even the most important terrain on which the dialectics of freedom and constraint unfold.
The freedoms that the group seeks are as diverse as the constraints they encounter, for if oppression comes in many guises, so does the state of having transcended that oppression. One constraint with which multiple members of KFTG have had to reckon is the expectation of gainful employment. Multiple men in the group, that is, had been subjected to varying levels of censure and disappointment from families who feel they were failing to provide income. “This thing that you are doing is wasting your time,” one man recalls his father saying. “You should be working there in my company. By now, you would be in a position that would give you a better salary.” He had not only passed up a job in his father’s company but also at a local grocery store. “I had to go with what I love, which is art,” he argued. But he and other members of the group were continually pressured by their families. “Because I’m not getting any income now, they see me as no one,” another member of the group told me. “In order for older people to listen—especially those who come from the oppression of apartheid—they don’t understand. I have to have money for them to be impressed or to appreciate what I’m trying to say to them. So I have to have money. I’m trying, but I have to be stubborn for my own sake. To stick to what I believe and what I love. Not to divert and go look for a job.” Another man quit his job in the stockroom of a grocery store after two weeks. “After I quit that job, I got more pressure. More pressure and more pressure. It was like I felt the craziness within me every time I woke. I could feel really lonely—an outcast. People could tell me I’m nobody, even today.” Situated in the midst of a terrain marked by high unemployment, many members of the group had repeatedly shunned regular and steady jobs.

Yet all three of these men were far from lazy or shiftless. They regularly pieced together labor-intensive odd jobs—construction one day, gardening the next, followed perhaps by some car repair or house painting. They labored as much as they had to in order to clear space for the
real work of contemplation and, above all, their chosen art form of Forum Theatre. The time and space to do this work and the forms of activism that attended it were among the chief freedoms sought by the group.

Knowledge—consistently articulated by members of the group as “information”—indexed another domain of freedom and constraint. The cultivation of information is the exercise of a social freedom in that it is found in dialogue with others and used in the service of helping others. “I question because I want to know and have information so I can live my life and help other people. When I know what to do and have the information, being in the state of a relaxed person, I can help others,” one man told me. “You cannot teach a person something that you don’t know. The way you present your thing, it must be really presentable. That gives me the pleasure of changing and upgrading in life—trying to get to new standards, getting more information and trying to implement new strategies,” another said. Lack of information is a serious constraint: over and over again, I would hear of a piece of information members of the group lacked, or about the information they felt their community lacked. For example, one group member told me, “people must know where to get bursaries (scholarships). Because the government has bursaries, but people don’t know about such things. They finish school and they end up not doing anything. So if we have information, we could set up an information desk to help the community in our ward. If maybe a student finished matric, they could apply for a bursary and they know what to give to us, you know, all that stuff.” The possession of this information—which came through diligent study in a wide range of books, conversations with others, and the tutelage of wise pedagogues, found its aesthetic expression through the group’s forum theatre activities where they would impart their information to others.
Only rarely did the group discuss freedom or oppression as a matter of either local or national politics, though on one occasion, shortly after the death of Nelson Mandela, the group engaged in a spirited discussion of Mandela’s legacy. Although he had “fought for freedom,” some of them argued, he did not do so alone, and did not secure complete freedom for black South Africans at any rate. This freedom would find only limited articulation in the group’s activities; there did not seem to exist a deficiency to the extent that the group registered the political atmosphere as oppressive. In terms of local and national politics, the group stressed the importance of voting and of “keeping local leaders accountable,” but these virtues were not approached as matters of protest or agitation.

Ultimately, the members of KFTG sought the freedom to imagine, occupy, and cultivate a particular subject position. The subject position in question is artist, although not of the kind that is oriented toward the public consumption of their product. The aesthetics of self they practice utilizes one art form— theatre—in the service of cultivation of self. Far from a self-help form of navel-gazing, this ideal self is a self that draws others into community, teaching and giving “information” about how to live life and how to move through an uncertain terrain. The constant rehearsals are rehearsals for life, and teaching others to rehearse in a similar way is secondary only to the work of forming the self. In this sense, KFTG leaves the theatre of Black Consciousness behind, or more accurately, pauses at the step of affirmation of self that the theatre of Black Consciousness takes for granted in the artist. The exercise of freedom in the shaping of an ethical self is the constant artistic project.

This aesthetics of self transcends theatre. In Katlehong, a township approximately fifty kilometers Southeast of Soweto, I also saw it at work among students who were learning how to paint. Charlicks, their mentor and teacher, was a man deeply steeped in South Africa’s political
struggle, a former ANC guerilla fighter who had gone into exile with his comrades to fight from the other side of the border in Botswana. He had witnessed and fought against apartheid agents both at home and abroad. He had the perfect struggle pedigree. But he also felt like something was still missing, all these years after Mandela and the ANC had been governing the country. There still needed to be “an RDP for the mind.”

His own art was a process of reconstructing and developing himself, and his pedagogy was a journey of doing the same for others, constantly incorporating lessons about how to live well as part of his artistic training regimen. The students of which he spoke most proudly weren’t necessarily those who had mastered painting techniques; they were those who proved most responsible, most diligent, most hardworking and most self-motivated.

These shifts toward a politics of self-governance overlap and enfold the history that came before them. They are productively entangled in philosophies that demand artists play a role in the liberation of black consciousness, and respond to this demand through pedagogy. It would thus be simplistic and reductive to see the aesthetic politics of black artists like KFTG and Charlicks as a shift away from more communitarian concerns, the trampling of an indigenous ethic by an insidious neoliberal conception of the self. As the Comaroffs argue, the “praxis of self-construction” had long been a part of South African conceptions of personhood (2012, 55); the Tswana self was in a constant state of becoming, a process that always unfolded alongside and in relation to others. If anything, the shift toward an aesthetics of the government of self is a shift back toward, or a reclaiming of, these traditions. The liberation of their own consciousness,

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24 South Africa’s “Reconstruction and Development Programme” was a sweeping economic policy framework enacted by the ANC in 1994 after apartheid, aimed at de-segregating and de-racializing the economy among other things. The RDP did bring some benefits to many Black South Africans—many of my informants, for instance, lived in houses provided through the RDP. Charlicks’s assertion of the need for an “RDP for the mind” suggests the need for further epistemic and ethical revolution.
and the spaces that need to be cleared for that work of liberation, are ongoing even as they help others.

KFTG participates in a broader aesthetics of freedom that transcends Forum Theatre and reaches beyond Soweto. It is also at play in elite spaces, where training and technique form part of a broader professionalization in the course of an undergraduate degree. In these spaces, a much different process of liberation unfolds. As in Soweto, it also casts a sideways glance at conventional politics. It does so to focus on the liberation of bodies in particular, and aims at a new perceptual politics that would overthrow dominant conceptions of the body in movement. It is to this (primarily white) space, 970 kilometers to the South of Soweto, that I turn next.

Revolting Bodies: The Aesthetics and Politics of Physical Theatre

Bodies in Motion at The University Currently Known as Rhodes

Prior to being in Grahamstown as an anthropologist, my visits there had revolved around the annual National Arts Festival, the largest arts festival in the Southern hemisphere and second only to Edinburgh globally. The National Arts Festival, which typically lasts ten days in late June and early July, is a time when the town is buzzing with liminoid spaces of theatre, dance, music, and visual art. Churches become restaurants, restaurants become gallery spaces, gallery spaces become venues for performance, and well over 200,000 people descend on the city, easily doubling its normal population. The surge of energy and excitement floods the streets with people, whether during the day or at night, regardless of the cold winter weather.

Outside of festival season, there is an understated vibrancy to Grahamstown; a pulse that beats, in many ways, around the infrastructure of the UCKAR and its seasons. People flow in
and out of High Street with the tides of the academic day, and coffee shops are filled with pensive and worried faces as exams draw near. On the weekends, the bars are filled with students and a few stalwart locals, and it was typical of a weekend night to hear any number of 80s rock ballads being drunkenly slurred out from the balcony of taverns like the Rat and Parrot. That, of course, is the weekend. Grahamstown is an undeniably more quiet city than the burgeoning metropolis of Johannesburg that I left as I transitioned to a new site.

My primary activities in Grahamstown were all related, directly or indirectly, to the Department of Drama where I embedded myself as an ethnographic researcher. I attended workshops and lectures, gave one or two of my own, interviewed faculty and students, and frequently observed rehearsals and performances in varying stages of production. It was at Rhodes Drama that I would encounter, primarily through interviews with Juanita Finestone-Praeg (head of the department and artistic director of First Physical Theatre Company) and observations of her students, the practice of physical theatre: a hybrid of dance and theatre that seeks to radically reconfigure conceptions of the body in movement.

My ethnographic encounters with physical theatre at the UCKAR and the fieldnotes derived from them are, in retrospect, confounding and inadequate for the production of anything that would approach “thick description.” I never attempted to characterize, record, or describe the movements that I was seeing in rehearsals, nor did I pay much attention to how they were constructed or how they were put together. The primary reason for this profound absence of data is that I had not been exposed to physical theatre in any depth prior to visiting the UCKAR. When I first attended rehearsals and then performances of Hunger, directed by the UCKAR alum Acty Tang, the choreography I saw had no immediate meaning to me. I generally could not determine whether movements were executed with skill or horribly botched, or whether a
particular actor was a novice or in a more accelerated position relative to the skills he or she was deploying. Movement simply happened; it unfolded with a rapidity that resisted my attempts at description, especially given the fact that different movements unfolded between different pairs of actors throughout the staging area.

All that I took with me from rehearsals were descriptions of the social environment of the rehearsal space. I focused on the director, Acty Tang, who was soft-spoken but confident about his vision, and the ways in which he attempted to realize that vision through the movements of the students. I also closely watched the students as they worked with Tang and with each other. My notes included the interactions between a pair of students who I knew to be romantically involved with each other, and the ways that they lovingly touched and tugged at each other’s clothing. Of their choreographic steps, which included moments of jumping toward and away from each other, I could only surmise the depiction of a kind of back and forth dynamic that seems in turns antagonistic and loving. I was left with little or no description of actual physical movements, or the ways that different movements of the body are ordered into a particular syntax to make a series of embodied statements. My notes don’t seem to do much work. My photographs are blurry and indeterminate.
I was unprepared to understand the aesthetics or politics of physical theatre at the time. There is nonetheless something appropriate about my pronounced lack of data on the movements of physical theatre. Supposing I had filmed parts of a performance or rehearsal and watched it studiously frame by frame, I still do not know that I would have gotten anything of relevance. “The group jogs in a circle with their knees slightly bent, their heads looking down, their palms to the ground,” I might write, or “one woman takes a slouching step outward, grabs her partner’s shirt, and quickly turns away.” These statements in themselves would not communicate anything important, especially when the genre itself occupies, as one informant told me, “that place where language has failed and the body steps in.” Physical theatre is a non-cognitive theatre; its performative currency is not mimesis but affect.

In what follows, I draw on ethnographic encounters with physical theatre at the UCKAR to present this genre as a particularly corporeal form of artistic expertise that works to center the body rather than the mind as the locus of creativity and action. I approach Physical Theatre through the lens of expertise (Abbot 1988; Boyer 2005, 2008, 2010) partly to focus on the historical constitution of Physical Theatre in South Africa as an artistic profession and as a mode of research, both of which are activities through which some of my primary interlocutors at UCKAR drew their salary and worked toward degrees. At the same time, there are compelling analytic reasons for thinking about physical theatre through the lens of embodied expertise. In his work on journalists in Germany, Boyer (2005) argues that attention to embodied expertise productively complicates easy distinctions between physical and mental forms of labor. Intellectuals—and the anthropologists who study them—often construe expertise as a disembodied act, and think of the body as a passive instrument or conduit of mental labor. In moments of anxiety, however, the body emerges as a site of “alternative media for the expression
of critical knowledge of social relations” (2005, 244). The expertise of Physical Theatre is compelling for the ways in which it proceeds from the opposite direction, privileging the body as the primary site of meaning and critical knowledge. At the same time, as I show throughout, many of the anxieties of Physical Theatre practitioners come not through embodied moments, but instead in the attempt to frame the significance of Physical Theatre in cognitive terms to others.

The object of Physical Theatre’s expertise—its form of work and its epistemic jurisdiction—consists partly in the cultivation of embodied knowledge through movement. More specifically, it stresses the development of excellence in bodily articulation and expression, without explicit reference to spoken dialogue, in ways that allow it to become a critical form of commentary about the world. This articulation of Physical Theatre’s expertise is admittedly provisional and sketchy, but will become more clear through the rest of the section. Importantly, Physical Theatre’s constitution as a mode of artistic expertise in South Africa came in the closing years of apartheid. Its impetus is deconstructive, and the objects of its deconstruction are the bodily residues of apartheid: not only the conceptions of race, gender, sexuality that were predicated of bodies, but their entanglement with aesthetic judgements of beauty, delicacy, frailty, and strength. There is an ethical project at the core of Physical Theatre’s particular form of expertise, and this ethics also mediates a particular relationship to the political.

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25 See also Marcus and Holmes 2005.
26 Here I follow Abbot (1988), who delineates domains of expertise in terms of epistemic jurisdiction. This conception also figures centrally in chapter three.
**South African Physical Theatre Expertise**

Physical Theatre is less of a genre than an umbrella term that covers a wide range of performance-based practices, from dance, theatre, clowning, and mime among others. Its precedents and lineages are legion: Physical Theatre has been traced to the theatre of Jacques Lecoq in France as well as Grotowski and Artaud, but also located in the rituals of ancient Greece and Japanese Butoh (Murray and Keefe 2007). While generally scholars who dare to offer a definition do so only in the broadest of terms, the *physical* of Physical Theatre does furnish some clues about the features such diverse practices share. Robyn Sassen (2015), for instance, argues that “when two men evoke a natural birth onstage armed only with a watermelon, in such a way that all the blood, drama, and trauma of this biological event become indelibly seared into an audience’s collective memory, that is physical theatre” (Sassen 2015, 77). While Murray and Keefe (2007) find the concept to be overused, nebulous, and difficult to characterize, they likewise take note of Physical Theatre as “a distancing strategy from a range of theatre practices that are…outmoded and laboriously word based. To be physical is to be sexy,” they comment wryly, “and to resist the dead hand of an overly intellectual or cerebral approach to theatre making” (2007, 13). Callery (2001), meanwhile, offers a more precise (but still quite broad) definition: Physical Theatre “is theatre where the primary means of creation occurs through the body rather than through the mind. In other words, the somatic impulse is privileged over the cerebral in the making process” (2001, 4). This challenge to the dominance of verbally-driven theatre is what makes Physical Theatre *physical* (Coetzee and Munroe 2010, 11); its narratives and their significance stem from the movements of bodies rather than the spoken word and are to be felt by audiences rather than rationalized.
Physical Theatre can be distinguished more concretely by its processes of production. Most scholars indeed seem to agree that “the key line of distinction between the range and nature of physical actions within text-based theatre, and those forms we might with some confidence label as ‘physical theatre,’ lies around notions of authorship, authority and the creative role of the actor/performer” (Murray and Keefe 2007, 17). While Physical Theatre does not preclude the use of a text or script, works are, more often than not, “devised” by groups of actors and a director working together to generate or interpret content. A thoroughgoing deconstruction of the “passive, ‘docile’ body awaiting the instructions of the teacher-choreographer-god” (Finestone-Praeg 2011, 37), Physical Theatre is thus marked by democratized processes of artistic production and conception.

South African Physical Theatre as practiced at UCKAR and other South African universities is a more concrete domain of expertise with a more defined historical trajectory and more discernable features. Among its chief progenitors is Gary Gordon, whose training includes a Cecchetti Ballet qualification and a Masters in choreography from the prestigious Laban Centre for Movement and Dance in London. Gordon “brought the latest European physical theatre style with him” as he founded the First Physical Theatre Company at the UCKAR in 1993 (Sichel 2010, 42). Gordon and First Physical’s brand of Physical Theatre, a collision between avant-garde theatre and avant-garde dance, was certainly the dominant form of Physical Theatre at the UCKAR during my fieldwork. At its inception during the years of transition from apartheid, First Physical and similar companies staged revolutions in theatre and dance that would stretch the
boundaries of both in South Africa, and wrestle with newly available freedoms in the aesthetics and production of performance.  

For both Juanita (Finestone-Praeg 2011) and Gary Gordon (Frege 1995), Physical Theatre is, in the questions that it poses, an intensely political genre. Like KFTG, though, its politics sit at arm’s length from conventional political questions of governance, parties, elections, and “service delivery.” Drawing on Kristeva (2002), Kershaw (1999), and others, Juanita makes the case for Physical Theatre as an “intimate revolt” that “continually rehearses its freedom from the perceptual politics of traditional dance representations. In this way,” she argues, “it continually performs difference; liberating difference and opening up a space for difference to revolt; to perpetually be revolting” (Finestone-Praeg 2011, 22). This revolt, for Juanita and Gary Gordon, is simultaneously aesthetic and political, carrying the possibility for newfound freedoms for bodies, perception, and representation more broadly. It had, and continues to have, implications for performance as well as artistic production.

A key intervention of Physical Theatre was the inauguration of a shift in the bodily politics of dance, primarily around the ideal body and shape of the dancer. The aesthetics of dance in South Africa had previously rested on the virtuosity, delicacy, and fragility of the (thin) white female body, moving in prescribed classical Western form and carried by the strength of the male dancer (Sichel 2011). In response to these fragile/feminine and strong/masculine bodies, Physical Theatre in South Africa, according to Juanita, brought about:

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27 Other streams of physical theatre are certainly present in South Africa and the UCKAR in particular: the descendants of Lecoq’s Theatre de Complicité—Sylvaine Strike, Jennie Reznik from the Magnet, Andrew Buckland, and Rob Murray and others are frequently included within this tradition as well.
“A subversion of the official ideal of the dancing body. For one, the ages of the performers has ranged from 18 to 75 years of age, contesting the dominant expectation of the dancing body as young, nubile and mobile. Furthermore, there is often no distinction between the vocabulary of the male and female dancers: both genders are capable of an athletic flexibility and strength, both are seasoned in the art of lifting and catching” (Finestone 1995:71).

This subversion of gender roles in dance was an integral part of Physical Theatre’s impetus. Gary Gordon agrees with Juanita that the intervention was not only directed at ideals around female bodies but also male ones: “They see our treatment of women in particular as quite different,” he noted of responses to First Physical Theatre company, “although I think it’s our treatment of women and men, because as much as women do the supporting and sharing of weight, the carrying, they have another kind of strength and that’s what we’ve been investigating. In the same way you’re also allowing men to be sensitive, vulnerable, and delicate” (Frege 1995, 99). In contrast, then, to the petite female dancer being hoisted and carried by masculine strength, Gordon’s choreography in particular would turn this dynamic on its head, making women icons of strength and showcasing male vulnerability.

Some of Gordon’s works, Shattered Windows in particular, would work to completely efface gender within the spectacle of performance. As I sat with Juanita in her office, she remembered her performance in the work, the range of body types in the performance, and the mixed reception it got from audiences:

“I recall when we performed it for the first time—I think it was in ‘94—I think people just thought we were this bunch of Amazons from hell. The men and women all looked the same. We all had this long hair with clay, these black, distressed dresses, Gary always
went with a very unusual look. Really veering strongly away from the unison core, all
dancers must look like dancers. We had tall people, short people, big people, small
people, men and women, you couldn’t tell who was who. I remember that first Dance
Umbrella [festival] we went to, the horror and people going ‘What are they doing?’”

“Nostalgia” would not be the right word to use for Juanita’s memories of performing in
Shattered Windows. She has performed in the work three times, each performance coming years
apart. Of her most recent performance in 2003, she writes that her “39 year old body again
revisited this site of questioning—although this time I knew that if I did one of those Gordon
polar bear dives through one of the empty doorways, I would be permanently shattered.” This
didn’t stop her from doing so, she goes on to say. “The gender confusion of dancers in
decomposing dresses worn by both male and female performers … long hair, bald heads and
exposed body parts smeared with wet clay which gradually flaked off leaving in its wake an
ashen trail of dust on the nice clean floors of the theatres we performed in,” continues to raise a
significant question for her: “is this dancing?” (2011, 25).

To declare that Shattered Windows is indeed dancing is part of what Juanita has in mind
by the “bodily revolt” of Physical Theatre. Her reflections on Shattered Windows point not only
to Physical Theatre’s revolt toward the politics of gender but also more broadly at its politics of
representation. The indeterminacy of immediate and obvious meaning and its “insistence on
experimenting with traditional narrative structures” (Finestone-Praeg 2011, 37) causes no small
amount of confusion and annoyance for many audience members. Juanita writes that she is
“often confronted by people who find Physical Theatre obscure and want to know…what does it
mean?” to which she responds: “when you listen to a Beethoven string quartet, do you ask
yourself: But what does it mean? Of course not. That would be inappropriate; a fundamental
confusion of sorts. A confusion that assumes that all art should respond to the criteria of logical, rational and even narrative structure of meaning” (2011, 26). As I interviewed Juanita, she explained further: “You don’t always have to know what everything means in a logical, linear way, you know? Just allow yourself, in the same way that you would allow music, to penetrate and infiltrate you at many levels. Allow the body to just speak.”

The body in Physical Theatre does speak, if one listens in the right sorts of ways. Hunger, for example, was an intensely political work, and much of the content, Acty Tang admits in the program, comes from his reading of South African headlines while abroad. Stories of the Marikana Massacre and the Nkandla scandal in particular were apparent through contrasting scenes of mass death and grotesque luxury. Not that any of this comes out in a straightforward way. It is a work of protest with no verbal polemics (and little verbal content in general) and, in the end, not even necessarily about South Africa as such. “I’m sure that each audience member can readily substitute [South African events] for recent images from different countries,” Tang argues in the program. As I saw Hunger unfold across two performances, bodies told me of anger, despair, reckless abandon, austerity and excess against the backdrop of a society in turns spurning and embracing its elites. Elaborate costuming, staging, and music added layers of meaning, but the presence established by bodies moving on stage was how the meaning fully emerged.

28 On August 16, 2012, the South African Police Service fatally shot thirty-four striking miners, and wounded seventy-eight more in an event that has since been labeled “the Marikana Massacre.” The massacre has been likened to other (apartheid-era) instances of state violence, including massacres at Sharpeville in 1961 and Soweto in 1976. Of course, it is now the ANC rather than the National Party wielding the coercive force of the state.
In addition to subverting representational forms of dance and theatre, Physical Theatre is also a revolt against the politics of production that would situate the choreographer or director as the sole authority. It is, in many ways, a fitting post-apartheid performance form: after decades of the state speaking on behalf of bodies, categorizing them, classifying them, excluding or including them, inscribing history and memory onto their surfaces and interiors (Fassin 2008), Physical Theatre’s processes of production allow each artist to devise their own bodily contributions and shape the work within a collective. “Sometimes you have a script, but how you manifest that is a devised process,” Juanita told me. Physical Theatre’s devised processes of production mean that “each performer express[es] personal and experiential knowledge through the moving body,” (Sassen 2015, 90), and this knowledge issues from each performer’s own personal history, “intimate idiosyncrasies and bodily gestures” (Finestone-Praeg 2011, 37). Training in Physical Theatre is not about learning prescribed forms but learning how to research one’s own body and movements in order to contribute to processes of devising, creation, and ultimately, performance.

Physical Theatre and its attendant forms of production, pedagogy, and professionalization thus open the floodgates, allowing a full range of bodies and personalities to participate in its unconventional forms of dancing. A series of what Anton Krueger (2011) calls “experiments in freedom,” Physical Theatre agitates consistently for the freedom to chart new aesthetic terrains and imagine and inhabit new subject positions through performance. This form of freedom draws unconventional students to the UCKAR’s department of drama, one of whom is named Ester.
Ester is Awkward

Ester is not a “good” dancer. Her movements do not have grace and flow; they are not aesthetically beautiful. The sequences she choreographs and directs with her casts are bizarre. The performances she directed on the UCKAR campus and in Grahamstown more broadly provoked mostly confusion and laughter. Ester is, in a word, awkward. Yet I don’t think she would mind my saying so, primarily because this (bodily) awkwardness is a key part of her signature style. While not a dancer in any conventional sense, Ester carved out a space for herself as a Master’s (and now PhD) student studying dance and choreography at in the department. Ester worked hard to be awkward; to excel at it. She was reflexive about this awkwardness, and speculated on it at length in ways that are deeply philosophical. Through the subversion and deconstruction of dance, I saw her design and perform work that would open up spaces of freedom for herself, other performers, and audiences, living out the kind of bodily revolt that Juanita champions as part of the legacy of Physical Theatre at the UCKAR.

As a student at the UCKAR, Ester has charted a winding and uneven trajectory through the years, punctuated by moments of uncertainty about herself and, ultimately, a return to the dynamics of her own bodily forms of movement. As she moved through the undergraduate program, Ester became increasingly interested in dance and physical theatre, but remembers being a miserable dancer. She was continuously put in the back row during workshops where no
one would be distracted by her complete lack of bodily precision, and wasn’t cast in anything she auditioned for. She persisted nonetheless, and went on to take an additional honors year to focus on dance more intensively.

Ester is convinced that the drama department at the UCKAR is the only program that would allow her to pursue dance in spite of her deficiencies as a dancer. While other students had backgrounds in ballet, or at the very least, some form of contemporary dance, Ester had come to the program as an actor. “Somebody like me with no dance experience and no dance training would never have been allowed into an honors choreography course. It’s just unheard of,” she explained. Nonetheless, in an audition before the faculty, she managed to convince them that there was something worthwhile and interesting about the types of questions she could pose with her body:

“I based my choreography audition on “Where’s Waldo?” I borrowed stripy clothes from friends and did a dance on what happens to Waldo when the book is closed. The dancing wasn’t so great, but what they liked was the idea. They were like, ‘this is funny, and you’re doing a weird and interesting thing.’ Lots of people were doing heart-wrenching serious things, and they said ‘it’s nice to sometimes see something funny.’ And that’s the big thing that they said to me after the audition: ‘there’s something interesting happening. It’s funny because of rhythm and because your body is a little bit awkward in some of the dancing. But it’s really funny.’ And they were like, ‘we certainly think you should be in choreography because there’s something interesting there.’”

The cultivation of this humorous and interesting aesthetics of the awkward was her task as an honors student, the reason she was admitted into the choreography program.
Developing this style and choreographing it were not always easy for Ester, and she required some pushing from faculty at times. For a period of time after beginning the honors course in choreography, Ester began to veer away from humor, feeling that she needed to make more serious choreography. She increasingly choreographed “serious things, thinking I must be serious and have a serious theme,” and feeling pressure to be a more conventional choreographer. It didn’t go well for her. “I had showings that were disasters,” she said. “It was horrible and horrible and horrible and horrible.” Eventually, Ester told me, Juanita intervened, telling her that she was moving in the wrong direction. Juanita recalled this conversation as a pivotal one for Ester: “it has been very interesting with Ester. The difference between last year and this year. I remember at the end of last year saying ‘just go back to your own body. You did interesting things last year, but I can intuit that they are not your choreographic strength. The place that I saw as an undergrad; those little sparks. That wit. The way is to go back to your own body.’” While lots of other dancing teachers would have expected “big, incredible dancing” from students, Ester felt gratitude that Juanita has encouraged her to play to her strengths.

Ester clearly took Juanita’s advice: the performances and showings I observed were evidence of her growing confidence in her careful deconstructions of dance. Unwilling to be contained in traditional spaces of performance, Ester, during the time I spent with her, was determined to invade public spaces with spontaneous explosions of performance that were, in turns, confusing and humorous for audiences.

One afternoon, I accompanied Ester and other students from the department to witness a “flash mob” performance that would take place unannounced just outside the library. We marched a few blocks over from the drama building, and at the appointed time, Ester cued the music: a slow, whimsical, and pensive classical piece, driven by piano and violins. The song
grew louder, and students passing by began to look on with confusion as the ensemble of dancers took their place. They began dancing—not slowly or gracefully, but instead with a violence and sexual energy that would be far more appropriate for a dance club: thrusting hips, bent knees, arms above their heads. Their movements were not, in any obvious sense, the products of careful technique and training. “Is this drama or something? What’s going on?” one man asked. Others simply looked on with mild disgust. It wasn’t even good dancing, and didn’t sync up with the music anyway. Gradually, though, students began to enjoy and laugh at the incongruity of the music with the ridiculous and hyperbolically sexualized dance moves. They applauded wildly as the music abruptly stopped and the cast marched off in unison, not saying anything to anyone and marching back to the drama building.

In her awkwardness and the awkwardness she drew out of her collaborators in this performance and others, Ester pushed the limits of dance and choreography. She also hoped to challenge the boundaries of where and when performance could occur, and subvert the aura of polite theatre etiquette that haunts traditional spaces of performance. In a theatre space, she
explained, it’s expected that the audience will be quiet, polite, and composed. As a performer, “you are pretty safe and can do whatever you want. You can scream at them, you can throw things at them, you can ignore them, and they’re always just going to sit and take it.” By contrast, public performances of the kind she was carrying out unfold in a radically different space. Here, “the audience can keep talking if they want. And they can laugh at you. And they can take out their phones and film it… They haven’t come into our territory; we are out in the public world where they are in charge. And they could actually go ‘this sucks’ in the middle of your dance. Because they can do whatever they want.” This, of course, makes it harder for performers, Ester explained. They have to work harder to earn attention and any kind of positive response, which is never guaranteed.

Such performances, then, are a revolt on multiple fronts: against conventions of what choreographed movement should look like, against spaces of complacency for performers, and against structures of constraint for audiences. More fundamentally, these environments of risk and bodily vulnerability are the staging ground of an ethics of freedom for Ester; the places where she finds the challenges that push her toward a greater sense of “presence” as a performer. They produce “a different kind of energy” and force higher levels of commitment. As she told me about her first public performance at the National Arts Festival, in which she was supposed to generate publicity for a larger performance, Ester remembered how her and another student:

“We were like, in these weird nighties. It was so cold, and we had bare feet. It was a bunch of drunk dudes and some school kids who are like ‘what are you doing, crazy baby?’ And it was so hard. We were not allowed to talk. So we had bottles of water and we were like blowing in them and making sounds and doing some of the dancing that we do in the piece and running after people. And it was so scary. But you are so aware and so in character—because you
can’t do that if you’re not in character. Friends would try and talk to you…If you’re not 100% in character, then the thing falls apart. You’re just so exposed. So it was very scary, but there was something really cool about that. I think that’s my interest in bringing some of this performance stuff into the public. That idea that you’re so scared as a performer but that that’s a good thing. It brings out something else. And I think I saw in the cast that it brings out a different kind of commitment.”

Cultivating this performative commitment for herself and her cast was the reason behind her public performances on campus and, ultimately, in a local sports bar one weekend. She reveled in putting her body and her ideas about dance and choreography into the world, not enveloped in the safety of the department where they could be understood within the context of what Lehmann (2006) calls “post-dramatic theatre” but out on the streets and in pubs where she ran the risk of being openly mocked and not taken seriously. With the awkwardness of her body (and other bodies) on full display, she found the freedom to continually develop as a rather unconventional choreographer.

**Physical Theatre and (White?) Political Aesthetics**

Ester’s ethics of vulnerability and awkwardness and her trajectory as an artist are, ultimately, the unique product of drama at the UCKAR, part of a series of small revolts the department gives rise to on a regular basis. These revolts are obviously not political in any conventional sense. Even *Hunger*, which did venture to comment in its own ethereal way on predicaments of power in South Africa and elsewhere, left meaning as an open question of reception—it could plausibly be about South Africa, but it could plausibly be about someplace else. Physical Theatre’s politics of revolt take place largely in the realm of aesthetics: issues of production, representation, and reception.
These revolts, at the same time, cannot help but carry implications that ripple outward. The work of making space for new bodies, new forms of movement, and new forms of knowledge rooted in the body are exactly what Juanita, drawing on Kershaw, has in mind by “radical performance.” Truly radical performance, Kershaw argues, does not merely involve transgression against but also the opening of spaces for new things, ultimately working toward the “freedom to create currently unimaginable forms of association and action—the transgressive or transcendent sense of the radical” (1999, 18). Bodies that once wouldn’t be allowed to access the sphere of dance performance are legitimized, and the possibilities of movement and articulation with these bodies have been radically extended across a range of ability. There is certainly a space within the UCKAR for students with strong backgrounds in dance to master choreographic technique and subtly extend established lineages through new, sophisticated explorations in movement, like a jazz musician learning the rules in order to bend them. There is also room, though, for an Ester. More of a punk rocker than a jazz musician, her aesthetics constitute an assault on choreographic conventions, and her body demands recognition—ideally as a way of thinking through the power dynamics she works to deconstruct—but even if only to laugh at her.

The lack of any formalized and institutional “South African Physical Theatre” aesthetic—which is exactly what opens space for those like Ester—is deliberate. It is also where Physical Theatre most concretely interfaces with South African politics, and more specifically, the history of apartheid. The necessity of agitating against a national dance aesthetic was indeed the thrust of Juanita’s Master’s thesis, which argued that an uncritical attempt at creating a “national” dance aesthetic after apartheid would run the serious risk of reproducing the foundational logics upon which apartheid-era aesthetics was premised: absolute knowledge of
bodies and prescriptions of the artistic forms they ought to take (1995, iii). Gary Gordon is similarly hesitant to seek out, identify, or construct a particular form as the dominant “South African” flavor of Physical Theatre. “I know people are looking for a South African aesthetic,” he admits. “I don’t know what it is. Is it me as a white South African or is it Boyzie Cekwana who’s a black man in ballet?...I, myself, as a choreographer, wouldn’t strive to be South African—you can also be quite fascist!” (1995, 101). The only constant features are those found in pedagogical processes and in production, which always aim at eliciting the contributions of each artist on their own terms.

For all its revolutionary discourse and democratizing impulses, there is, nonetheless, something undeniably white about South African Physical Theatre. This is not to say that all Physical Theatre artists are white, but that its normative aesthetics and the institutions that house them are recognizably white. Various passing comments in scholarly literature seem to substantiate this whiteness. Sichell (2010), for instance, notes that Shattered Windows, “which grabbed wider attention at the 1994 FNB Dance Umbrella, just weeks before the first democratic elections, was an outpouring of white angst and desperation to survive against the looming catastrophic odds” (Sichell 2010, 42, emphasis mine). It would be far too reductive and uncharitable to read in Sichell the suggestion that Shattered Windows was primarily a work about the white will to survive in a now hostile and apocalyptic post-apartheid landscape. Her comments are nonetheless interesting for the way they suggest that, racially speaking, Shattered Windows may not have accomplished the erasures of identity that Juanita recalled. A comment from Sassen’s (2015) explication of South African Physical Theatre is, while likely unintentional, interesting for similar reasons: “A number of key names are emerging with alacrity and a fierce sense of muscularity on the theatre circuit,” she writes. “They are white, they
are aggressively creative, they are fueled by enthusiasm for everything from Shakespeare to Paul Callico, and they are making important new Physical Theatre” (Sassen 2015, 82, emphasis mine). The whiteness of Physical Theatre floats just under the surface in these and other critical reviews.

Beyond scattered remarks that (intentionally or unintentionally) expose the whiteness of Physical Theatre, its whiteness is apparent for a number of other reasons. Its lineages, by and large, stem from European dance and avant-garde theatre traditions: one needs facility in Artaud and Grotowski, Lecoq and Lehmann to fully comprehend its interventions. It is created almost exclusively at elite (and formerly racially restricted) universities like the UCKAR and the University of Cape Town. Its audiences, by and large, are comprised of those who possess what Antrobus and Snowball (2010) call “omnivorous” taste (2010, 338): they are more highly educated, have higher than average income with higher-status jobs, and are more likely to appreciate Physical Theatre’s eclectic forms of presentation.29

There is an institutional whiteness to Physical Theatre that comes from its constitution as a form of artistic expertise and research, its situatedness within a broader intellectual division of labor in a historically white university (the UCKAR), its particular aesthetic lineage, and the direction from which it poses questions of South Africa’s apartheid past. This institutional whiteness does somewhat blunt its radical edge and democratizing potential. The subversion of the dancing body has indeed opened many doors, but artists may still need to walk through them into elite spaces of training and professionalization to learn the theory and technique that

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29 These traits, of course, are not exclusive to white South Africans. But other studies by Antrobus and Snowball (e.g. 2006) have identified whites as the dominant racial demographic at the National Arts Festival (at 69%). White South Africans remain the dominant demographic of those with higher socioeconomic status and education levels more broadly, so we might expect to see whites as the dominant demographic within what Antrobus and Snowball call “omnivorous” consumers.
underpin its forms of bodily movement before critics begin to take notice of them. For now, elite and primarily white spaces remain the home for both training in and criticism of Physical Theatre.

The Department of Drama at the UCKAR, for its part, does much to encourage and mentor its black and “coloured” students. One student in particular, Push, came to Rhodes on a bursary (scholarship), having been trained initially through workshops and public classes facilitated by the department. She has flourished at the UCKAR as a dancer, and, during my time there, delivered a stunning piece from atop Grahamstown’s “mountain of sins”: a hilltop rich with historical and spiritual significance for local Xhosa. It was here that the Xhosa assembled against the British in battle, and it is here today that religious groups continue to gather on the grounds to perform rituals. Push’s piece was deeply steeped in ritual and in a bloody colonial history. Herbs burned atop four separate fires, and ropes covered the ground, evoking the suicidal hangings of desperate Xhosa as the British closed in. Though other student performances would take place outside the university’s theatre spaces, the mountain of sins had a charged energy that demanded

*Push performing on the Mountain of Sins. May 2014.*
recognition. “I feel like I’m invading someone else’s space,” one white woman told me. Not
invading, perhaps—invited would be more accurate, as we were there to support Push—but the
charged energy of the space was itself a challenge to the comfortable white spaces of the theatre.

Push continues to make visually stunning physical theatre. More recently, she created and
performed Xeno, a careful deconstruction of xenophobia that critically questions notions of the
foreign and the other through movement, text, and sound. The fuller integration of African
bodies, cultural forms, and aesthetics is happening in Physical Theatre, albeit slowly, and still, it
seems, unrecognized by those who currently write of the history and present of Physical Theatre
in South Africa. The racial component of Physical Theatre’s revolt is ongoing. Like post-
Mandela South Africa more broadly, many nonwhite bodies are still fighting for freedom.

Conclusion: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Process

I am fully aware that South African critics and artists may take issue with the ways in
which I have racially characterized Physical Theatre. Were they anthropologists, they might
accuse me of trying to “Crapanzano” them, a verb which derives from the pejorative
characterizations that Crapanzano’s (1985) white informants (some of them academics) feel they
received at his hands (Scheper-Hughes 2007). And I welcome arguments that prove me wrong,
demonstrating that South African Physical Theatre, on both institutional and popular levels, truly
is a genre that represents South African bodies and forms of movement in all of their fractured
diversity.

My analysis here is not necessarily meant to critique South African whiteness more
broadly, or the whiteness of elite theatre institutions in particular, although it does do both of
those things. Supposing Physical Theatre is as white as I make it out to be, it makes the parallels
with black theatre groups like KFTG all the more interesting. They are from radically different sides of racial, economic, and aesthetic spectra. One is set in the bustling metropolitan locales of Soweto and Johannesburg, the other in a more rural and isolated university town. Nonetheless, the technologies of performance, for both KFTG and Physical Theatre at the UCKAR, are ethical ones. Both forms of theatre aim, in their own ways, at making these technologies of self available to others, democratizing performance and subverting the safe and hallowed space of the theatre. Each of them eschew conventional politics in favor of more intimate revolts toward the construction of new selves. They both work toward a teleology of the self through processes of artistic production, continually posing questions of self and others about what freedom means more than twenty years after the end of apartheid.

The processual aesthetics of KFTG, First Physical Theatre Company, Charlicks, and a host of others is continuing to take shape in post-Mandela South Africa, a country for which “process” is indeed a fitting metaphor. Post-Mandela South Africa is processing, in more ways than one: processing the death of Mandela, and the status of his vision for a “new South Africa;” processing race, which continues to have implications for the kind of life one can imagine and enact; processing class, which more recently has led to the closure of multiple universities as students agitate for affordable or free university education; processing questions of ethics: how one ought to live in the entanglements of past that continues to haunt and fold in on the present. South Africa is processing, and South Africans have an uncanny reflexivity about this processing.

To say that South Africa is processing is not the same as saying that it is developing. Development has a teleology that terminates somewhere, often in the ascription of “modernity” from those outside of places where “development” takes place (Ferguson 2006). Development
has a logic underpinned by technocratic epistemologies of expertise, which often work at odds with local understandings of need and progress (Rottenberg 2009). Development has an ethics that mutates and warps indigenous understandings of self (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997; Pandian 2012). Development in this sense is indeed taking place in South Africa, but to call South Africa a “developing” country is at odds with its status as Africa’s largest economy and the variety of ways in which, as the Comaroffs (2012) note, Euro-America is in fact evolving toward Africa.

Processing does not presuppose momentum in any particular direction. It is circular and cyclical; a series of folds of past upon present; a web of entanglements (Mbembe 2001). The processing I have described here is also dialectical (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997): the object that emerges from process is the product of a dialectic between what was and is and what could be. The self that emerges from an ethical process is the product of a dialectic between constraint and freedom. Theatre, in South Africa, not only gives representational form and content to this process but actively mediates its movement through moments of searching, creating, and becoming. The anthropologist, if lucky, can catch a glimpse of one iteration before the process continues.
Chapter 2

Making Ends Meet:

Kinship, Ethics, and Political Economy in South African Theatre

Kinship Then and Now

Cultural contact and the changing shape of South African society (and indeed, whether South Africa was a society at all) were central concerns of early-to-mid twentieth century British social anthropology in South Africa (Hunter 1936; Kridge 1936; Schapera 1928, 1933, 1941). It seemed imperative—particularly prior to apartheid—to assess the impact of colonial contact on indigenous African ways of living and being in the world and to take stock of the revolution that modernity had wrought on South Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1995). Of the British social anthropologists who studied the “phenomenon of change” in South Africa, Isaac Schapera was among the most exhaustive. Married Life in an African Tribe (1941) was written for a popular audience (although it still carried the social capital of a celebratory introduction by Malinowski) and was built upon a career forged in the Bechuanaland Protectorate. The work was, in many ways, a definitive statement that things had indeed changed a good deal for black South Africans as the result of contact with Europeans.

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30 Within South African anthropology more generally, there was fierce debate about whether South Africa was a society at all. Kuper (2005) presents a comprehensive overview of the “Single Society” thesis advanced by William Miller Macmillan (1929, 1975), which found agreement in the work of Radcliffe-Brown, Schapera, Hunter, and a number of other South African social anthropologists. Afrikaner volkekundiges, committed as they were to the idea of separate cultures and groups, could never endorse such a position. Whether South Africa is a single society, for many of my informants, is again an open question. The broad relevance of the question is, I argue, another feature of a post-Mandela South Africa.
Schapera’s primary concern was the toll that colonial contact had taken on kinship. While social institutions built around kinship had not completely dissolved, he found that the family unit had lost much of its traditional role as the mediator of religion, economics, and sexuality. The greatest changes, Schapera argued, were economic ones. Families, once self-sustaining economic units, had begun to split apart like never before as family members increasingly left their reserves in the Bechuanaland Protectorate to seek work in cities and on farms. Whether it was to pay the steadily growing taxes levied by the colonial British administration or to be able to buy luxury goods that could not be produced at home, making ends meet increasingly required more family members to leave home to seek paid employment.

South Africa’s history of labor migration is well known and continues to be an anthropological ground zero for studies of sexuality (Akileswaran and Lurrie 2010), HIV/AIDS (Hunter 2006), violence (Sichone 2008), and ritual (White 2001). Yet even before apartheid’s installation, Schapera was perceptive enough to notice the strain that economic changes were placing on African forms of kinship. Family members—male or female, young or old—were leaving homes on the rural reserves in droves, greatly reducing the number of kin available to work the land and maintain property. Families grew more disparate from each other, and one could not count on the assistance of a father, son, uncle, or aunt in the same sorts of ways as before.

Post-Mandela South Africa, like the postcolony more generally, is a time of entanglements; simultaneous trajectories of progression and regression that are not the result of rupture but rather continuity (Comaroff and Comaroff 1995, 2010; Mbembe 2001). Kinship remains a “besieged domain of moral life and cultivated personhood,” (White 2001:458), particularly as the prospects of employment have greatly diminished since the end of apartheid.
(Niehaus 2014). Parents still leave children with grandparents to work, either locally or further afield, and it is common for fathers to live separately from their children, even if in the same town. Among my black South African interlocutors there was a spectrum of ambivalence regarding family—some never saw their fathers and mothers and did not live with them, some spoke regularly with fathers who lived separately from the family and only provided token support, some had left their families altogether. It is thus understandable why other intimations of kinship—sending the youngest of a friend group on a beer run; the friendly address of “baba,” “sisi” or “auntie” to older adults—plays such an important role.

This chapter examines the entanglements between kinship, political economy, and South African theatre. There are compelling reasons for examining kinship in this context. First and foremost, theatre is a space of community, characterized by alliances and bonds that have all the characteristics of kinship. Even where not explicitly identified as kinship relations (e.g. referring and relating to someone formally as ‘father’) or near-kinship relations (e.g. “the cast are like my brothers and sisters”), many of the artists I engaged in my fieldwork were kin to each other in substantive ways. They spent time living together, growing together, shaping themselves and their group together, and learning together what it means to be, among other things, a professional artist. Theater, then, is a space in which kinship is taken extremely seriously and as something that is morally binding.

Second—and consistent with one of the broader arguments of this work as a whole—the theatre industry is an economic, social, cultural, and political microcosm of South Africa. It is subject to the same tensions over issues of race, class, gender, and ethnicity. Economically, it is supported to a significant extent through government agencies, and the money is distributed by networks of politically-connected bureaucrats with the same susceptibility to nepotism and
corruption as any of their counterparts in the Department of Home Affairs or the Department of Basic Education. The stakes are admittedly smaller in terms of who is impacted by resource distribution, which makes the theatre industry, at least until this dissertation, relatively understudied. Yet the instantiations of broader cultural and social trends that could safely be called features of a post-Mandela South Africa are just as apparent in the theatre industry as they are anywhere, and perhaps more so. Artists are as reflexive a bunch as any anthropologist could hope to find, and broader racial, cultural, and political dynamics play themselves out not only onstage but behind the scenes.

Alongside Schapera’s seminal analysis and more current analyses of kinship and political economy in South Africa (e.g. White 2001), the analysis I undertake in this chapter also draws precedent from critical reworkings of kinship that question distinctions between biological and social forms of kinship (Carsten 2004; Franklin 2001; Rodgers 2010; Strathern 1992) as well as accounts that fundamentally question the gulf between “fictive” kinship and kinship proper. For the latter accounts in particular, adoption has emerged as a process and act that unsettles not only classic anthropological approaches to kinship, but also their fundamentally Western and heteronormative bases (Carsten 2004; Howell 2001, 2006; McKee 2016; Weismantel 1995). Far from being an anomaly or exception that proves the rule, adoption demanded and continues to demand a re-tooling of conceptual frameworks for understanding and discussing kinship within anthropology.

My affinity with these accounts has partly to do with the fact that the cases of kinship I discuss share certain features of adoption, though they differ qualitatively in interesting ways as well. More importantly, these examinations of kinship have been helpful in illuminating the crucial facets of ethical work that attend forms of kinship not rooted in consanguinity. Adoption
involves deliberate and conscientious processes of subjectivation that shape and transform both the adopter and the adoptee, expressed through a variety of rituals and symbolic actions (Howell 2006). Forms of kinship rooted in adoption are established and sustained through long periods of consistent and deliberate care (Carsten 2004; Weston 1991), and can carry with them expectations of normative permanence (Faubion 2001b) that are just as binding as any form of kinship. They are entangled in dynamics of race and political economies, which constrain and also open up possibilities for new forms of kinship (Weismantel 1995). These forms of kinship, in short, are rich grounds for studies of ethics.

In what follows, I examine two cases of kinship strained by economics. The first case is patrilineal in nature, urban in its setting, and ends at the barrel of a gun. The strain of living out the role of malume (the mother’s brother) in Soweto, I argue, led to the dissolution of a children’s theatre program, as the search for funding pushed two men to increasingly present themselves as entrepreneurs and small business owners. As they did so, the original impetus for their project—grounded in kinship and non-instrumental aesthetic aspirations—became more and more obscured. The second case—a confluence of matriarchy, race, aesthetics, and economics—showcases what I will call “ethical fatigue”: a state of resignation characterized by tenacious clinging to a subject position that seems to make one a worse person rather than a better one. Kinship, I argue, is ethically taxing and exhausting. Something keeps this particular mother doing her job. Something, I suggest toward the end of the chapter, keeps many South Africans engaged despite ethical fatigue.
The Mother’s Brother in Dobsonville, Soweto

When I arrived in Dobsonville Extension Three in mid-October 2013, I was excited and ready to observe Forum Theatre performances by the Khulumani Forum Theatre Group (KFTG). During preliminary fieldwork in 2012, I found KFTG to be a hard-working and dedicated group of artists who took their training, rehearsal, and performance seriously. KFTG crafted performances that spoke to relevant issues in their community, while at the same time using forum theatre as a space for shaping themselves as individuals and as a broader ethical collective. The group was, in many ways, perfect for an investigation of how the aesthetic and the ethical converge in projects of self-formation, which was what I had set out to study.

Upon my return to Dobsonville, I was thus rather surprised to learn that KFTG had been reduced to only two or three stalwart members from an original group of around fifteen. The group had lost crucial funding that had previously provided a small daily stipend as well as transportation money for the members to go to and from rehearsals. The latter was particularly important: the members of KFTG were from disparate and far-flung corners of Soweto, and would not be able to travel to rehearsals and performances without some assistance. The group’s future was uncertain with their funding gone; while they sought nonprofit status to be able to receive donations, they weren’t operating at nearly the same level they once were.

The performance that I ended up seeing was indeed Forum Theatre, but was performed by children who were part of a group called Dobsonville Artistic Youth (DAY). The children (most of whom were from eight to twelve years old, although some were much younger) had created their own show, with the help of their mentors, and had chosen domestic violence as the subject they wanted to pursue and present to their community. The performance was indeed a
violent one. The husband and father relentlessly beat his wife and children, talked down to them, and dominated over them. In keeping with the principles of Forum Theatre, the play was performed in its entirety one time, which took approximately fifteen minutes. A discussion with the audience (who were also mostly children) followed the performance, and the facilitator asked them what ought to be changed about the work. When the children of the audience didn’t contribute much, a few of the adults stepped in and suggested changes instead. “The wife should fight back,” one woman said, and she was invited on stage to act out this alternative scenario. The children in the audience, watching attentively, began learning the types of engagement expected from a Forum Theatre performance as the adults began a complex discussion of domestic abuse and what responses might be appropriate. The performance, the result of many rehearsals and a lot of hard work for the children of DAY, was largely a success.

DAY, I found out subsequently, is an after-school arts-enrichment program that teaches children theatre and dance after school each day and tutors them with homework assignments. At the same time, DAY is more than merely an after-school program. With its emphasis on Theatre of the Oppressed and mentorship for children, DAY is also a pedagogical space of moral and ethical formation, for the children and the adults who work with them. Formed with the goal of providing a safe space for children to flourish both morally and intellectually, it was an organization that allowed the two men who ran the project to form bonds of kinship with their young charges.

Bonginkosi, one of the founders of DAY (and also a member of KFTG) began his work in theatre pedagogy by mentoring and training adults, but found them stubborn and difficult to work with. At the same time, he saw a pronounced lack of theatre that was be appropriate for smaller children to watch. He wanted to create a safe space “where children can be happy and
learn,” whether through watching theatre that spoke to their experience or creating this theatre themselves. To this end, Bonginkosi and another man, Tshepo, formed DAY with the assistance of a mentor.

As they dreamed of expanding, Bonginkosi and Tshepo drafted an ambitious five-year plan for their organization. For year one, the goal was simply to get the project up and running, followed by registration as a nonprofit organization the second year. The plan for year three was to get funding “so we can understand the money and business in the project,” while year four would focus on “jumping bodies over to the suburbs” and growing the organization outside of Soweto. By the fifth year, they hoped, all of the artists and children in the organization “would have made a platform for their lives so that they are somewhere now.” While this last goal is quite nebulous, it seems to refer to a longer-term goal of upward mobility for their participants. Tshepo would later point out that while “we couldn’t make a platform for any of the children, we’ve given them a tool, something that they’ve never had.” The “platform for their lives” is thus not a literal stage for productions, but a metaphorical platform upon which the members might make some movement to “somewhere” better than their current conditions. The five-year plan is ambitious in itself, but Tshepo’s horizon for working with DAY was indeed quite a bit broader than that. He planned to give himself twenty years to devote to carrying out the work, and wanted to raise children as though they were his own family, from the crèche until he saw them returning to the neighborhood as successful and happy individuals.

DAY was thus an organization whose aims handily exceeded the scope of the 2–3 years of funding that most projects receive, and that exceeded even its own five-year plan. Even so, the telos of the project, at its most idealistic, remained constricted to its immediate locale. DAY was not merely an arts-enrichment activity, but a long-term investment in mentoring that would only
culminate when the children, grown and having moved on to greater success, returned to the neighborhood for visits.

Bonginkosi and Tshepo’s conception of their pedagogical role went beyond that of a teacher or a provider of services to that of a *mulume*—an uncle who provides mentoring, support, and advice throughout a child’s life. Anthropologists, of course, are quite familiar with the term *mulume*, the “mother’s brother” who was the subject of a much celebrated (and much contested) account from A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1924). Radcliffe-Brown engaged in lengthy analysis of the position of *mulume* and other kinship terms, primarily to refute Junod’s (1913) claim that BaThonga of East Africa had, at some stage, a kinship system rooted in matriarchy. While Radcliffe-Brown’s objections to Junod were roundly criticized his work on kinship in this seminal talk and elsewhere (e.g. Radcliffe-Brown 1940) nonetheless testify to the importance of the *mulume*; it is not only a “joking relationship” but also a bond characterized by affection, assistance, and not a little indulgence.

*Mulume* is a title that Tshepo in particular sought to embody, as he told me that “we have a system that all male participants in the project are *mulumes.*” In Dobsonville, of course, *mulume* can be a term of respect for any older male; consanguinity is not required. But Tshepo wanted something more formal than this honorary designation: for him, a *mulume* plays a critical role as a moral pedagogue. Tshepo wanted to ensure that children leave the program with a sense of self-control and a moral “backbone.” Too many children, he told me, are doing “nasty things.”

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31 See Kuper 1976 for a tidy summary of this debate and its trajectories. According to Kuper, Radcliffe-Brown’s arguments were completely undermined by subsequent arguments from Junod and other BaThonga ethnographers even before broader “well known theoretical objections” were published (1976:11). Radcliffe-Brown’s accounts have not particularly stood the test of time—I point to him merely as someone who helped popularize the category of *mulume* within the discipline more broadly. ‘*Mulume*’ constituted, in any case, a meaningful local term in my fieldwork context.
in the streets that break his heart; getting into trouble with the law and doing drugs. Even without getting into such trouble, the sheer boredom of having nothing to do was oppressive in itself, as I heard both from children and the men I got to know in Dobsonville.

Tshepo also wanted children to have a mentor because he had never had one and had started “late” in life. Mentoring children when they were younger would give them an advantage, particularly as they continue to grow into professional artists and make money. As Tshepo explained, “most artists in South Africa, they have been cheated because of a lack of education, an understanding of themselves and where they are going; they get money but they don’t know how to use it, someone becomes rich, then tomorrow they’re broke. If I teach these children from a young age, automatically the future artists are going to be the best.” Fully expecting his pupils to become artists, part of Tshepo’s pedagogy would thus ideally include lessons in how to be responsible with money.

Bonginkosi and Tshepo’s aspirations to act as malumes contrasted in many ways with their other kin-based relationships. Both men, at various points, had been placed under a good deal of scrutiny by their families. Being an artist is not a job that brings home a lot of money or groceries, and the failure to provide economically to their respective households put them at odds with their mothers and fathers. Both men pulled in money from day jobs in construction or gardening; jobs done part-time to subsidize the arts work they actually wanted to do. In terms of their own families, they were not particularly successful and important and were certainly not providers. Their ambitions to act as malumes went beyond economics and into aesthetics: they certainly wanted to mentor and help the children grow in ways that were morally commendable. They also wanted the children to experience the joys of art and theatre.
Kinship terms like malume, Faubion (2001b) argues, qualify the self as a subject through its relation to others and also qualify others through their relation to the self. They shape the self into a particular kind of subject that relates to others in particular ways. At the same time, these terms, Faubion argues, are terms “of being, not of doing. They can and of course often do come with scripts or rulebooks attached. Yet the normativity of kinship is just that: definitive not of being kin but rather of being a good or a bad kinsperson” (2001b, 11-12). More immediate familial pressures to prove themselves successful and the dedication they had to their adopted charges drove Bonginkosi and Tshepo to work hard at the goal of being good malumes. At times, they were great ones. Other times, they failed by their own metrics. Examining these failures more closely illuminates some of the constraints on kinship that are the product of a uniquely post-Mandela South Africa.

For Bonginkosi and Tshepo, being a good malume in the context of DAY meant serving as good role models, instructing the children on how to dance, sing, and act, and tutoring them with homework. At the same time, financial constraints weighed heavily upon this work. The men needed money to transport the children to and from events, rent rehearsal spaces, and, whenever possible, provide something to eat for the children, many of whom did not have food at home. Having a theatre project like DAY funded, however, requires a performance of a different sort—a demonstration of political connections, good standing in the community, and properly entrepreneurial intentions. Attempts to raise funding for DAY would lead the men to present a much different face of the organization, and would require them to engage in transactions that were at odds with their roles as malumes. Ultimately, the demands of the funding world would also set the two men against each other and lead to the dissolution of the group.
In accordance with their goals for year three—to see the organization receive funding of some kind—Bonginkosi and Tshepo appealed to a number of local businesses and organizations in Soweto. As they did so, they consistently positioned themselves as community development-oriented activists, pedagogues, and men in good standing with local political structures. To this end, they attended a meeting with their local ward councilor not wearing business suits or formal attire of any kind but instead more eclectic regalia: Bonginkosi donned track pants with an ANC polo-style shirt that celebrated the history of ANC presidents since the party’s inception. Tshepo donned a bright red jumpsuit emblazoned with the logos of various newspapers, although the top was conspicuously left open to reveal a t-shirt bearing homage to the now posthumous Nelson Mandela. While Bonginkosi and Tshepo did not explicitly acknowledge the political positioning of these outfits, their sartorial choices were nonetheless deliberate ones: had they worn more formal attire, Bonginkosi told me, the men would run the risk of being seen as “less authentic,” as they do not wear suits and ties on a regular basis. They thus needed to “be themselves,” as artists and community activists, although they needed to do so in a way that appropriately recognized existing political structures.
For better or worse, in my capacity as a researcher I became part of the group’s push for local legitimacy in their quest for kinship. In contrast to many anthropological accounts of kinship through adoption (e.g. Howell 2006; Weismantel 1995), Bonginkosi and Tshepo, more often than not, sought to be adopted as malumes rather than adopt the children into their care, visiting wary parents and convincing them that they could provide a valuable service for their children. As I visited the homes of the children they taught and mentored, Bonginkosi and Tshepo explained that I was a researcher who was interested in the work they were doing with the children—an explanation, I was told, that bolstered their local reputation. I also went, on several occasions, to meet Tshepo’s father. Tshepo told me that his father’s attitude about his work as an artist has changed now that Tshepo has drawn the attention of a white researcher—and an American one at that. On other occasions, at their urging, I inquired at businesses like Pick N’ Pay (a South African grocery chain) about the status of requests for funding. My position in these encounters was to be an embodiment of social and cultural capital for the group, and a visible sign of international attention for their work. I accepted this role as a reasonable benefit that the men might derive from my presence as a researcher. Although I felt uncomfortable as an anthropologist speaking on their behalf, I did so at their request.

It was in this capacity that I came to the civic center with Bonginkosi and Tshepo to meet the municipal councilor. I explained my project to her, and after exchanging business cards, she turned to the work of helping Bonginkosi and Tshepo with a letter of endorsement that they could attach to requests for funding assistance that would go to local businesses. While she would not directly contact businesses to solicit donations on their behalf, she did try to mentor them in the content of their letter of solicitation, telling them, for instance, that they need to make it clear that they are going anywhere and everywhere asking for donations.
After our meeting with the councilor, and after learning the letter (to be drafted by an administrator) would not be ready for some time, we proceeded next door to speak with Lerato, a “community development worker” for the ward, to see if there were any avenues of funding available for DAY’s project. In the meeting with Lerato, Bonginkosi and Tshepo pitched the project not as part of a five-year plan, but instead as something quite a bit more restricted: they needed funds to cater an “after school snack” for their students, many of whom do not have anything to eat at home. The ability to provide such food would be a major incentive to attend a series of forum theatre workshops they wanted to begin with their students. In response, Lerato handed them some applications to another local nonprofit, with the caveat that the men would need to determine if each child in the program was actually eligible to receive assistance from the program. Since DAY has multiple locations throughout Soweto, it seems that a number of the children will indeed be closed off from these resources, presumably because they could get them in their own wards. “My focus is on Dobsonville,” she told them, and in particular on ward forty-seven. Beyond that, the only help she could offer them was advice: “Go out and sell your project,” she exhorted them. She told them to go to stores like Woolworth’s and PEP for donations, and to build up their resume and write a detailed report on all their activities. “I can’t give you anything,” she concluded.

In their capacity as local activists running an after-school arts program, Bonginkosi and Tshepo thus drew on what resources they could to raise smaller pockets of funding for DAY. They received some mentoring and direction from community officials, but the message from the ward councilor and community development worker seemed to be that they would need to make appeals for funding to local businesses rather than local government bodies. To “sell their project,” the men would need to continue building their local profile and resume. It was only
after doing so that they could reasonably hope for funding. Rather than waiting to build this profile, however, Bonginkosi and Tshepo rhetorically performed it in their applications to government.

Attempts to solicit governmental agencies for funding would transform the organization—at least on paper—into something that often seemed quite at odds with the daily work of the group and their work of acting as malumes. The ability to receive tax-exempt donations from individuals and funding bodies (whether public or private) requires registration as a nonprofit organization, and the group officially registered as an NPO in 2010. To do so, they had to complete an “Application For Registration by a Nonprofit Organisation” and submit it to the Department of Social Development. As part of the application requirements, DAY submitted a detailed constitution that carefully outlines the positions of each member of the executive and their responsibilities, along with detailed policies for the group’s finances and how meetings would be structured.

While the organization has a number of officers and executives listed in its constitution, DAY was, in reality, a project spearheaded almost entirely by Bonginkosi, Tshepo, and their friend Nthabiseng—who is nowhere mentioned in the constitution but who nonetheless played a role in accounting for the finances of the group. The smaller scale of the organization meant that, in reality, all three would play a heterodox series of roles, the most important of which was the task of actually working with the children. The relatively small scope of their project and the paucity of other individuals who wanted to do the work of the organization with them meant that any number of roles were either truncated or collapsed into each other. Bonginkosi, as chairperson, was thus acknowledged as the visionary and the “brains” behind the organization,
and Tshepo, by his own admission, was Bonginkosi’s “mouthpiece.” In addition, both men worked to facilitate the work at the centers as teachers.

As part of their attempts to secure larger amounts of funding, DAY developed a business plan that they have submitted in various iterations to a number of different private and public organizations. The business plan itself reveals much about the way the two men work to position themselves as arts entrepreneurs in the current funding climate and the interventions they feel will get traction with government funding bodies. The plan stresses that the leadership of the group has “acquired small business management qualifications to balance available skills with business knowledge,” and in particular can boast expertise in “H.R. management, commerce, and information technology, skills which contribute to DAY’s potential for growth and business innovation.” In the business plan, the men transcend the role of artists—presenting themselves instead as job creators who seek to bring full time employment to artists as part of the work of the organization. “The key role,” they argue in the business plan, is “creating employment opportunities through partnering with professional artists and organizers in our communities to increase [the] capacity of professional arts practitioners.” The bulk of their business plan, in fact, is given over to detailing how these jobs will be created. After-school tutoring, mentoring, and arts activities—the original impetus for the project—became sublimated in the proposal as one of many “services” provided by the organization to their “customers” (which includes parents, NGOs, churches, schools, government, business, and individuals). A “market analysis” section of the business plan also makes clear that the key intervention is targeting unemployment, specifically by training unemployed youth (a category that could apply to anyone under the age of forty or so) in events management and planning. The funding applications and accompanying business plan were projects of a much different scope that went well beyond the work that DAY
actually engaged in as an after schools arts enrichment endeavor. These documents represent a
transformation of their more nebulous aesthetic and moral projects into an endeavor that was
purely instrumental and—to the extent possible—of sound utilitarian calculation. More
fundamentally, their applications were an attempt to participate in more national imaginaries of
South Africa’s neoliberal political economy: job creation by small business owners that will
empower the community.

While Bonginkosi and Tshepo positioned their organization as a small business that
would create jobs for unemployed youth in the arts and culture industry, the realities of doing
business at a more national level would require them to make compromises that they were not
willing to make. Bonginkosi and Tshepo were not connected to officials at any of the
government funding agencies even in an indirect way. In a nepotistic climate where
administrators often award funding to friends or family members (or use friends and family
members as proxies for their own projects to be funded), Bonginkosi and Tshepo were at a
distinct disadvantage for not having the right connections. These connections, I learned from
Bonginkosi, could be purchased in a way through exchanges of money that are firmly embedded
in networks of patron-client relationships. When I asked him whether he was confident that DAY
would receive funding from his applications, he told me he was not, but requested the recorder
be stopped so he could tell me why.

Eventually, though, Bonginkosi was willing to talk more candidly (and with the recorder
on) about the way he perceives the process of seeking funding. After discussing applications that
had been rejected by one organization on grounds that seemed dubious and arbitrary to him,
Bonginkosi continued:
“Another time, they said: ‘okay, you are being funded. But come to the offices.’ When you go to the offices, they say: ‘Okay, we understand. Re-draft the budget.’ They give you the contact of the accountant that they want. The accountant tells you ‘no, you don’t have to pay me. You will pay me when the funds go through.’ So when the funds go through, they take their money, the guys who gave you the number of the accountant take his money, and the money that is left is yours for the organization. When you are drafting the budget and everything, you are drafting it for the project. You never thought that they would need that money that they are talking about now. So that puts you already in a situation where you are only going to get funds once, and you are never again in your life going to get funds. I’ve been investing all my life in this. I cannot just take this risk and get 200,000 and then my life is over. All that I was working for, it’s over. It would be better if I was the child of a politician studying HR somewhere, and then I do this application, I get the funds, and then next time I don’t get the funds I don’t care because I have money. It’s not my career. It’s not what I’m doing. So it becomes a problem for people who are really interested in the industry…If you don’t want to pay bribes, they will wait until you want to pay it. This is their attitude. They give you a letter saying you are funded for 500,000. They know that you would go crazy because you want that 500,000.”

For Bonginkosi, funding is accepted along with an implicit agreement that money will be distributed to various individuals and bodies that are, at best, tangentially connected to the project itself. Officials in the department that granted funds to the project will take money—not always from the artist—but perhaps from someone else who will materially benefit from the artist’s relationship to the state. The remaining funds are available for the project for which it
was intended. The problem (that Bonginkosi feels will guarantee that funds will never be given again) is that all the money must be accounted for. Bonginkosi explicitly recognizes himself as someone who is not connected in the right sorts of ways. As someone who is not “the child of a politician” with a steady office job, failure to successfully navigate this complex world of payments to officials and their associates means that one’s future prospects of working with government seem dim. It was, simply put, a game that ran counter to his aspirations as an exemplary figure for the children.

This is a story I would hear multiple times from other interlocutors at varying levels of complexity. One easy work-around, I learned, is to form an umbrella company or organization that includes smaller subsidiaries. The funding earmarked for smaller companies within the umbrella is what actually goes to paying these hidden costs of connection. Bonginkosi seemed unwilling to risk participation in these networks, which he feared would result in his life being “over” and his work destroyed. Paying these types of bribes never guarantees admission into more permanent relationships either: “South African Revenue Services, after ten years they revise again the taxes for all organizations. Most people get arrested after ten years. So these guys will not be there—those who you paid bribes to. After ten years, they will not be there, and you will be there alone,” Bonginkosi told me.

Paradoxically, as the men did what they thought was best commensurate with their positions as good role models and responsible malumes, they grew more distant from funding. There was a constant sense of hesitation and procrastination around applications for funding, which cannot be dismissed as mere laziness. The applications, after all, were always acknowledged as important and one of the few ways to get money from their organization. If it was hard to “sell their project” on a local level without a profile and more robust local
connections, it felt impossible to pay the necessary tributes in order to receive funding in their capacity as entrepreneurs. There is, of course, nothing wrong with emphasizing the more entrepreneurial aspects of their project and diminishing the original impetus of the project. The larger problem was the threat posed by administering the money in the sorts of ways required, while simultaneously staying out of trouble and being a good role model.

The conflict generated by their non-instrumental aspirations and the completely instrumental logics of state in which they needed to participate would ultimately split the two men apart and lead to the dissolution of DAY. When I last spoke with Bonginkosi, he told me he had not seen Tshepo at all for the last six months—which is all the more surprising given the fact that they live right around the corner from one another. Tshepo had done something “unacceptable,” Bonginkosi told me. Specifically, Tshepo had threatened Bonginkosi with a gun, accusing him, along with an associate, of stealing twelve million rand (nearly one million dollars) from a fund earmarked for DAY’s use. Bonginkosi had no idea what Tshepo was talking about, and would have found the accusation laughable if it weren’t for the gun at his head. “What money was Tshepo talking about?” Bonginkosi wondered, and from what application? Where did this money come from? Bonginkosi was eventually able to convince Tshepo that he did not have any such sum of money, but rumors about it persist in their neighborhood. People still come up to Bonginkosi asking about the money, to which he replies: “What money? Do I look like I have money?” DAY is officially dissolved, and Bonginkosi has begun an applied drama degree at University of the Witwatersrand.

Bonginkosi and Tshepo had a vision for working with children. They wanted to create a space where children could be happy and learn. They wanted to mentor children, train them, and watch them grow into successful adults. They sought recognition and validation as malumes, and
worked hard to be good ones. Getting funding for DAY, however, ran counter to their desire for authenticity and honesty. Their friendship ultimately ended over the issue of funding, as one man accused another of theft and corruption—accusations that, oddly enough, seemed to be par for the course in the world of arts funding.

Economics, and in particular, the task of providing for one’s kin, continues to take a heavy toll on kinship in a post-Mandela South Africa. At the same time, there is a racial dynamic at play in funding for theatre as well. Bonginkosi told me that things worked very differently for white applicants. “If you’re white,” he told me, “you either get funded or you don’t.” My work with an organization run by a white South African woman would bear this out to some degree, and more importantly, tells a parallel story of the political economy of theatre as a space of frayed and decaying kinship.

**Ethical Fatigue and Motherhood in Grahamstown**

If anything can be said with certainty about post-Mandela South Africa, it is that many South Africans are growing weary of working to build a “new” country. Grand moral projects like reconciliation and the formation of a nonracial Rainbow Nation are losing legitimacy and momentum, particularly after the absence of Mandela from public life. Many South Africans feel a sense of fatigue with the work of occupying subject positions that have not conferred the esteem of others or a better material life. “Let’s get that reconciliation!” a man in Soweto told me, with sarcasm in his voice. “I can’t reconcile when I have nothing. You’ve taken all my things, then you tell me ‘let’s reconcile.’ What am I reconciling? I can’t reconcile while you are taking all of my things to yourself.” Kinship too is exhausting work. In the Eastern Cape, where
unemployment can be as high as 30 percent, being a mother is especially hard. Women are increasingly the sole economic providers for their families, whether through domestic service or other forms of labor. Economic hardship, as many anthropologists have pointed out, has always taken a heavy toll on kinship in South Africa. In this section, however, I am concerned with a different kind of maternalism. It is a conferred and anointed form of maternalism, but not any less demanding (and perhaps more so) for that reason. It is not the maternalism of Allison Jill King’s madams (2012), marked by condescension and infantilizing toward a teleology of cheap household labor. Even so, it is a form of white maternalism all the same. It steadily crumbles under the weight of expectations in an economic context colored by corruption and nepotism. The mother in this case remains in the position that people expect her to remain in and drudges on, for reasons that are hard to decipher and for an unknown duration of time.

_Mama J_

Andrew and Janet Buckland, both jointly and as individuals, are a force to be reckoned with in South African theatre. Both are well known in Grahamstown and on a more national level, and Andrew in particular has been an artistic trailblazer in Physical Theatre, receiving a number of accolades and awards for the virtuosity of his own comedic blend of clowning and mime. In Grahamstown, Janet is widely known as “Mama J,” for her role as artistic director of UBOM!³², a theatre company attached to the drama department, and as an artist with expertise in directing and dance. These roles, and her work in the broader community through dance programs like Amaphiko, have endeared her to many people.

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³² Reading a draft of this chapter, Janet made sure to note that the correct spelling of UBOM! (which is not an acronym) includes an exclamation point. I honor this spelling throughout.
Throughout my time among the theatre artists of the UCKAR, both Andrew and Janet occasioned a certain awe and respect from students, community artists, and other residents of Grahamstown. Drama students spoke beamingly when they recalled being praised by Andrew for something—his penchant for gentle but incisive criticism lent his praise additional legitimacy and felt like getting an award. On the other hand, Andrew was not afraid to mete out discipline when it was needed, particularly when cast members shirked their responsibilities. “Mama J,” was and is also held in very high regard; she is seen as a warm but also very direct administrator and mentor. I never saw Janet angry but people avoided making her so, and intra-cast problems with personal dynamics or payment issues would be dealt with in a way that did not involve escalating the issue to her attention. As Mama J, Janet was, and still is, the driving force behind UBOM! and much of its success, and she has stepped in at crucial points to take the reins from faltering resident directors or to iron out logistical problems.

For purposes of this chapter, I will focus on the subject positions occupied by Janet, particularly her anointed position as “mama” to her students and especially the members of UBOM! theatre company. I focus on Janet as mother rather than Andrew in his role of “father” (a name also anointed on him) for at least two reasons. First, Janet played (and still plays) a very direct role in providing funds for UBOM! and other programs through applications to local and
national funding bodies. Andrew, of course, provides mentoring, help, and advice to his students and UBOM! whether “on the floor,” in the classroom, or as productions travel to Cape Town and Johannesburg. But the title of “Mama J,” for Janet is apt in the sense that she is seen as responsible for securing financial resources for UBOM! and, for better or worse, seen as responsible for acts of nurture, care, and guidance. More importantly, during my time in Grahamstown, I saw more tangibly in Janet the strain that finances began to put on her kinship ties to her students and members of UBOM!. Frustrated by several unsuccessful funding applications and the corruption and nepotism she saw in the world of arts funding, she was getting tired of her motherly role in the organization and was eager to hand the reins over to someone else. Though she loved her UBOM! family very much, living into her role as Mama J, she told me, was beginning to make her a worse person and not a better one.

Speaking to me about the inception of UBOM!, Janet remembered her excitement when the white paper on arts and culture (ANC 1996) mandated the creation of three professional companies for each province: a student company, a youth company, and adult company. These never materialized in the Eastern Cape, which has historically been one of the most economically marginalized provinces in the country. That marginalization, she found, extended to the realm of funding for art, as provinces like Guateng and the Western Cape typically receive the bulk of arts funding. Janet found Eastern Cape theatre to be, at this point, “abysmal.” “There was no innovation,” she recalled, and people would “find one piece and repeat it and repeat it.” Even if artists could be trained in Eastern Cape, they frequently migrated to Cape Town or Johannesburg in search of better opportunities. With these critical gaps in mind, Janet and Andrew founded UBOM! in 2003 with grants from two major arts funding agencies and had received steady funding from them for over a decade.
UBOM! is, first and foremost, a professional theatre company that produces at least one piece for the National Arts Festival each year in addition to numerous other productions. Janet’s penchant for history (in which she earned a B.A. from the UCKAR) has colored many of the group’s productions; works like *Thuthula: Heart of the Labyrinth* (2003) and *Kiss My Boot* (2006) pay homage to indigenous figures and stories of the Eastern Cape as a way of preserving its heritage. Beyond its celebration of Eastern Cape history, the company has an emphasis on education that is well known; works like *Sink or Swim* (2010), *Betty and the Yetti* (2013), and the *Wangai* (2014) were all crafted with the aim of entertaining children and teaching them about the environment at the same time. The company also runs community outreach events, most notably the Makana Drama Development Festival, an event that brings a variety of local theatre groups together for performances and workshops. The focus of this festival, UBOM! states in one report, “is to provide entry level participants with a comprehensive introduction to play production, while stalwart participants are challenged in new areas.” (UBOM! 2010). Winners of this festival have a production sponsored by National Arts Festival.

While UBOM! is thus quite active in producing theatre and opportunities for communities around Grahamstown and beyond, it is also an important space of cross-racial artistic collaboration for the members of the company. In previous years, it has been able to offer a one-year contract to a full-time company of 5–6 workshop performers/facilitators. More than half (and sometimes all) of these are local artists from the nearby township of Joza, while others are from the UCKAR or other drama programs. The company has always been intentionally multiracial, and themes of race and apartheid history have played a central role in many of the company’s productions. Janet recalled instances in which the company performed in more rural areas for children and adults who had never seen white and black South Africans working
together. “These kids in the rural areas, they thought [the actors] had to be from another country; they couldn’t possibly be from their own country because they were seeing this for the first time,” she remembered with pride.

UBOM! has been widely recognized as a company for artistic excellence. The group won a Silver Standard Bank Ovation Award in 2010 for their production *Breed*, as well the Best Puppetry Manipulation Award from Handspring for their work on *The Adventures of a Little Nobody* (2010). In addition, Janet herself was awarded “woman of the year” by Pick N’ Pay. In general, UBOM! has a heavy media presence and is frequently covered in media like *Grocott’s Mail* and *Cue*, the official arts festival newspaper.

When I arrived in Grahamstown at the beginning of April 2014 to study the drama department at the UCKAR, I found UBOM! in a financially precarious position. The company had been denied funding through its usual granters, and was forced to operate on a more skeletal budget. This meant, among other things, that UBOM! would not be able to employ a full-time cast with a year-long contract as it had done in years past. For the mostly white students at Rhodes who would have potentially been offered employment through UBOM!, there would be other opportunities to earn money: lecturing, tutoring, or grading exams. For the “professional artists” usually hired by UBOM! (many of them black actors with no academic attachment to the UCKAR), the loss of another opportunity for full-time work would carry more palpable consequences. Beyond the immediate loss of employment opportunities, Janet told me, were a host of other concerns: Would the company be able to continue subsidizing performances for children from the townships so they could afford to see theatre? Would they be able to return once again to extremely rural parts of the Eastern Cape to perform in kraals and communities that rarely experience theatre or cross-racial collaboration? The future was uncertain.
Fortunately, UBOM! had sufficient funds to hire a seasonal cast in order to create a production that would play to local schools and feature in the children’s program at the National Arts Festival. *The Wangai*, a script written by Andrew Buckland, was a Xhosa-language, Eastern Cape-flavored adaptation of Dr. Seuss’s *The Lorax*. UBOM! hired a cast of six and an assistant director from the pool of community artists with which UBOM! had had previous experience. In addition, UBOM! was commissioned by the university to create *Unzip Your Knowledge*, a work that dramatized an academic student handbook that dealt with issues like plagiarism and academic writing more generally. Although scaled back from their usual artistic output, UBOM! was not completely off the radar.

Even so, as I interviewed Janet, she openly described her frustrations with the ambiguities, paradoxes, and politics of her attempts to get funding for the company, and a sense of resignation hung over much of our interview. “The pattern had been that we’d gotten support from [a particular granting agency],” she told me. “I was aghast because we were turned down twice. We were turned down once, and then they said ‘we’ve just given all these proposals a year’s funding, but the next proposal is three years.’ So they gave us another six months, and I put my life and soul into that business proposal. I need to show it to you, it nearly killed me. Because I thought, that’s just a glitch; we’re going to get money.” UBOM! did not, in fact, get funding from this application either. Amidst hearing rumors that UBOM! was turned down because its affiliation with the UCKAR would be a “tax problem” (which had never been an issue in the past), Janet had also heard that a member of the same granting agency had been securing funds for his own projects.33 “It’s made me so uncomfortable. It’s a bit nauseating. It’s

33 It also bears mentioning that the University Known as Rhodes has a widely-known reputation as a historically white university. During apartheid, Rhodes University (named, of course, for the colonial magnate and adventurer John Cecil Rhodes) was reserved for whites only, and recently the university, along with University of Cape Town,
also illuminating, the fact that I’m not fighting it, I haven’t gone to see him, I haven’t written a letter of appeal…So yeah, I’m kind of letting everything down a bit here,” she said. Janet, who described herself as “tired” and ready to hand over the reins of the organization to someone else, did not feel like contesting what she saw as nepotism within funding schemes.

This nepotism indeed had colored other interactions with funding agencies for quite some time. Janet recalled being at a funding meeting with government officials in which one official wanted to put the Eastern Cape “on the map” for arts. The bureaucrats in attendance announced that they were forming a company to do just that. “You should be facilitating it, not running it yourself,” she remembers saying. The company was instituted nonetheless. “The council that dispenses the money to the companies spends most of their money on that company,” she told me. “They spend hundreds of thousands on that, and everybody else, if you apply correctly, you can get between ten and fifteen thousand [rand] for the year. Government tells them, ‘we want you to fund this company. We want this to happen now.’ What this company does, they have done since 1993 or 1994—[they have] repeated the same program every year. It’s like a tourist brochure that they bring alive.” Affiliation with the provincial government ensures that this company stays afloat with consistent funding.

A second major source of funding for UBOM! had also opted not to fund the company for the 2014-2015 cycle, and the loss of this funding was even more frustrating. UBOM! had previously enjoyed a 1.2 million rand grant (approximately $97,000) from this source, and the money had been stretched over three years. But funds were slow to actually arrive and the

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became the epicenter of struggles by black university students to remove monuments that paid tribute to South Africa’s colonial heritage. It thus came as no surprise to some research participants that the Eastern Cape Opera House, which boasted a more diverse management profile more in line with the oft-cited goal of “transformation” was chosen for funding rather than UBOM!, an organization that is, at least in its top leadership, run by a white South African.
university had advanced UBOM! the money in the meantime. This, according to Janet, did not make the funders happy, causing one of them to write her demanding an explanation for why the company had carried on with its project in the absence of its final installment of funding. “I was gobsmacked,” she said, expressing a sense of feeling punished: “you’re wrapped on the knuckles because you kept your project going. Because you kept the reputation of the [funder] good, you know? I’ve been to so many meetings where they get attacked. I’ve been the one person that’s said ‘sorry, I can’t complain. We’ve had a really good relationship with them.” The new project manager advised her to express these thoughts in a written appeal to the board, but it seems to Janet that UBOM!’s reputation with them may have been damaged—paradoxically, for continuing a project that the agency was very late in funding.

Such dynamics around funding and the constant strain of drumming up new money for the organization was a process that Janet found altogether tiring, and couldn’t help but color her perception of herself as “mother” to the organization. When I asked how she felt she had grown as a person during her tenure as UBOM!’s director, she replied wearily:

“I wish I could say I’ve grown. I wish I could say I’ve changed... I got a bit tired of everybody seeing me as ‘Mama J,’ as the big mama. I’m a bit like: give me a job and I’ll get on with it. I don’t need to be babied, and I kept on feeling that the company wanted mothering and nurturing and loving and I just—I might have been prepared to do that initially, but I got tired of that. So I don’t think I grew in a positive way. I think I grew in the sense that I wanted it to be more perfect, I wanted people to get on with their jobs. It’s a little bit like, ‘guys, I raised the money for you, I’ve created a bloody job for you. You’re in arts, you’re in theatre. You wake up in the morning and you warm up and you train and you act for the whole day! If somebody had done that for me, halleluiah! That’s
enough—get on with your job and do it properly!’…So I think I grew more obstinate. More pedantic. More looking for a strong resident director. Someone who was paid to be the father or the mother. To nurture and baby and discipline.”

Janet thus sees herself as a financial provider rather than someone who engages in nurturing and “babying.” In this sense, she is not unlike some white South Africans who let the task of childcare fall to hired help. At the same time—and interestingly—Janet is also not unlike many black South African mothers—so exhausted from securing money to survive that energy does not remain for emotional nurturing (King 2012).

There is a certain fatigue that attaches itself to projects that, while once a source of freedom, twist and turn into spaces of ethical decay and atrophy. Janet wished she could have grown and become a better person as the result of her work with UBOM!. What she expresses instead is a sense of ethical retrogression: according to her, she is a worse person now than when she started UBOM!. She has run out of patience for mothering, nurturing, babying, and disciplining people, roles that she once did not mind playing. Instead, she has become more demanding and asserts more strongly that people need to get on with the work and not wait for her guidance or approval. In this sense, kinship has gradually morphed into a constraint rather than a source of ethical freedom and movement; in Foucauldian terminology, a source of “subjection” rather than “subjectivation.” She certainly has her own expectations of what her role entails, but she is also entangled in the hopes and expectations of others, finding it exceedingly difficult to step away from them. The fact that she increasingly resents her role as provider, nurturer, and disciplinarian points to a sense of ethical stagnation. She is becoming someone she does not want to be, and at this point, would rather have someone else take her job. Yet she doesn’t know where to turn.
Janet’s frustrations with funding undoubtedly have played a role in this ethical fatigue. She expressed feeling nauseated by the culture of funding she consistently encountered and is tired of fighting with administrators who have a problem with the way she has been conducting business on behalf of UBOM!. The busy work of providing for her “children” in UBOM!—financially and emotionally—has led to a general sense of resignation about her motherly role even as she dreams of moving away from Grahamstown to be nearer to her own family. Economics and the task of making ends meet has frayed the cords of kinship for her—not quite to the breaking point, because she still feels like no one else is willing or able to run UBOM! in her stead—but she feels worn out by her charge as artistic director.

**Agency, Responsibility, and Ethical Fatigue**

Janet’s ethical fatigue has much to do with her responsibilities and the extent to which she can meet them. It is the result of a conflict that revolves around judgments of responsibility and agency that are both internal and external to her. Laidlaw’s recent work on agency and responsibility (2010; 2014) is germane here, allowing not only for a deeper analysis of Janet’s situation but South Africa’s moral trajectory more broadly.

Laidlaw undertakes an intervention into the troubled and theoretically sloppy history of agency in social theory by distinguishing between two different accounts of the concept, both of which are problematic for different reasons. One account, which traces its lineage through theories of practice advanced by Bourdieu (1977), Sahlins (1981), and others (though it reaches well beyond them), designates as agency “the creative and assertive capacities of individuals, as against the constraints of what are conceived as ‘larger’ structures” (2010, 143). On this account, for example, an individual is said to be exerting agency when he or she engages in acts of resistance, either subtle or overt, against broader social structures and forces. The problem for
Laidlaw and others (e.g. Mahmood 2005) is that this conception of agency “recognizes as efficacious only actions conducive toward certain ends and outcomes” (2010, 144), namely, values like liberation, empowerment, and equality. In so doing, this conception smuggles certain (western and liberal) values into understandings of agency, postulating a never-ending contest between human subjectivity and social structure, with plenty of accolades when the former prevails over the latter (2010, 145).

A second account of agency discussed by Laidlaw issues from Actor-Network Theory (or ANT). For ANT, “the ascription of agency rests on the empirical question of whether in any particular network of relations an entity participates in an entirely transparent and predictable way in chains of cause and effect or whether it makes a discernable difference in how things go” (2010, 145). On this account, nonhuman and inanimate entities can identified as agents, so long as they play a role in causal explanations of why and how processes or events occur (Laidlaw gives the example of a laptop crashing just before a deadline as an instance of agency in this regard). While ANT does not carry the baggage of the moral assumptions smuggled by the previous account, it fails to recognize that explanations are interpretive, and that they take place in a moral universe populated by “our ongoing judgments about whose presence or absence, whose actions and omissions, whose words or silences, have contributed in which ways to things turning out as they are doing, and by our assigning responsibility accordingly” (2010, 146). Humans search, in other words, for specifically human agents to whom they can assign blame or praise, to an extent that explanations of a chain of events in everyday life, however complex, will rarely be satisfactory without them.

Neglecting the ways in which responsibility is predicated is the key flaw for ANT, according to Laidlaw. At the same time, ANT allows for causal explanations that do not rest
entirely on interior motivations or the exercise of “free will.” Taking up the causal framework of ANT, along with moral theories that account for a variety of causes in the attribution of moral responsibility (e.g. Williams 1985), Laidlaw offers an amended conception of agency in which agency turns out to be “an aspect of the relational processes whereby stretches, phases, or stages of people’s ongoing conduct are interpreted as acts for which distinct agents (of varying shape and size) are accountable” (2010, 155).

The salient theoretical implication from Laidlaw’s discussion is that responsibility—both in terms of the ways it is assigned and the moral weight it carries—is intimately connected to agency, such that “an augmentation to one’s agency is not necessarily an empowering or liberating experience” but instead carries increased responsibility “for particular happenings or states of affairs, and these may include states of affairs that they have rather limited capacity to influence” (2010, 162-163). A close examination of responsibility and how it unfolds in various social worlds has implications for understandings of agency—at the very least, it demands an account of agency that takes responsibility seriously.

Conceptions of agency and responsibility illuminate the dynamics of Janet’s frustrations, and indeed play a role in explaining her sense of ethical fatigue. As Mama J, Janet bears responsibility for many things, whether or not she agrees that responsibility should be predicated on her. Her students, according to her, see her as being responsible for demonstrating care, nurture, and giving guidance—or in her more pejorative language, “babying.” While she denies these forms of responsibility, she does feel their weight, and feels the weight of the responsibilities she does accept—primarily that of seeking funding and administering UBOM! as a company. Meanwhile, funding agencies also see her as responsible for following bureaucratic
protocols, and hold her responsible for breeching those protocols—one of the reasons she found herself in trouble with them.

There is undoubtedly some slippage in how I am using responsibility here. Laidlaw speaks of responsibility in terms of causal explanations that attach to moral judgments (for example, one person being responsible for stealing another’s wallet). I use responsibility not only in that sense but also in the sense of a duty, which is something that Laidlaw does not venture to do. There is good reason for invoking this sense of responsibility, however: it is assumed by Janet’s students that she has the ability to carry out these duties, and the fact that she has grown to resent some of them (especially the “babying”) suggests that they are not only expected, but that she will be, to some degree, viewed as cold and distant if she doesn’t perform them. There are moral judgments, that is, that attach themselves to responsibility in this sense as well. She is held to account—made responsible—for these duties, and also held responsible for the actions of which she is thought to be an agent.

Janet, in her own accounting of her situation, does not posses agency. More importantly, she does not possess it in either the practice theory or the ANT formulations of the concept. She feels that fighting the obstacles to funding UBOM! is a losing battle, given the bureaucratic and structural forms of inertia that she is up against. Because of her institutional position, she is also forced to reckon with the emotional demands that come with her role as administrator and mentor-figure for UBOM!. She has no agency, in either case, in the face of structure. She is also, in her view, not much of an agent when it comes to ANT accounts of agency either: she is merely the terminus of a long causal chain of funding mechanisms, and the decision to deny UBOM! funding has less to do with her and more to do with the logics of government funding,
the caprice of particular bureaucrats, and the corruption of others who administer funds to
themselves and those in their networks.

Assumptions that she is responsible, however, are in turn assumptions of agency:
assumptions that she’s not giving enough emotionally for reasons that are blameworthy;
assumptions that she’s being duplicitous in having funding advanced by the university;
assumptions that she has the power to change what she cannot in fact control. External
assumptions of agency press inward, demanding that she accomplish what she does not feel
herself capable of and pushing her to follow protocols that would have a detrimental effect on
her work. Perhaps she has more power than she supposes, but it certainly does not feel that way
to her. What makes her a “worse person” (an internal judgment) are the ways that she feels
herself responding to these conflicting accounts of agency and responsibility.

Janet became, because of her inescapable entanglements in these expectations, a different
sort of Mama J—more distant, more pragmatic, more administrative. She remains Mama J so
long as she occupies the space of artistic director of the company, which is for the foreseeable
future because she hasn’t found anyone that she feels is willing or competent enough to train for
the position long-term. Kinship often carries with it a state of normative permanence (Faubion
2001b), and the expectation of others that she will remain Mama J keep her in place for now.

That kinship can be exhausting is no surprise; it is common for people to get tired of
being a mother or father, aunt or uncle. The ethical exhaustion faced by Janet, however, stands as
something that is qualitatively different. Her comments point to a trajectory of ethical decay; she
is becoming a worse person for her motherhood rather than a better one, but she cannot quit
altogether. Conflicting accounts of responsibility and agency, coupled with her own dogged
persistence, leave her in a role that is esteemed by others but simultaneously draining. Janet’s sense of weariness shows a darker side of ethics—her conscious exercise of freedom—those things she undertakes to live into the subject position of “Mama,” paradoxically binds her to become a worse person. It is the albatross around her neck.

It was and is hard to ascertain exactly what keeps Janet going in her role as Mama J. It is, in many ways, even harder to know what keeps South Africans trudging forward in recognition of their role in building a “new” South Africa—and understandable to the extent that they stop. Mandela is dead. Tutu will be dead before too long. Many South Africans too, are exhausted—exhausted by the demands of reconciliation, by calls to “forget the past,” or alternately, by calls to wrestle with redefining whiteness in such a way that one can re-emerge worthy of receiving the esteem of racial others. Just how responsible (whether we are referring to duties or to actions, each of which are attended by moral judgments) are South Africans for South Africa’s current moral trajectory? To what extent can it be said that black South Africans have the agency to forgive, or that white South Africans have agency to transform racialized subjectivities? More broadly, what keeps anyone steadfast in subject positions characterized by Gordian knots of responsibility and agency, when there is little or no compulsion to remain? The answers to these questions are far from obvious. Yet the answers—and whether they keep South Africans working toward visions of a “new nation”—will define South Africa for the decades to come.

Making Ends Meet

Isaac Schapera, writing in 1941, went to great lengths to communicate the strain that European contact had placed on Bkgatla forms of kinship, although the wheels of that revolution, as two of his own students have pointed out, began turning much earlier than that (Comaroff and
Comarff 1991, 1995). In Schapera’s context where money was growing in its importance for exchange on the reserves, kin were increasingly less likely to help in times of financial distress. Schapera in fact argued that “the bonds of kinship are no longer so advantageous to all, and may even be found a burden by men whose occupations make them a suitable mark for the importunities of the needy” (1941, 137). The issue was not simply about needing money to buy European luxury goods, but also to pay one’s dues in the form of taxes and levies to a colonial administration and to participate in new forms of citizenship and personhood.

A major facet of post-Mandela South Africa and its “suspended revolution” (Habib 2013) is the fact that political economy continues to place a crushing weight on kinship. An artist with whom my wife and I grew quite close told me about how she grew up working to provide for her younger siblings and her terminally ill mother, and she was (and likely still is) the sole financial provider for her family—a husband and two sons—as well as numerous extended family members that continue to seek her out for support. During one of our many conversations, she once told me that the only thing she really envied about white South Africans was the amount of wealth that they have. Connected to this wealth, for her, was a sense that there was no expectation of this wealth shared or distributed within a family. If a white woman leaves home and makes her own way in the world, it’s not necessarily up to her to support her other unemployed siblings or parents—it’s her life, her house, her money that she has earned. She, on the other hand, felt the constant strain of having to render assistance to family.

Her observations about the economics of white kinship were astute in many ways. While capital of various kinds, as Bourdieu has shown very well, are reproduced through inheritance, through taste, and through habitus more generally, a white South African is not on the hook for supporting unemployed family members to nearly the same extent as a black South African
might be. Even so, in the context of the kinship I have been discussing, the responsibilities placed on Janet to provide financially and emotionally for her family (in the form of UBOM!) were quite taxing indeed. Her unwillingness to become imbricated in networks that she saw as corrupt and nepotistic (and the extent to which she found it futile to continue struggling against them), along with the strain and stress of cycles of funding applications, wore her out and left her with little enthusiasm for the role that people expected her to continue playing. The role of Mama J was itself already loaded with responsibilities that she was growing tired of. Janet has undoubtedly lived a different life as a white South African. Her weariness with the expectations of family, I would argue, was qualitatively quite similar to Black South African mothers in interesting ways.

Bonginkosi and Tshepo likewise struggled to be good malumes, when playing that role for the children of their organization meant, among other things, dealings that could eventually get them into trouble. At the same time, raising funds outside of funding agencies and networks was difficult if not impossible without the right sorts of connections and business acumen. The suspicion that one man got ahead at the other’s expense (and the expense of the organization) broke a decades long friendship and dissolved the kinship they had formed with the children.

The strains on kinship in both of these cases took an ethical toll. Janet came to resent the task of being a mother, and Bonginkosi and Tshepo might still informally play the role of malumes to neighborhood children, but no longer to the same extent. If theatre is a space of kinship, it is increasingly a space marked by these familial tensions, in the context of a nation that has only recently lost one of its fathers.
Chapter 3

In the Ring:

Epistemic Agon and Institutional Constraint in a South African University

Dispatches from the University Currently Known as Rhodes

The light of the flaming barricades was clouded by teargas, the air punctuated with the percussion of stun grenades and rubber bullets. South African Police Services (SAPS) were responding in force to another round of student protests in Grahamstown on October 19, 2016. Ten students were detained by SAPS, the latest in a burgeoning list of students at the UCKAR who have found themselves subject, with varying levels of injury, to tactics aimed at securing the university through heavy police presence. These arrests followed a pitched battle between student protestors and SAPS that ranged over much of the upper-campus. Sizwe Mabizela, the University’s Vice-Chancellor, was shaken but defiant: complaining of rampaging students and admitting that the university does not have the capacity to handle such protests, he relied on the State Security Agency\textsuperscript{34} and SAPS for help. Help (for Mabizela at least) had arrived indeed: a

\textsuperscript{34} South Africa’s domestic intelligence agency, the SSA was formed in 2009 to bring the National Intelligence Agency, the South African Secret Service, the South African National Academy of Intelligence, the National Communications Center, and COMSEC together into one department.
constant stream of videos documenting police beating and firing on students would continue to proliferate on Facebook and Twitter in the days that followed.

“Fees Must Fall,” the uniquely South African hashtag and slogan of the current student protests, is a demand for completely free university education; a response to an all-too-familiar story of steadily increasing university tuition and steadily declining government expenditure on higher education. While Fees Must Fall is a movement that is unfolding on a national scale and shutting down a number of South Africa’s universities, it is only the latest iteration of a series of student protests that have been unfolding in earnest since March of 2015. The initial protests began when a group of student protestors from the University of Cape Town covered a statue of colonial magnate John Cecil Rhodes in feces. Protestors *toyi-toyi’d* (a well-known form of protest dancing from the apartheid era) around the statue and called for its removal to the delight of some and the disgust of (mostly white) others. Colonial figures like Rhodes, the protestors said, had no place in a contemporary South African space of education. The movement naturally spread to the university that bears Rhodes’s name, and Rhodes University has begun the process of a formal name change.

Students at the UCKAR joined the Fees Must Fall movement in October of 2015, on the heels of protests that had already shut down the University of the Witwatersrand and had been met with violence by police and private security officers in the university’s employ. The legal groundwork for a similar show of force in Grahamstown would come six months later in April of 2016 via a court interdict that “prevents students from interfering with other students or academic activities, academic or administrative staff at the university,” and makes it clear that police will respond forcefully to anything that resembles “kidnapping, assaulting, threatening, intimidating or otherwise interfering with the free movement, bodily integrity and psychological
wellbeing, and any other constitutional rights of any members of the Rhodes University community on the Applicant’s campus” (Mail and Guardian, April 20, 2016). The interdict, it should be noted, was not a response to “Fees Must Fall” or “Rhodes Must Fall” protests, but instead a series of protests against the prevalence of sexual assault on campus. Names of accused rapists were publicly circulated, quotes from university employees dismissing complaints of sexual assault were posted in public places, and the university was brought to a standstill. The interdict against these protests remains in place, giving SAPS the legal wherewithal to enter and exit campus at will, and to shoot (with non-lethal but nonetheless extremely painful rounds) students that are deemed disruptive.

These protests and the increasingly violent response they provoke revolve, in countless ways, around bodies: black bodies tired of moving through “white space” (Anderson 2015) that is charged with the energy of a colonial legacy; demands that the university protect the bodily integrity of female students against violation; the material implications of rising fees that mean a choice between paying for food or education; bodies that carry the memory and inscription of apartheid (Fassin 2008); and bodies inscribed with new memories through experiences of trauma and violence on the grounds of the university.

The UCKAR, I argue, is institutionally incapable of taking these forms of bodily struggle seriously. What follows is both a justification of this assertion and a prologue to the events that are currently unfolding at the UCKAR. Specifically, I examine Agon: Conflict and Catharsis in Boxing and Performance, a performance by Athina Vahla, and the university environment that the work was enveloped within. Agon was a theatre production that placed a boxer (Mziwoxolo Mdwayana) and his coach (Thabang Hlalele) from the local township of Joza in the central roles. Their regular training exercises were choreographed by Athina, and became a ground for
reflection on themes of power, discipline, and the body. In preparation for the show, Athina traversed numerous regimes of expertise and knowledge at the UCKAR, drawing on insights from the university’s philosophers, sociologists, sports scientists, and artists about the broader significance of boxing as a site of struggle and mastery over the self. Panel discussions, conceptualized as an integral part of the performance, were similarly eclectic: psychoanalysts, community organizers, anthropologists, and physical theatre experts all engaged in theoretical and scholarly forms of *agon* \(^\text{35}\) that complemented the battle happening in the ring. By putting the disciplined and vulnerable body into examination from diverse perspectives in its production and performance, *Agon* was an attempt to take bodies seriously, and to theorize the body in struggle across racial, socioeconomic, and epistemic domains at the site of a single performance.

*Agon* also took as its aim the development of an ethics that would seek to transcend boundaries and borders in forms of self-mastery and self-overcoming. In its examination of bodily struggle, *Agon* invited its audiences and panel participants to engage, more deeply, their own forms of agon. The result, it was hoped, would be a new ethics that would mediate new forms of knowledge and new genres of performance.

Drawing on my observations and participation in *Agon*, I argue that the work was an attempt to get professors, students, and surrounding community at the UCKAR to take bodies seriously. While the project was not a failure, *Agon* came up against significant forms of constraint. Despite Athina’s travels across the university to generate interest and expert epistemic investment in the show, attendance at *Agon* was sparse, and the panel discussions unfolded to completely empty rooms. Athina’s invitation to theorize the body required the transcendence of

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\(^{35}\) By way of a basic definition, the word ‘agon’ refers to a struggle or contest. Later in the chapter, I go in depth about the original Greek usage and the ways in which it informs the work.
the boundaries of disciplinary expertise and a flexible set of epistemologies that are deeply at odds with the UCKAR—a space marked by an audit culture (Strathern 2001) in which disciplinary orthodoxy and its products as a profession (weighed through assessments) are paramount. Gaps in trans- and cross-disciplinary forms of thinking about the body did not lead to the student protests that would take place less than a year later, but they do stand as a prior and more elite iteration of irresolvable conflicts around the body. *Agon* as an artwork and the agon unfolding through the protests, that is, are both visible evidence of violence—both epistemic and embodied—that are continuing to threaten the legitimacy of a post-Mandela South Africa, and its universities in particular.

**Athina**

Athina is about five feet tall and has the muscular physique of a dancer. Her hair, blonde and punky, would either spike up in pieces or lay down flat in a sort of disorganized part, depending on her activities for the day. A day lecturing in front of students does not render her appearance more conservative; her fashion transmitted the edgy habitus of the artist no matter what the venue. Much like me, Athina can routinely get away with being estimated some five to ten years younger than her actual age. Her small stature, her intense energy (mediated through rapid-fire Greek-accented English), and her heterodox fashions emanate from a relentless, buzzing source of energy.
The sense of urgency that Athina seemed to have every waking moment is, for most people, reserved only for moments of sheer panic. She had a hectic, frantic, scattered drive to all her activities, as though she was perpetually running fifteen minutes late wherever she goes in life (and she most often was). More fundamentally, she has a sense of intense restlessness that propelled her from one activity to the next, unable to imagine what life could be like otherwise. “The moment I stop flowing…” she once began to muse, trailing off. She could not even imagine, it seemed, how it would feel to be completely at rest. A chaotic and boundless energy was her default.

Then again, it is worth mentioning that I met her at a particularly busy time in her life. The latest iteration of a project that she would produce during my stay in Grahamstown was already revving into production, and as the director, choreographer, and artistic visionary, Athina was solely responsible for making sure that things fell into place. Quite often, things did not, setting off a new crisis and a new burst of hectic problem solving.

When she is not in the United Kingdom or back in Greece creating commissioned works, Athina has made her home in Grahamstown for nearly ten years as a figure that seems to revel in her liminal social status. While Athina has spent various periods in official positions within the drama department (as a lecturer, and most recently as an artist in residence for the First Physical Theatre Company), she has spent just as much time living outside of them. Professing herself to have no status, Athina sees herself as “a traveler or a passenger” from one thing to another, constantly on the move both physically and intellectually.
A lifestyle characterized by sustained antistructure doesn’t bother Athina, but it did put a strain on her relationships at the time. Her partner Peter expressed a good deal of frustration over the fact that she generates no reliable income as an artist. For her work as the director, producer, and choreographer of Agon (three month’s work by conservative standards) she drew as her payment the sum of 10,000 rand; well under 1,000 dollars. “I was never driven by money,” she argued, “but in a way I always managed to survive gracefully.” Part of surviving gracefully, for better or worse, meant that Peter would pick up some of their joint expenses as a couple. Athina’s sense of his confusion and irritation over exactly what Athina does was palpable: “If you can’t rationalize it, is it research?” she asked, mirroring his perspective. “No, he thinks it’s purely dances that make absolutely no sense.” While Peter would eventually (and publicly) express great pride for Athina and tout the non-monetary and non-instrumental value of her work, the ways in which she consistently flouted concerns of economic utility was initially a frustration and a source of tension.

Athina’s liminal positioning with regard to the university is matched by a sense of epistemic liminality; intellectually, Athina lives and plays “in the cracks” between disciplines, methodologies, and ways of knowing the world. Although her background is “purely dance,” she told me, “in my mind I always had other ideas”: themes and spatial configurations that consistently transgressed the borders of her own disciplinary expertise. Her experimentation with site-specific works caused her to increasingly branch out—first, to other artistic disciplines that could be collaboratively brought into conversation with her choreography, and eventually outside the realm of art entirely. Driven by the constant search for new forms of bodily movement and bodily understanding, Athina can’t settle for an orthodox set of approaches for how bodies ought
to move. Instead, each new work brings with it the cultivation of epistemic communities that comprise a wide range of interlocutors from a number of different disciplines.

Her departure from the purity of her own discipline and professionalization has meant that ideas of excellence and the drive to create “high art” forms of perfection had to be rethought. This was especially the case in a commissioned work that Athina called her “breaking point.” Commissioned to create a site-specific piece for the reopening of London’s Royal Festival Hall in 2007, Athina found herself working with 150 students, many of whom were marginalized in some way, whether because of their race, disability, gender, or socio-economic status. The six-story newly renovated concert hall normally would have been the occasion for a large scale spectacle, beautifully choreographed, aesthetically excellent. To a large extent, this is what the producers of the show wanted, although according to Athina they also stipulated that she “spend the money quickly and make something.” Feeling that she was a pawn being deployed to celebrate token instances of diversity, Athina decided to use the opportunity to strike out beyond her expertise as a choreographer. Nothing was straightforward about her attempt to work with marginalized bodies: when she wasn’t fighting to center those with bodies typically seen as grotesque, ugly, or deformed, she was actively intervening into knife fights between the rival gang members that also made up part of her cast. Nonetheless, she found a kind of chaotic beauty in working with different bodies. The work was an attempt to center their ways of knowing and forms of movement, allowing them to speak on their own terms rather than by choreographic fiat.

This production caused Athina’s conception of aesthetic excellence to be radically rethought. “Things changed. My whole life changed,” she told me. There was something larger, for her, than aesthetic product. Pushing through borders and boundaries, whether bodily or
intellectual, had become a way of life for her; the water she swims in. Most importantly, the conceptualization and theorization of her work no longer begins in her own expertise but in a dialogical process that includes her performers.

*Agon*, her latest work, was thus animated by epistemic approaches and tensions between embodiment and intellectual labor that had been developing for quite some time. As a sustained meditation on visceral forms of embodied struggle, the challenge inherent in *Agon*, for Athina, was that the language of the body is of a different order than theory. “We live into its fuzziness,” she argued. At the same time, the ineffability of embodied experience needed to be rendered intelligible in order to showcase bodily knowledge as a legitimate companion to theory: “I thought: if we can make this bridge where bodily knowledge *is* legitimate and serves theory—is that possible?” she wondered. “And if it is, how? So that’s, I think, the…*what was your question again?*” Athina set her coffee down absentmindedly. In her own ruminations on the struggle between cogito and body,36 she had lost sight of the theoretical question at hand in our interview (a question I had asked about her methodology), which was put to her fairly poorly at any rate.

**Agon: Conflict and Catharsis**

Athina envisioned *Agon: Conflict and Catharsis in Boxing and Performance* as a multidisciplinary theatrical event that combined a performance of the rituals and social spaces of boxing with academic inquiry and discussion. “Performance-led research,” one of the primary goals of the work, would be facilitated through an examination of a boxer as well as a “ring girl.” Athina hoped to acknowledge, through both these characters, the centrality of process and conflict within the liminal spaces of boxing: moments of pause, of preparation, of steadying the

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36 Athina’s reflections undoubtedly proceed from a Cartesian bifurcation of mind and body that is characteristic of intellectual expertise more broadly (see Boyer 2005). At the same time, similar to the practitioners of Physical Theatre in chapter one, she approaches this divide with the body as a starting point.
self. These private moments of conflict and struggle would culminate in public presentations of a bodily self that showed a sense of mastery and transcendence. For the boxer, this would be accomplished through a live and unscripted bout with an opponent that would be viewed by the audience, who would take their places on stage as part of the “community of the ring.” For the ring girl, moments of agon would culminate in a performance that combined feminine sexuality and bodily power. *Agon* would also mimic a sense of economic agon through a bidding war that would take place as spectators vied with each other for ownership of a piece of art, the sale of which would raise money to benefit the local boxing club.

Three separate panel discussions, considered an integral part of the performance, would also take place to process the evidence created by the work. These panels, which encompassed disciplines ranging from water science to psychoanalysis, focused on different facets of boxing in an attempt to draw knowledge from the embodied practices put on display. The first panel in particular would follow a similar format to a boxing match with some modifications: standing in separate corners, each of two contributors at a time would have two minutes to give a presentation utilizing their own disciplinary frameworks to come to substantive insights about boxing. Immediately after, their partner would do the same. Unlike the boxing match, these presentations were not antagonistic but collaborative, seeking an answer to the question of whether “there is scope for a hybrid performance form which might emerge out of sports as drama.” Two subsequent panel discussions would take place the next day to explore facets of interdisciplinarity and the social and political facets of boxing.
Athina’s vision for Agon as a production evokes, in many ways, the fluidity of agon in its ancient Greek usage. It is indeed difficult to overestimate the ubiquity of agon in ancient Greek life, given that it referred broadly to contests and struggles that occurred across a variety of social domains. War, of course, was one major form of agon, though agon also referred to competitive events like gymnikos agon (athletic competitions), hippikos agon (equestrian competitions), and mousikos agon (musical competitions).37 Athina’s focus on boxing (itself having origins in ancient Greece) places her work within the lineage of such events.

At the same time, Athina’s commitment to the centrality of debate, discussion, and reflection connects her vision for Agon to ancient Greek tragedy and its engagement with civic life. Ancient Greek theatre, that is, was also a site of agon in multiple ways. Theatre itself could a site of competition between plays, between playwrights, and between actors (Cartledge 1997), much like a contemporary drama or film festival. More importantly, agon was a formal element within tragedy itself. Generally coming at a point at which two characters (or, at times, one character and the chorus) argued from two opposing positions, the agon served to explicitly lay out the fundamental conflict of a tragedy and the logics that animated it (Llyod 1992).

It is precisely with regard to tragic agon that the lines between distinct spheres of agon in ancient Greece blurs most radically, for tragedians look the rhetorical form and structure of tragic agon directly from civic life. Llyod (1992) argues that the plays of Euripedes in particular “clearly owe a great deal, both in form and in content, to a variety of situations in contemporary Athenian life which provided a formal context for the conflict of arguments. Prominent among them were the lawcourts, but the political and diplomatic debates were also relevant” (1992, 2).

37 See Miller 2004.
Far from simply borrowing from and mimicking these contexts, theatre was in a “productively dialogical relationship” with the law, such that orators wrote tragedies as well as forms of legal argumentation for clients (Cartledge 1997, 14-15). Ancient Greek tragedy, then, not only participated in the competitive spirit of agon, but also overlapped with other civic forms of agon. The use of agon in tragedy was “an integral part of its engagement with the public life of the contemporary city” (Goldhill 1997, 135).

Athina’s ambitious goal for *Agon* was to evoke something of the original blurriness between theatre and civic life by stitching together seemingly distinct fields in academia and performance. By pairing performances of preparation and combat with discussions among members of a robust epistemic community, she hoped to represent agon artistically, while also showcasing a theatrical sense of agon as a method of critique and exploration. Engagement with a broad scope of individuals from the UCKAR community, she hoped, would show signs of “a truly interdisciplinary process of observation, reflection and knowledge” to push agon out of the space of theatre and into the university community. For Athina, the entire production stood as evidence of the agon “between theory and practice, academia and non-academia, the cerebral versus the embodied.” In these ways, *Agon* was an epistemic endeavor that played between boundaries of expertise as much as it was an embodied, physical endeavor.

Taken as a whole, *Agon* is part of a broader trajectory of interdisciplinary performance pieces created by Athina. *Topos* (2011) and *Polis* (2012), were both productions for the annual National Arts Festival that created collaborative spaces of academic discussion paired with performance, often occurring alongside each other. The difference between *Agon* and these works was its central research question (or as Athina framed it in her program notes, “the same damn simple question): “if most of us share a body with two arms, two legs, one torso, one head
which makes us experience a kind of ‘knowing’ and sharing because of our physical genetic make, how can we use this basic inherent knowledge to better ourselves within our daily encounters and strivings, our agon?’ The goal was thus to generate knowledge through the starting point of embodiment. The bodies of the boxers (as well as the body of the ring girl) would create an immersive kinesthetic environment from which forms of embodied knowledge could be theorized and worked out collaboratively.

Through processes of production and performance, Athina—and *Agon* as her work—would encounter numerous forms of constraint within the context of the university. These forms of constraint, at times, came from enforcement of the boundaries and borders of the different regimes of expertise that Athina seemed to revel in muddying.\(^\text{38}\) Other forms of constraint would become apparent as Athina’s interlocutors attempted to overcome their own forms of epistemic struggle to help her theorize the work’s themes more deeply. In the sections that follow, I track Athina’s process of traversing the university to generate the forms of expertise and theorization that she hoped would be put into dialogue with the work, and discuss the performance itself. *Agon* was a success in some ways, but the same time, the work drew a disappointingly low turnout, and its panel discussions unfolded to empty rooms, failing to generate the sustained theorization and dialog about the body in struggle that Athina had hoped for.

\(^{38}\) Here, I draw analytical inspiration from Abbot (1988), who emphasizes enforcement, contestation, and dispute of epistemic borders as constitutive of the professions more broadly.
Epistemic Intersectionality: Traversing the University

For Athina, exploring embodied struggle through boxing was, of necessity, an interdisciplinary conversation that had to unfold in multiple registers. Praxis, for her, could not be separated from theory, and embodiment could not be parsed from cognitive processes. Understanding the body of the boxer meant that race, class, gender, and socioeconomic position had to be taken into account. The social contexts surrounding boxing—not only the bout itself but more liminal spaces of waiting and anticipation—were also priorities. In terms of a research project, Agon was a tall order indeed. While Athina could not simultaneously play the role of sociologist, ethnographer, philosopher, and psychologist, she saw her task as bringing experts from these fields together in the formation of an epistemic community that would help her “bridge the gaps” to derive knowledge from the visceral and embodied evidence of struggle that Agon would present.

Unbeknownst to me until her visit to a sociology class, ethnographic methods constituted a central part of Athina’s research for the development of Agon. Inspired the “carnal sociology” of Loïc Wacquant (2015), and in particular, by his research on boxing (2004), Athina had engaged in her own ethnographic
research of boxing over the years. As such, she was presented as a social-scientific expert in her own right to the class, and was invited to share her ethnographic approach with the students. Others, it seemed, had already been speaking to the class about their uses of ethnography; Athina’s talk was thus presented as another “autobiographical account of research.” Even so, Athina did not come to the class to impart expertise but to seek it, hoping that the students and the professor might help contribute to a more robust social-scientific methodology for *Agon*.

Athina’s own knowledge practices are driven by a foundational principle of Socratic ignorance—“one thing that I know,” she once told me, “is that I know nothing. I love that quote!” Her lecture to the sociology students at the UCKAR on ethnography was an attempt to deploy some of this ignorance in order to generate insights and refinements for her research. Athina did not profess expertise about ethnography as such. She admitted not having any training in ethnographic method, and denied that she spoke from any textbook. Speaking “from the heart” instead, Athina told the class about how she “stumbled and tripped” her way into ethnography in the course of her research about boxing. She was not a proper ethnographer, she told the class, and would produce no ethnographic product as the result of her research. She admitted that her research was “faulty” and asked the class to help her see where it was potentially “dodgy.”

As she lectured about ethnography, Athina evinced a particular anxiety about the subject of ethics. She went out of her way to address the topic, even when it wasn’t raised by anyone in particular. She explicitly wanted the class to know that the research she conducted was not, in any conventional academic sense, ethical. She did not submit her project to guidance by an institutional review board. She did not hand out and collect consent forms, nor did she gain verbal consent for interviews beyond inviting people to participate in conversations with her. She readily admitted that she paid informants for their time. Ultimately, she said, sociologists and
other qualitative researchers are likely to have a big problem with the way she is conducting her research.

Athina’s anxiety was obviously, on one level, aimed at warning the students against such practices, and she repeatedly told them not to do the same. Nonetheless, her lackadaisical regard for institutional ethics served as foil for an ethics that stood outside of institutional spaces. The research encounter, she told the class, is an encounter with the other, whether that other is an object, a group, or a person. This encounter carries the responsibility of finding ways to dialog and communicate; a common language must be found to facilitate this encounter. This language, for Athina, is barely ever verbal. “Our essence—how we experience the world—is through our bodies,” she told the class. Throughout her lecture Athina presented ethnography as a practice rooted in an ethics of encounter that is never uniform and not particularly susceptible to procedural ethics. It unfolds along multiple axes that transcend issues of consent and communication itself; a situational and dialogical exchange between ethnographer and interlocutor.

In this way, Athina defended her sense of research ethics while simultaneously rendering it problematic. The expertise that she sought was an identification and intervention into any facets of her ethnographic work that were particularly suspect. Yet she was also clear that this project did not conform in any rigorous sense to the procedural ethics of the university. In their capacity as students doing their own research, they could not, of course, be encouraged to follow her lead. But her lecture was also an invitation to interface with her brand of guerilla ethnography and its ethics of encounter.
Her invitations to dialog and to come to the show were met mostly with silence. As Athina’s lecture drew to a close (and after screening a video from the boxing club in Joza), the obvious and embodied restlessness of the students (zipping up backpacks, packing up purses, looking at cellphones) signaled that the class time was already handily surpassed. Despite her attempts to elicit questions from the students, to get help in seeing the “dodgy” aspects of her project, the students were uninterested in engaging. She left them with her email address and an invitation to come and participate in the conversations that would take place around the performance.

To deepen the engagement of theory with her project, Athina also visited a philosophy class that had been reading Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morality*. As with the sociologists, her goal was the deployment of expertise in service of her project, coupled with an invitation to step beyond disciplinary boundaries in an exploration of *Agon*’s themes of conflict and catharsis. “We talk about theory a lot, but how do we talk about the language that is visceral?” she asked the class. “What happens with this language, the embodied experience?” The application of Nietzsche, she hoped, would not only add philosophical insights to the project but also give the philosophers a springboard to new arenas of contemplation.39

After a brief overview of the project, Athina introduced the three video clips of the project that she would show to the class, depicting rituals of preparation, a round of shadow boxing against an invisible opponent, and a punching workout with his trainer. The fight, Athina noted is “all in his head” at this point. The clips gave evidence of an intense discipline that had become automatic and a training regimen embodied so deeply that it left spaces for anticipation

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39 Athina had already been reading Nietzsche prior to visiting the philosophy class. Her understanding of agon as a concept that included inner struggles directed at self-overcoming obviously evokes Nietzsche’s deployment of agon in various places (e.g. Nietzsche 2001:6-7). For more, see Hillesheim 1986; Tunsel 2013).
of the struggle to come. The philosophers, she hoped, would let Nietzsche speak to this context to unpack the themes further and more deeply.

Through the course of the conversations that followed, which included students working in small groups and presenting their findings to the class, boxing emerged as an expression of the will to power. The training and preparation rituals, the students noted, are exceedingly “ascetic,” evidenced by the highly disciplined manner in which the boxer directed cruelty inward in an attempt at self-mastery and excellence. Constraint rather than excess, they argued, is what leads him to overcome himself time and time again. On the other hand, the fight itself is not ascetic at all, but instead noble. The boxer—a sovereign individual in Nietzsche’s sense, fuses his nobility and will to power with ascetic ideals in the space of the ring. Nietzsche would not entirely approve of boxing—the rules make the contest a bit too restrained to truly celebrate the spectacle of domination. Even so, he would applaud the self-mastery and the self-overcoming of the boxer.

Not everyone, it seemed, was completely comfortable with the direction the conversation was taking. In a rush toward the end of class (the next lecture would start six minutes later) a visiting postdoctoral student briefly took the podium to intervene into what he saw as a kind of intellectual seduction inherent in the project. His task, then, was to dissuade the class from being
overly enchanted with the subject at hand: “It’s so important not to be infatuated by these kinds of acts. It is something to admire boxing and something else to be a boxer. There’s a difference between these two, okay? Philosophy is a major in which you try to draw connections between ideas. That is philosophy, and nothing else.” He concluded by noting the vast range of ideas that philosophers get to work with—there are not necessarily any new ideas but endless combinations of existing ones.

Despite this moment of paranoia (driven by concerns of disciplinary purity and framed in the erotic language of infatuation), the philosophers seemed generally earnest and excited about applying philosophical insights to boxing, and to seeing embodied instances of self-overcoming to expand their more disembodied forms of contemplation. Athina considered the conversation a success, and closed by making sure the students were invited to attend and contribute to the forthcoming panel discussions.

Athina’s seminar and lecture circuit also brought her to the department of drama. Her seminar discussion in this context was not, in any sense, aimed at using the language of performance to approach the subject of boxing. Unlike her philosophical foray into Nietzsche, with its questions of nobility and the will to power, or sociology and the question of the “dodgy” bits of her project, there would be no disciplinary frameworks solicited in this context. While the theme was set as “representations of power,” we spent much of the seminar discussing the question of “why such an unnecessary or diversionary activity (sport) had become such a human necessity.” During our conversation, and unlike either of the other two disciplinary encounters, Athina tried the most among the members of the drama department to integrate conversations that she had brought with her from other disciplines. Rather than performance expertise (which, perhaps, was already assumed), the expertise she projected in this space was the expertise of the
catalyst who would bring disparate threads together. Her invitation in this space was a call to engage with ideas that she had heard elsewhere, including her visits to the philosophy class.

These conversational prompts did not get much traction, seeming to stall after short, single-sentence answers to the points she was raising. Even so, participants in the seminar were generally open to the discussion and certainly engaged with Athina. Their insights were not grounded in epistemologies of performance, but instead comprised a collection of functionalist analyses of sport, observations of gender and class, and folk psychology. Taking a more critical approach, one faculty member “questioned the question” of whether sport truly was unnecessary, and argued that sport is a space of play and leisure that is intensely important. Others bemoaned the extent to which sport had become a “moneyed, consumerist space” and, at times, an unabashedly political tool of nation-building and manipulation.

The seminar never quite gathered the momentum of a conversation. More fundamentally, we did not arrive at any significant sense of disciplinary expertise about sport and boxing. In large part, this is due to the already interdisciplinary nature of the drama department, where a wealth of disciplinary approaches and forms of knowledge are brought to bear on pedagogies and executions of performance. At the same time, there seemed to be a distinct lack of generative contribution from the perspective of drama or performance.

Feeling rather surprised that no one had brought up issues related to performance or even aesthetics (and ignoring, in retrospect, Athina’s goal in this particular space), I attempted my own recklessly constructed discussion question: “One thing we haven’t touched on yet is the spectacle itself,” I suggested. “And the aesthetics of the spectacle that draws us even if we don’t play the sport.” I went on to speak to the judgements of beauty—or lack thereof—that are passed
upon contexts of sport, and connected notions of beauty to a sense of Kantian disinterestedness. A provocation intended to arouse passions around the idea that art, of necessity, could not be useful. No one had a chance to take the bait; Athina quickly moved to the next topic of discussion: the tension between spaces of preparation and the bout itself.

A sense of disciplinary contribution was not the goal for the seminar at any rate. Athina was working to get other theatre artists to follow her thought process and be led through the epistemic tangents and rabbit holes that had characterized her work. It was an attempt, in other words, to push her colleagues toward her brand of epistemic eclecticism, mirroring on a smaller scale the process that would unfold in Agon. It did seem that her colleagues were willing to follow her as far as the seminar went, although only a small handful would show up for the performance itself, and none would attend the panel discussions happening around the work.

Athina’s activities across the university, aimed at generating a community of expertise around Agon, were successful in some ways. The instructor of the philosophy class that Athina visited ended up presenting on one of the panels, and her visits allowed her to promote the performance more broadly. At the same time, it was an uneven process that was met with some ambivalence at various points. The suspicion evinced by the postdoctoral student in philosophy is a particularly salient reminder that such projects are not always particularly welcome for those who wish to maintain a sense of disciplinary orthodoxy. More fundamentally, few of the students or professors that Athina invited actually came to the performance, and none would attend the panel discussions aimed at putting analytic flesh on the work’s themes. The performance and panel discussions, to which I turn next, were the culmination (at least for the moment) of Athina’s research on boxing. The reception of and participation in the work is, I argue, visible evidence of the constraints against which Agon had to unfold.
In the Ring

*Embodied Agon*

Agon and the panel discussions took place in the UCKAR’s Box Theater, a smaller, darker, more intimate setting outside of the larger venue within the same building. The Box was an ideal setting for Agon: in this space, there is not any substantive distance between the staging area and the spectators. The single entrance and exit discouraged quick dispersion of the audience, while the warmth of the lobby immediately outside invited further reflection and conversation.

Rather than recapitulate the entire performance, I focus instead on moments of the show meant to produce evidence of simultaneously embodied, cognitive, and affective forms of agon. In particular, I focus on moments that would be explicitly taken up for reflection by the panel discussions that would follow after the work: the moments of preparation and the spectacles of violence and blood that would occur during the bout sequence. These moments of struggle would serve as the impetus and springboard for more sustained reflection and theorization.

Agon revolved, in many ways, around private moments: of self-composure, of struggle, of preparation. Early in the show, in a dark and otherwise silent space, Mzi steadied himself as he

![Mzi prepares for his bout](image)
slowly and methodically wound tape around his wrists. Mzi didn’t look at his hands at all while doing so; he had obviously performed this ritual countless times. Muscle memory made space for contemplation as he stared out into the empty space thinking about his upcoming bout. His trainer entered the scene, carefully checking Mzi’s wrapping job by flexing his wrists back and forth. The sharp percussion of the music evoked a sense of time passing and evoked a pensive mood that complimenting Mzi’s restless contemplation.

Visualizing the presence of his opponent, Mzi moved into a short round of shadow boxing, followed by a more sustained period of preparation that included a variety of different physical exercises: footwork drills around cones, jumping rope, and relentlessly throwing punches into a set of pads held by his trainer. Musically, his activities were punctuated by the slow dirge of Vivaldi’s *Stabat Mater*, which, after a few minutes, was taken over by the chaotic energy of Prodigy’s rave anthem *Poison*. As the transition happened, Mzi shifted from his quiet and contemplative state to a frantic outburst of intense activity. The contrast between the two songs—one quiet and mournful, the other, abrasive and confrontational—was a presentation of a kind of dualism inherent in agon: a kind of fearful quietude paired with a relentless urge to annihilate.

Within *Agon*, Mzi was not performing simply as a boxer, but a black South African boxer from the township of Joza, evidenced by the footage of his boxing club that played in the background at various points in the performance. The disciplining of his body, accomplished through rigorous training and exercise, was also made evident through a team of sports scientists that, throughout the show, constantly took stock of his heartrate and other biometric information. But Mzi was not just a body—he engaged in intense periods of contemplation as a form of preparation, and was constantly probed for information on his own internal mental states.
Throughout the show Mzi as boxer thus emerges through the intersections of race and class, embodiment and rationality.

The exploration of the “ring girl” that followed Mzi’s preparations was similarly an exploration at the embodied nexus of gender, race, and sexuality. Rather than preparing for a fight against an opponent, however, she struggled to make her body conform to the relentless standards of femininity and beauty required by her job. Once again, Stabat Mater gave emotive content to her own forms of agon as she mentally prepared herself to bear the symbolic and physical weight of the signs she would carry for the fight’s spectators and practiced her choreography, mimicking the movements she would make once the bout started. Other forms of warming up, which included her own version of shadow boxing, were understood to be occurring in private before the match, but carried both a determination and a sense of urgency.

Her preparations demonstrated forms of power that are rendered invisible in her performance as ring girl, and her monolog to the audience would likewise dwell in the tension between private and public personas. “They call me Foxy,” she told the audience:

I’m a size 34A. Small, but sexy. I’m sexy. I’m a fighter. My mother used to say: ‘no guts, no glory. No pain, no gain.’ I’m a dancer. Yes, I have a child. I ring the bell. I walk the rounds. I like walking the rounds. I call the rounds. I ring the bell. I ring the bell on the graveyard shift. I…You don’t know who I am.
After her monolog was over, Foxy applied lipstick and a grotesque, tangled mess of a blond wig to replace her short, brown hair. Stiletto heels replaced her workout sneakers, and *Stabat Mater* would play again once she made her entrance into the stadium, now performing as the ring girl. Her movements as the ring girl were intense, seemingly impossible feats of balance and strength. One particular moment found her holding a large sign in one hand and one ankle in the other, all while balancing on the tiny point of one stiletto heel. Overcome by the weight of her sign, she eventually collapsed as the music reached a point of mournful crescendo. But the bout was starting soon. She picked herself back up and, as the Prodigy once again began blaring, resumed her sexualized composure. It was her job to get the audience excited.

Once the announcer had invited the audience to form the “community of the ring” on stage around the fighters and appropriate introductions had been made for each fighter, the bout began in earnest. Mzi and Anele, wearing protective head gear, sparred with each other across the ring, throwing cautious jabs and dodging punches where they could. In rehearsals, both men had been instructed by their coach not to spar too hard, as a serious injury to Mzi would jeopardize a bout he would fight in East London only a few days later.
Those actively taking part in the performance, such as Mzi’s trainer and the four drama students who served as living posts for the ring—cheered and called out sporadic encouragement and points of coaching, particularly when one or the other of the men would land a successful punch. The audience itself remained utterly silent throughout much of the fight, uncomfortable with their complicity in the violence that unfolded. They tended to jump back from the ring if the boxers go a little too close, and many watched with their arms crossed, itself a kind of defensive posture. Far from the crowd that would ordinarily gather for such a spectacle, audience members at the performance were squeamish and noncommittal in their support for the community of the ring. This lack of enthusiastic support didn’t tend to dampen the energy of either of the combatants, but it did somewhat dispel the pretense of a serious bout with serious consequences.

The audience was shocked out of their complacency at a particularly visceral moment in the bout that came about in a completely unscripted way. Anele took a hard punch to his nose, and soon blood was gushing from the wound and spraying across the stage. Despite the shocked gasps from the spectators, the fight continued with no interference from the referee. Afterward, the ring girl did her best to mop the blood up with a paper towel, but a good deal still remained
after the bout was over. In subsequent conversations, I learned that this moment was especially disturbing and jarring for many in the audience. They obviously had not expected to see blood, and the safe pretense of theatre had been disrupted in a radical way.

Disturbing as it was, seeing the blood on Anele’s face and on the canvas and seeing the very embodied stakes of the competition was a pivotal moment for many. Those who would take place in *Agon’s* panel discussions the next day repeatedly recalled this incident as one in which distinctions between art and life became blurred, and when issues of embodiment became central. Anele was not seriously injured, but the sight of blood was itself visible evidence of agon written on and flowing from the body.

*Getting Punched in the Face: Interdisciplinary Agon*

*Agon* was supplemented by three panel discussions, which were considered an integral part of the performance. It was here that evidence, provided by the body, would be examined more closely and critically by multidisciplinary panels of academic experts. The organic creation of new approaches to the body and new forms of knowledge was indeed the impetus for the work in the first place, and the panels were where the work of “bridging the gaps” between practice and theory would take place. Unfortunately, this work did not generate the participation and enthusiasm that Athina had hoped. While the performance of *Agon* was somewhat dampened by low attendance and a lack of enthusiasm for its bout and its auction, the panel discussions were greeted with completely empty rooms. The lack of response from the university community and Grahamstown more broadly was evidence of constraint on multiple levels: refusal to participate, failure to think beyond the confines of discipline, the enforcement of epistemic borders, and a lack of interest in the discussions that were repeatedly and earnestly promoted by Athina.
The lack of enthusiasm for Athina’s project cannot be reduced to a simple distaste for performance as a genre of critique and exploration, at least in the context of the UCKAR. The university routinely commissions works by the drama department to portray pressing campus issues and provoke discussion about them—part of the department’s intellectual labor on behalf of the university. Productions that tackle issues of race in particular have been praised as effective pedagogical tools for audiences as well as the actors themselves (Sutherland 2013a, 2013b), and during my time at Rhodes I witnessed a series of performances that introduced basic issues of scholarship, including citation, plagiarism, and work-life balance. Performance, in the context of the UCKAR, is not generally a liability to facilitating conversation but is indeed routinely deployed as an asset. The medium of performance itself thus cannot be meaningfully posed as an explanation for why Agon, on some levels at least, failed to generate the response that Athina hoped.

While Athina enjoys prestige and professional status in the UK and Greece, her deliberate marginal positioning relative to the UCKAR as an institution does not do her any favors, nor do her consistent attempts to muddy epistemic distinctions between disciplines. While her labor does, in a sense, result in a product of discernable disciplinary origin (performance), it is not the authorized research product of the university, strictly speaking. And while she was able to enjoy the use of the theatre department’s facilities and some amount of support, Agon was not the product of the department itself.40

40 The department’s own productions were much better attended—especially those that were made compulsory for students. Other productions through the department would receive much more promotion. I do not intend this as a criticism of the department itself, but simply a way of noting the professional resources to which Athina did not have access.
Athina’s particular brand of performance-driven conversation had detractors as well, which added to the weight of her marginal positioning relative to the UCKAR. Some invited panelists shared Athina’s commitment to themes of embodiment and struggle, but did not agree with the genre in which she presented her epistemic forays. Richard Pithouse, an activist-intellectual who has used the UCKAR as a base for work alongside a number of social movements, did not take Athina’s project seriously and refused to participate. A previous work in which he participated, Polis, had (according to him) made a mockery of the subject of inequality through its absurd panel structure, which included an academic debate in which chairs were positioned around a seductive pole dancer. He categorically refused to be a part of Agon, and others failed to show for similar reasons.

Whether because of her marginal status relative to the UCKAR, her epistemic muddying, or a sense of unease with her style, the panel discussions suffered from a decisive lack of attendance or interest. Toward the end of the second of Agon’s panels, titled “Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face,” the emptiness in the room could not go unremarked. However earnest and penetrating the dialog of the panel, we did, at some point, have to come to grips with the reality that no one was really there to see it, other than those involved in some other facet of the production (an audience of four people). No one—from the drama department, from other departments, or from the community of Grahamstown more broadly—was present to engage or hear the ideas that the panelists presented. Toward the end of the panel, Athina wearily reflected on the dismal attendance of the panel, comparing it with similar attempts at interdisciplinary dialogue in the past:
“It’s interesting if you look around here, we are in a theatre. With one, two, three, four, five people. You have a very interesting conversation, and I’ve been given the space both physical and intellectual from the department. But like with a [previous] year-and-a-half series of events, it’s often that my own colleagues and students are never here. We start something in order to facilitate a platform to understand something about bodily knowledge and interaction. But when it comes to it, people are not here. And it’s not about marketing. This [previous] series of interdisciplinary events I started, the idea was that you start with the body and try to get the students to be familiar with other ways and other manners of bodily expression beyond drama. Rather than just be immersed in drama studies only, they know how other artistic or other expressions happen. I felt that would be incredible and attract a lot of people…And anyone could be here—except for the students and the staff. So by talking about this lonely space…This space that one has to stand for, that has a sacrifice, and it’s not economical. This was the question I had: can this interdisciplinary space be economical? Does it serve the system of the university?"

Athina’s comments reflect multiple frustrations. One long-held grievance, shared with me multiple times, is the token support given to her by the department of drama. No one openly opposes her projects of course, and support in terms of space and time is “nicely and kindly” provided. Yet the support she truly desires—engagement with her cross-disciplinary explorations of the body—is not met with any response. Her gift of provocation, of time and space to engage other ways of creating knowledge, creating movement, creating connections, is not reciprocated in kind. More broadly, she expressed an honest sense of doubt about whether it is having any sense of broader impact in the space of the university. What the lectures, the discussions, and the provocations amount to at the end of the day is a mostly empty room rather than the kind of
robust engagement she would have hoped for; the kind of engagement that she desired, as a pedagogue, to pass on to her students.

The panel discussion was indeed a lonely space. Having known Athina—having seen her frantic last minute plans, hectic adjustments, and almost berserk energy—I have been tempted since Agon ended to see the low turnout of the panel discussions as the result of her poor promotion. At the same time, the lack of reciprocation from broader scholarly and artistic communities is part of a broader trajectory that encompasses, for Athina, not only this event but others as well. For this work, the room will always—seemingly of necessity—be lonely, empty, and quiet. There is no visible practical benefit, and such endeavors are generally seen as superfluous and trivial. There was simply no demand on campus for a sustained study and theorization of the body.

The panel discussions proceeded in earnest nonetheless. The second panel, “Everyone Has a Plan Until They Get Punched in the Face,” was the most explicit attempt to use Agon as point of departure for the generation of new forms of knowledge. The discussions that emerged from this panel in particular embodied the epistemic and ethical orientations that Athina had in mind for Agon. According to James Sey, who chaired the panel, the goal of the discussions was not only to start a conversation about embodied research, but also to interrogate the agon of research itself. The panelists would focus on agon “not only as a negative conflictual struggle but as a productive struggle between practice and research viewed as an intellectual activity,” he argued. This “productive struggle” would take as its point of departure the evidence of bodily knowledge and bodily struggle that was made visible during the previous night’s performance. In conversation with this embodied knowledge, the panel would give panelists and audiences the opportunity to think beyond the boundaries of narrow disciplinary confines and generate new
forms of knowledge that had bodies as their origin: township bodies (Mzi and his trainer), sexualized bodies (the ring girl), bodies in pain (Mzi’s opponent), and elite, academic bodies. The interpretation of this evidence would unfold within an eclectic epistemic community carefully assembled by Athina, which included Sey (listed in the program as a “theorist, artist, writer, boxer”), Sue Southwood (from the Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching, and Learning), Lisa Saville Young (a psychoanalytic therapist), Craig Patterson (a PhD candidate in history), and Tally Palmer (from the Institute of Water Research). Some of the panelists were firmly entrenched within the UCKAR as professors or PhD students (Southwood, Patterson), while others had more tenuous connections to the university (Sey and Palmer). Collectively, the group was committed to cross-disciplinary forms of thinking and dialog.

While the thread tying interdisciplinarity to the question of embodied knowledge was thin at times, it was at its most visible when the discussion turned to performance. “We start the world totally in our bodies,” Saville Young mused, “there’s no ability to think about our bodies. We just are our bodies. We like to forget that later on. We like to think that we are our thoughts and words, and I think performance reminds us about that.” Agon in particular contained these reminders in a visceral way: the blood that had sprayed the mat during the previous night’s performance had deeply impacted all the panelists. The bodily stakes are high in boxing; the possibility of pain and blood and sweat are always present.

The sweat and pain of the boxers (who were incidentally only supposed to be sparring) stands, in many ways, in stark contrast to the clean and polished product that academics produce. Even so, the panelists argued, the generation of knowledge is itself an embodied activity, a process vulnerable in its own ways. This vulnerability is twofold: first, an intensely embodied sense of confusion, of frustration, of hesitation; the affect produced when one is trapped in front
of an empty word document populated only by a blinking cursor. These are not cerebral, intellectual experiences. Secondly, panelists recognized the vulnerability inherent in appearing invulnerable to others. The vicissitudes of research are effaced, rendering epistemic struggle and the knowledge-making process invisible. Struggle and pain, present in every research endeavor, are completely obfuscated in the presentation of final research product, giving the sense that the process was effortless and inevitable. “The result seems to be that the research comes across as a sort of victorious part of you. You’ve subdued this minor opponent—the research question—as if the opponent didn’t stand any chance. I think anyone who’s done any research will admit that that thing really could have beaten you,” he confessed. Interdisciplinary research, other panelists argued, was a way of making this struggle visible through a process of wrestling and collaboration with others. For the panelists, then, vulnerability in research and vulnerability about research are, as a matter of ethics, part of research. The production of knowledge is a vulnerable process, and that vulnerability was admitted to be keenly felt on a physical level. Epistemic agon is not only cognitive, that is, but physical and affective as well. Despite the decisive lack of an audience for the panel, it had constituted a form of community that had rendered these forms of agon visible.

While the stated nature of the panel was to “discuss the place of embodiment for research in the tertiary institution,” the panelists spent the majority of their time working out an epistemology that would facilitate interdisciplinary knowledge production. On the one hand, this epistemology chaffed at the borders and boundaries of institutionalized academic disciplines. There was no compelling reason, some panelists argued, why methodology should remain orthodox in the face of questions that can only be answered through the utilization of a broader range of approaches. This is not to say that traditional disciplines and their methodologies ought
to be abandoned. Some questioned whether quality would sacrificed once disciplinary integrity is breached in favor of broader insight. Others, like Southwood, argued that promoting spaces between and beyond disciplinary domains does not preclude disciplinary expertise. “What could be built on is the notion of a hybrid of deep expertise and broad experience…A matrix, a warp and weft of strong disciplinary structures supporting a tapestry of authentic, engaged, meaningful knowledge making,” she argued. The epistemology sought by the panelists was thus one that was open to breaching boundaries when necessary, and more fundamentally, a sense that breaches needed to be plentiful to explore questions that were not susceptible to orthodox methodological approaches.

For all the panelists, the ethics of interdisciplinarity was driven, on the one hand, by a kind of hard-headed pragmatism. Disciplinary orthodoxy, panelists argued, becomes a plane of constraint and circularity that cannot respond in robust ways to new questions, let alone generate them. Getting “punched in the face” was thus a metaphor for the realization that epistemic and methodological frameworks bound by the conventions of a particular discipline ought to be abandoned for tools “nearer to hand.” On the other hand, it was mediated by an ethics of becoming that actively sought out spaces of discomfort and unease both for academics and their audiences. “I think discomfort is our best ethical barometer,” Palmer declared. The discomfort here is not necessarily bodily but instead epistemic: too much certainty and confidence about knowledge, she went on to argue, means that one is not “in ethical space.” The reconciling principle between a “punch in the face” and an embrace of ambiguity was straightforward for panelists: the punch in the face came about in the first place precisely because of certainty. Like a boxer taking his or her victory as an inevitability, epistemic rigidity and certainty only set one up to fall harder. And each panelist indeed had their own conversion narrative; a blinding
encounter where the limits of knowledge and the vicissitudes of academic research pushed him or her toward a decisive opening of relational, rational, and embodied horizons.

Of course, not every discipline will hold out the possibility of generative excess and the imperative to transgress the boundaries of analytic encounter. For those that do, however, epistemic ethics demand the recognition that transgression is both authentic and necessary to pursue questions of fundamental import: not disembodied theoretical questions, the water scientist argued, but questions of how and why, for instance, water legislation meant to transform a racialized system of resource distribution has not done much but spin its wheels for the last twenty years. This question, indeed, was the “punch in the face” that first drove her to seek more interdisciplinary approaches to her own research.

“Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face” was an earnest assessment of the nature of constraint in the context of the UCKAR and South African universities more broadly. In some ways, the panelists recognized, disciplinary purity does come with its own benefits and safety. There is a certain comfort associated with the gravitas of authority that comes from expertise within a discipline; while disciplinary orthodoxy can be confining at times, at least people will tend to grant assent toward one’s argument when it is made from a position rich in cultural capital rather than, say, a starving artist or (worse yet) an independent academic.

At the same time, panelists found these advantages to be generally outweighed by enormous costs: the water scientist in particular noted, with a sense of bored frustration, the amount of time consumed by writing and producing academic papers rather than “uncovering and loosening the knots of practical problems.” Work within a discipline, for her, is a disembodied act of contemplation that does not generally happen in concert with others. She
need only look to the meetings that happen around municipal water distribution to see a group of
diverse actors applying different facets of expertise in a practical way. Academia, for her, is
disengaged and isolated from problems that are “profoundly more useful than the paper I may or
may not find time to write” in the midst of eking out research funding.

Freedom from the constraint of academic discipline, for the panelists, affords the
opportunity for epistemic hybridity. It forces one to find common ground and a common
epistemic language to speak with others, making it more applicable to the issues that seem to
constantly vex Grahamstown: racial divides, resource distribution, and a legacy of colonialism in
South African academia. And if the directive is to produce ever-increasing amounts of
knowledge, it is ethically sound to venture as broadly as possible, panelists argued. Nonetheless,
the community practicing this form of freedom was small. The room, as we had noted, was an
empty one.

If disciplinary orthodoxy and institutional divisions of intellectual labor constituted one
set of constraints, the work Athina hoped to accomplish through Agon was also constrained by
the panelists themselves. Although Agon had the stated aims of gathering and celebrating
heterodox disciplinary approaches, there were moments where disciplinary orthodoxy and the
adherence to rigid academic conventions indeed seemed to trump attempts at theorizing the body
in struggle across history and across epistemic borders. Indeed, I was complicit in these
contradictions.

The panel to which I contributed, for example, had the goal of exploring “how boxing
might be viewed as a manifestation of social issues.” My own offering to the panel, a set of
reflections that drew on Geertz’s essay “Deep Play” (1973) and on themes of voyeurism and
spectacle, was decidedly not interdisciplinary. I approached and conceived my comments as an anthropologist, drew on anthropological theory, and concluded with a set of reflections about anthropology and the generation of anthropological theory (and theory in general) as a kind of voyeurism. My bodily comportment and disposition reflected the habitus of the professionalizing anthropologist.

A second anthropologist, from the UCKAR (second from the right in the picture), took quite the opposite approach. “It’s easy to say you’re an anthropologist,” she began, “but what else are you?” Deciding at the last second to scrap her pre-planned talk, she spoke instead for fifteen minutes (rather than five) on memories of her father and grandfather, their experiences of boxing, and their history as a “coloured” family in South Africa. She drew rich connections between the body of the boxers in the performance and her grandfather’s body as a fighter, and spoke to the histories that are written onto each body. Her talk was earnest, honest, and not in any sense academic.
My own talk, which I took to be quite radical in its suggestion that we gaze at informants in qualitatively similar ways to spectators watching a boxing match, fell quite flat. No one took up the themes or questions I proposed for further exploration and examination, and my thoughts were received without either applause or controversy. Once the panel was over, however, I was repeatedly praised for the performance of my presentation. The praise was most certainly not for my oral delivery: I had spoken in my usual nervous monotone, and in my anxiety I had sped up the delivery of my talk considerably. Nonetheless, I had carefully planned my talk, carefully written it, and above all, carefully timed it to ensure that it did not significantly exceed the time I was allotted. My talk was praised for its more formal qualities, which included a rigorous disciplining of time and a carefully curated set of comments. I was praised repeatedly, that is, for following the conventions of an academic conference talk.

The other anthropologist, who had gone deliberately off script in terms of content and allotted time to think more deeply about her own identity and her family’s history, was repeatedly declared to be obnoxious by the other panelists and a lone audience member. “Athina makes some really bad choices for her panels,” he told me as he registered his disgust with the anthropologist’s presentation. He had been in and out of the room at various points during the panel, and had left entirely a couple of minutes into her talk. While I found her talk to be quite profound, it was not directed toward a particular contribution that anthropology as a discipline might make to the questions at hand, nor was it an attempt to bring other disciplines into conversation with anthropology. It was intensely personal, intensely un-disciplined in a number of ways. Once she registered herself not as anthropologist but as something else, and once she went off the grid in terms of the panel’s format, it seemed that she lost a great deal of legitimacy.
Within the space of the panel discussions, the collision of embodied knowledge with other epistemic domains did not ultimately give rise not to a new form of knowledge, but instead created a nodal point for the transcendence and transgression of epistemic boundaries. Those serious about Agon’s project discerned what they could about the excellence produced by struggle and found salient reminders of their own forms of epistemic agon, even if in an uneven and, at times, contradictory way. The possibility of a knowledge generated through the body and its capacities for dialog with theory remained open questions; terrains for additional exploration.

Agon in the Post-Mandela University

In his study of agon in the tragedies of Euripides, Llyod (1992) notes that the agon (in this context, the presentation of opposing arguments) “rarely achieves anything” (1992, 15). The characters, that is, rarely gain their desired ends as the result of the agon, and the relationship between the agon and action of the tragedy is generally indirect or obscure. “It is not surprising that the agon usually fails to achieve anything,” Llyod concludes, “since these are tragic conflicts which cannot be resolved merely by talking about them. Euripedies thus sometimes makes a point of the tragic futility of rational discussion” (1992, 17). Athina did not share this fatalistic view of agon, but it seems that her work met a similar fate in the terrain of the university.

As a study of boxing in particular, Agon was an interdisciplinary project that worked to understand the racial, cultural, gendered, epistemic, and socioeconomic forms that agon takes. Through multiple panel discussions, lectures to classes at Rhodes, and conversations both formal and informal, it worked to take into account the multiple axes along which figures like Mzi struggle for bodily forms of overcoming. As it did so, it also recognized the material limitations
under which Mzi’s boxing club operates, hoping through the performance to raise both money and attention for an institution situated in the townships of Grahamstown. Yet as I have argued, *Agon*, both as a work of art and a task set for the university community, unfolded in a space of institutional ambivalence. When it was not met by silence (as with the sociology students, or the lack of attendance at panel discussion), it was seen as a fleeting seduction (philosophy) or at the very least, a difficult task given the disciplinary constraints under which scholars are routinely asked to work. There was simply no epistemic market, in the space of the university, for the work that Athina set out to do with *Agon*. Its silent reception and the ways in which panelists spoke only to themselves, I argue, are themselves evidence of the epistemically marginal status of its central concerns.

The difficulties faced by Athina and *Agon* were also exacerbated by broader processes of “audit culture” (Strathern 2000) that characterize the South African university landscape. It is a terrain in which academic productivity and success are quantified by discipline-specific outputs, understood solely in terms of publications, and primarily as peer-reviewed journal articles (Heletta 2016). This is a source of both anxiety and frustration for South African academics in general, and was a common source of tension within the department of drama itself. For the professors in the department participating in “practice-led research,” a knowledge-production process that, like *Agon*, finds its epistemic starting point in the body, the work of translation from embodiment to intelligible academic discourse is a frustrating process indeed: difficult to assess and impossible to quantify for auditing purposes. In such an environment, it is little wonder that *Agon* had difficulty generating a sense of conversational momentum in the space of the university. A performative and largely improvised multi-disciplinary study of the body is simply not the kind of product to which academic expertise is directed.
It is not surprising that the failure of one form of agon—in the tragic sense of argumentation—would presage more violent forms of agon later. Bodies in struggle, for better or worse, are very much at the nexus of the current unrest at the UCKAR and campuses across South Africa. And there is a sense, for students and sympathetic faculty members, that administration at the UCKAR and elsewhere have radically failed to respond to this struggle in a productive way. When administrative responses do not involve police violence, at the very least they attempt force simple and hackneyed solutions onto complex problems. For the protestors, agon of this sort indeed accomplishes nothing.

Case in point: a meme on the UCKAR student body Facebook page likening Vice-Chancellor Mabizela to President Donald Trump. “Trumpizela,” complete with the requisite bad haircut, intimates that he will solve the current protest crisis by building a “great gate,” to simply block students from entering campus.

“And the protestors will pay for it,” one student quips. Yet there is also a dark undercurrent to the humor connecting Mabizela to Trump: the comparison also evokes the belligerence that surrounded Trump’s presidential campaign and the refusal to take responsibility for repeated instances of assault at his
rallies. Even while Trump’s electoral victory was still an unlikely possibility, students at the UCKAR, the meme suggests, felt they were already confronting Trumpist forces at their own universities who were not in the mood to compromise.

As the South African academic year draws to a close, universities may be able to run out the clock and put off “Fees Must Fall” for a later date—this was indeed the fate of the movement for the 2015-2016 academic year. But each year, the protests grow in their intensity and urgency; each year, the requirement of new epistemologies and new forms of expertise to approach the problem seem more palpable. Agon is no longer a spectacle that universities can simply ignore or observe passively. Successively intense forms of agon continually threaten to upend the stability of a post-Mandela South Africa. Like Athina, the students call for greater and more careful attention to bodies, and the price of ignoring them gets more steep with each successive wave of unrest.
Chapter 4

Pedagogies of the Self in South African Theatre

Theatre and Life

“IT’s antithetical to our culture.”

“I am against the process of being artificially inseminated. That is the antichrist.”

“The idea of masturbating is not even something we talk about.”

“If I’m going to lose that egg anyway, why not help someone in need?”

“I want to raise my first child. The second I can give away” (while mimicking masturbation).

“Things might not go well for you if you have a child out there somewhere.”

These comments (all pertaining to the ethics of sperm and egg donation) came in the context of a drama class at the Market Theatre Laboratory in downtown Johannesburg. The class, titled “Drama and Life,” seemed to have little to do with drama. It was a space of contemplation and discussion around anything and everything, including (once I was a guest being interviewed by the class) my own stories of growing up among the Mormons of Utah, a class-wide debate about whether polygamy was morally justified, and whether it was ever acceptable to cheat on one’s spouse. As my first set of observations of a theatre class, it was an odd introduction to drama pedagogy indeed.

41 The Market Theatre laboratory is a two-year program with very competitive admission that stands, both historically and currently, as a viable alternative to earning a drama BA from a traditional university. Steeped in the history of apartheid protest theatre, the Market Theatre Laboratory began with the impetus “to create a platform in South Africa for young people who had fallen through the cracks of Apartheid and who had been victims of Bantu education” and remains “committed to providing opportunities for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds.”
I first came to the Theatre and Life class as the guest of the instructor, Irene Stephanou. I met Irene not through theatre networks but instead through Greek ones. Though we would ultimately discuss theatre more than our shared ethnicity, she helped me feel more connected to my Greek roots, even going so far as to give me the opportunity to tell my life history as a “Greek American” while she interviewed me at the local Hellenic radio station as part of her weekly show.

Knowing Irene afforded me the privilege of visiting her class, the subject matter of which had perplexed me since our first interview. When I asked Irene what, exactly, she taught in the course, she told me that the curriculum was always newly developed according to the relationship with her students and the issues that seemed most important to them. At one point, she found it shocking that some of her students believed Nelson Mandela had died long ago, which prompted her to take the class for a visit to the Nelson Mandela Foundation in Johannesburg. Students are overwhelmingly interested in discussing issues of racism and sexism, which Irene sees as “just a sign of the times in South Africa—how things haven’t moved.” The connection to theatre itself still seemed nebulous, and I continued probing it in our interview:

NV: I’m still trying to get clear on where theatre comes in, because it sounds like you’re discussing social issues and talking about what it means to live in South Africa. How do you bring theatre into those conversations?

IS: It’s the fact that people are telling stories and hearing stories. The rest of the time, they’re doing formal acting training. They’re doing writing, they’re doing singing, they’re doing voice work. So it’s within that context that they feed each other. I think you’re right, because I’ve also asked: where does theatre fit into all
of this? It’s the theatre of life. Life is like one big theatre where you watch and you observe.

For Irene, (and John Kani, who developed the idea for the class with her), part of a formal education in theatre thus includes a space to reflect on “the theatre of life” alongside other students, a space to debate issues of race, gender, and culture, and a space for self-examination. The class is firmly situated within the broader legacy of the Market Theatre, where Barney Simon, John Kani, Athol Fugard and other theatre luminaries have long fashioned theatre from the stories and experiences of ordinary South Africans. Even so, the spaces of dialogical examination created in Irene’s class are not for the purpose of creating workshopped theatre pieces, but a facet, in themselves, of a broader pedagogy. Irene did not command the class as an authority, but mediated class-wide discussions and prompted visiting guests to the class with provocative questions; the only instruction was her invitation for students to participate.

In this chapter, I draw from fieldwork and interviews with two other drama pedagogues who, to varying degrees, reject a certain frame of pedagogy. Like Irene, their teaching explodes boundaries between theatre and life, opening up spaces of inquiry and exploration that transcend the utility of learning theatre technique. In these contexts, the pedagogical space is not only directed toward theatre but toward the shaping of self more broadly. In this way, I argue, they are forms of ethical pedagogy, given shape through post-Mandela orientations to authority.

**Ethical Pedagogy**

The theme of pedagogy is nearly always present in some form within the anthropology of ethics, even when it is not recognized as such or theorized at any great length. In Hirschkind’s (2006) account of Islamic cassette sermons, pedagogues of Islamic faith blare through the radio
speakers of Cairo; a crucial component of an aural technology for the cultivation of a virtuous Muslim self. Pandian (2008) focuses on pedagogy as a scene of object lessons whereby missionaries taught a “criminal tribe” to be law-abiding, productive workers of the land. Zigon (2010) and Davis (2012) both examine therapists who, in different ways, mold and shape neoliberal subjects by teaching forms of self-governance and sociality. The pastors discussed by Robbins (2004) preach on virtues and vices, teaching newly-converted Papua New Guineans how to act morally. Of course, pedagogues can play this role with varying degrees of warmth; they are often stern and sometimes confrontational (Vlachos 2014). Pedagogy itself is not an object of analysis for much of this literature, but pedagogues are always found near sites of work on the self.

James Faubion and James Laidlaw have each theorized pedagogy at some length. Faubion’s framework for the anthropological study of ethics recognizes “that the subject who achieves his or her position typically has a pedagogue to thank” (2011, 60), and he accords a central place in his study to the analysis of how pedagogues assign and shape processes of subjectivation. Ethics itself “emerges within the primal scene of charismatic performance at the moment at which the charismatic leader recognizes the chrism of the other” (2011, 86), moving from a sovereign force to exemplar and teacher. Laidlaw (2014) provocatively argues, toward the end of his book, that it is “possible both for writer and reader to place themselves in a pedagogic relationship to the ethnography, by which I mean genuinely to open themselves to learning from and modifying their own thought and conduct in light of it” (216), and pedagogy is central to his intervention into debates around conceptions of freedom.

Within this literature the ethics of the pedagogue himself or herself are seldom probed in any great detail. Foucault (and Faubion and Laidlaw in their expositions of Foucault) does
extensively explore the ethical minefields of relationships between men and youth in ancient Greece, and indeed this relationship needed an airtight ethics to avoid harming youth in their development as full citizens. The pedagogical processes at play in these relationships point to a broader dynamics of power and freedom that could either facilitate the development of fully free citizens or irreparably corrupt the youth and impede their development (Laidlaw 2014, 151). In addition, there are well-founded reasons, both theoretical and methodological, for a focus on the ethics of the pedagogue outside of this narrower context. The dialectic of freedom and constraint at the heart of any ethics has to emanate from someone, somewhere. Whether they are domineering or freewheeling, ruthless or affirming, pedagogues are a crucial part of this dynamic.

Ethnographically, there are equally good reasons for focusing on the ethics of pedagogy in a post-Mandela South Africa. Questions of authority and freedom in relation to pedagogues—whether of a white colonial stripe or, more recently, of a university system that mutates and carries forward colonial legacies under an ANC banner—are becoming the front lines in battles over what exactly a post-Mandela South Africa might amount to. Given the legacy of colonialism and apartheid, and given the present (increasingly seen as a form of neo-apartheid by my informants and others), the ethics of the pedagogue are an object of problematization now more than ever.

This chapter is, at least partly, an intervention toward anthropological studies which presuppose that ethical pedagogues the world over are always in some way engaged in the business of telling people what they ought or ought not to do. It certainly makes sense to assume that this will always be the case—if Zigon’s (2010) drug rehabilitation therapists didn’t put forward certain ways of being in the world as worth striving after, what on earth would they be
doing? It is not obvious how anyone could be an ethical pedagogue and not model, invite, exhort, or browbeat his or her charges into particular ethical channels.

The pedagogy that unfolded in the context of my fieldwork is of a different sort. Irene, as well as the two individuals I discuss below, embody an ethics of pedagogy that drives toward a space in which learners direct their own discoveries about themselves and the world around them. While this pedagogy begins in theater, it often winds up in spaces of contemplation of an ethics of self as well. It is precisely in these moments that they leave the students to their own work. With Wittgenstein, they all might say, in one way or another: “My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it)” (Wittgenstein 2002, 89). Their pedagogy, I will argue, is characteristic of a post-Mandela South Africa that grows increasingly suspicious of the authority of pedagogues and exemplars. This dynamic, of course, is not limited to South Africa either in terms of the rejection of ethical exemplars (Pandian 2009, Humphrey 1997) or regimes of expertise more broadly (Rottenburg 2009). For South Africans, however, it manifests in a critical lens on the liberatory projects of the past and a wary eye on those of the present. It is a context where Mandela himself is no longer a saint, but as my Soweto informants told me time and again, a sell-out who betrayed the cause of liberation to white interests. It is also a context where Andile Mngxitama—foremost intellectual of the Economic Freedom Fighters and professing bearer of the mantel of Steve Biko—can suddenly find himself under threat of violence by members of the party for whom he was once a chief spokesperson (Hunter 2015). It is a broader transition in the epistemology of ethics, where not only ethical subjects but also their pedagogues feel that knowledge of how best to shape the self should come through one’s own
restless contemplation rather than through authority or instruction.

**Playing with Ugli Bob**

Rob “Ugli Bob” Murray occupies an intermediary and somewhat liminal position in the department of drama at the UCKAR. As a PhD student, he is under the direction and guidance of various faculty members, although he also engages them as colleague in informal reading groups and other departmental events. As a lecturer in the department, he is also acts as pedagogue to others; particularly through improvisation classes taught to third year drama students.

While located within the department of drama, Rob is also frequently outside of Grahamstown at one or another festival, in one or another country, with one or another of the faculty or students who have devised a work that is on tour.

Through his workshops and mentoring, Rob is also an important touch point of the interface between the university and the “community” of Grahamstown, a term that typically refers to residents of the nearby township. Rob, like many of the faculty, constantly oscillates between these different worlds, which bleed together more often than not.

“Ugli Bob” is a nickname typically used in association with his work with the South African clowning collective A Conspiracy of Clowns and is not, in obvious ways, an apt moniker. Much like the character “Ugly Bob” on the television series *South Park* (who is
ridiculed as being hideously ugly despite his lack of any visible defect), Rob is not physically ugly. Instead, “Ugli Bob,” like the names “Johnny Rotten” or “Sid Vicious,” tags a certain punk rock ethos that is evident in his physical appearance: his hair is often spiked and pushing out in a riot of different directions, and he is more likely to wear a ripped and shredded Jack Daniels T-shirt while conducting a workshop than any kind of formal workout couture. More importantly, the name “Ugli” in its misspelling also underscores a certain irreverent playfulness, which finds its expression in his physical theatre, miming, and clowning work. Ugliness is of particular salience in the ways that his own projects touch various facets of the grotesque: excesses of rubbish, rot, and decay, (both social and physical) are prominent in works like Piet se Optlegoed and Crazy in Love. “Ugli” in this sense connotes an aesthetic that plays in the terrain of excess and the grotesque, retrieving humor from trash heaps and pools of bodily fluid.

My fieldwork in Grahamstown did not give me the opportunity to fully engage these facets of Rob’s artistry; I encountered Rob instead as a PhD student and pedagogue who led a series of workshops to further the work of his PhD research on mask work. Even so, his pedagogy is, I would argue, “ugli” in the sense that it holds, in one hand, a strong anti-authoritarian bent, and in the other, a deadly serious commitment to the concept of play, a disposition cultivated through the development of a very particular set of physical and mental competencies. The telos of Rob’s focus on play, I will argue, was to open spaces of contemplation, exploration, and knowledge, the development of new pedagogues and the devising of new post-Mandela forms of protest theatre. Rob’s pedagogical ethic is, in many ways, a rejection of a certain form of pedagogy. But his workshops did in fact teach a great deal.

Rob solicited participation in the workshops at the final cast meeting for The Wangai, a Xhosa-language, Eastern Cape-inflected spin on Dr. Seuss’s The Lorax. The cast was entering a
lull between a run of shows for the Grahamstown community and another round of performances at the National Arts Festival, and the cast (comprised entirely of actors from the local township) enthusiastically took up Rob’s offer for further training. The workshops, which began in earnest in late April of 2014, would focus on puppetry and eventually mask work. As it turned out, building a foundation for puppetry would involve a good deal more than building puppets and making their mouths move correctly, and the group did not proceed to masks until well after I was gone. The workshops I did observe, however, were staging grounds not only for training in principles of movement and expression but also of thinking and contemplation.

Jacques Lecoq et le jeu

To understand Rob’s pedagogy (and his theatre work more generally), it is necessary to draw out some of the philosophy of a pedagogue from whom he draws significant influence, Jacques Lecoq. L’École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq was (and still is after Lecoq’s death) an intensive two-year program that teaches mime, clowning, and mask. Lecoq was the head instructor and chief pedagogue from 1956 until his death in 1999, and his influence in the genres of physical theatre, mime, and clowning has been pronounced since then. More importantly, Lecoq’s pedagogical approach has found resonance among theatre pedagogues in South Africa like Rob, especially in its impulse to de-center authority and allow students to chart their own trajectory through exploration and improvisation.

Lecoq’s approach to the creation of theatre, shaped in the crucible of a totalitarian Europe during World War Two, focused on the body itself: not only its potential for movement, play, and exploration, but also the ways in which it communicates in the absence of any speech. A trained physical educator and athlete, Lecoq was fascinated by the new possibilities he saw for the body in the theatre of Jean-Louis Barrault and others during the German occupation of
France, and would go on to develop, with other athletes of a similar artistic bent, “a fundamental gestural language” for theatre (Lecoq 2001, 4). For Lecoq, unleashing the body’s potential for diverse forms of articulation and expression was a direct response to the structured, orderly, and deadly-serious bodily movements of European fascism. Lecoq remembers it as a context in which “the body and nature were fused together with totalitarian ideas where the chosen race had to produce champions, supermen, even gods. It is all too clear where a loss of humour and of playfulness can lead” (2006, 38). In contrast to the fixed, mechanical, pure essence of the totalitarian body, Lecoq insisted, “tout bouge. Tout evolue. progresse.” Understanding movement, for Lecoq and the students who would follow him, meant understanding the possibilities and potentials for flux and change more generally (Reznek 2012).

Lecoq’s commitment to change and flux, set against his experiences during World War Two, undoubtedly shaped his pedagogical approach: Lecoq had an ambivalent understanding of his own authority, and this ambivalence was apparent in his teaching. In one sense, his authority as a master teacher to critique student work was unquestioned, and his comments were seen as incisive, piercing, and weighty. At the same time, Reznek (2012) argues, Lecoq expected his students to disagree with him, and encouraged them to do so. He did not train students to parrot his own style, but pushed them to find their own through independent and group improvisational work. In terms of instruction, Lecoq would not tell students what they should do or how they should act, but instead focused on what didn’t work about a particular performance—a judgment which, according to his former students, always engaged deeply with the logic of the particular performance in itself and not external criteria (Sherman 2012).

Lecoq’s pedagogical approach was shaped further by the revolutionary movements of 1968, when students and workers brought France to a standstill in a series of strikes, occupations, and massive demonstrations. In open rebellion not only against the state but against the French communist party and labor unions that had grown complacent and moribund, workers and students organized at the grassroots level to occupy factories as well as centers of cultural production like the Sorbonne and the Théâtre de l’Odéon. As part of a movement that constituted a refusal of all leadership, workers as well as students pushed for self-management, arguing that “we will have good masters when each will be his own” (Feenberg and Freedman 2001, 39). The universities, like the factories, were completely under the control of the students, who refused to take exams or continue courses as usual.

Caught up in revolutionary fervor, according to former student Simon McBurney, Lecoq’s students “turned over the whole school and refused to work. They said to Lecoq, we don’t want to work, we want to teach ourselves” (Tushingham 1994, 19). Rather than closing as many schools and universities did, Lecoq fully accommodated this radical impulse: every day, for an hour, students would work independently in a designated time which came to be called auto-cours. It was here that the students would improvise and experiment to generate new content to perform for the rest of the school. Though Lecoq would suggest a theme for the students to work with, it would be up to the student working groups to interpret and develop a performance on that theme without any guidance (Sherman 2012). Auto-cours, alongside the rest of Lecoq’s methodology, was a decentering and diffusion of pedagogical authority. Performative

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43 Lecoq argues that “the revolutionary events of 1968 strengthened the teaching of the school and the desire of the students to work there...While the student movement exploded into the streets, we were exploding the traditions of gesture and text in search of a new language and new meanings” (Lecoq 2001:11). Lecoq’s integration of the revolutionary impulse directly into his pedagogy further suggests his readiness to divest at least some pedagogical authority, even if his comments continued to carry great weight with his students.
expertise, in Lecoq’s school, was not transmitted by a teacher but jointly discovered by the students and instructors (Sherman 2012).

These discoveries took place through the cultivation and exercise of a disposition that Lecoq called *le jeu* (commonly translated as ‘play’). Although it was a central facet of Lecoq’s pedagogy, he did not theorize it at length or discuss it much in his written work. For Lecoq, play was simply what occurs “when, aware of the theatrical dimension, the actor can shape an improvisation for spectators, using rhythm, tempo, space, form” (Lecoq 2001, 29). Since his death in 1999, however, Lecoq’s students have drawn on their own experiences with him to theorize this concept more robustly within the context of his pedagogy. Play, they argue, is the “imaginative space claimed by the performer to create material beyond the prescription of both the director and the written text” (Murray 2004, 34) and a “state in which the performer is capable of spontaneous responses within preconceived rules, a flexibility that results from awareness of and connection to others” (Sherman 2010, 94). More generally, Lecoq’s use of play, Frost and Yarrow point out, is underpinned by “the sense that ‘play’ is a salient feature of mankind’s capacity for the production of symbolic form, signaled primarily in Schiller’s *Aesthetic Letters* and in Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens*. Thus, it also implies playfulness—the pleasure derived from discoveries in the moment of creativity” (2016, 65). From these characterizations, play emerges as a disposition characterized by fluency in principles of improvisation, and at the same time, an orientation toward transcending those principles when appropriate. One who plays in this way knows the rules and when to break them, taking pleasure in the discoveries that result.

Play is also, Lecoq’s students have pointed out, a dialectic of freedom and constraint. On the one hand, an individual is completely free to make what she will with her body and the space
around her to craft an improvisation. Lecoq gave little guidance on how actors ought to improvise or play, and actors who worked too hard to ape the styles of Lecoq or the other instructors were more apt to receive derision than praise (Sherman 2012). Successful play culminated in the discovery of one’s own style and orientation toward the world. In this sense, play is “the antidote for the mechanical and fascist body;” a strong political intervention in which the means of production is radically shifted back to the individual (Reznek 2012, 39–40). At the same time, play is not completely anarchic but done within purposeful boundaries (Murray 2003).

Finally, play presupposes a certain relationship to others with whom one shares the stage or space. It includes “the energy that is shared between performers on stage and in rehearsal” (Frost and Yarrow 2016, 65) and what emerges from interactions between various players. Sherman connects this facet of play to the concept of “radical giving,” (2002) noting that play “thereby suggests an ethical relationship among agents involved in the embodied work of being and of learning” (Sherman 2010, 95). The freedom of the individual in playing is tempered through both bodily discipline and an ethical imperative to remain responsive and attentive to others in the creation of a common aesthetic project, however ephemeral that project might be.

The importance of play was formalized within Lecoq’s two year program for students: play was the primary criterion through which first year students were judged admissible for continuation to the second year of Lecoq’s program, and those who had no aptitude for play were summarily cut. Like auto-cours, significant portions of class time (ninety minutes of a four hour day) were devoted to improvisation, where students would perform either alone or in small groups in front of the entire school. Play was a product of Lecoq’s pedagogy as well as a prerequisite for more advanced classes.
Pedagogies of embodied contemplation

Though rarely acknowledged explicitly, Lecoq’s influence on South African theatre is not hard to find. His South African students include William Kentridge (who directed *Ubu and the Truth Commission*), Jennie Reznek (current director of the Magnet Theatre in Cape Town), and Sylvaine Strike (who presented four separate shows on the main stage of the National Arts Festival in 2014). The influence is also obvious in the physical theatre of Andrew Buckland, whose blend of clowning, mime, and Physical Theatre has set him apart as a unique brand. Lecoq’s “Seven States of Tension” were taught in workshops I attended both in Grahamstown and Johannesburg, even if its origin was not always made explicit.

Lecoq’s brand of pedagogy found a welcome home in South Africa after apartheid. For white pedagogues who are reflexive about their own racial positioning and the history of apartheid, anti-authoritarian and dialogical ways of teaching theatre are increasingly attractive. Reznek, a student of Lecoq who has implemented similar forms of training in Cape Town, argues that “as a result of the history of colonization and the apartheid project that ruptured relationships between people there was an inevitable vigilance in regard to potential subjugation and oppression in the learning environment. This necessitated the exploration of models of teaching that did not impose the pedagogy with an absolute authority” (2012, 84). Like Reznek, Rob’s pedagogical approach is one that works to open a space of play that does not dictate the pace or product of discovery.
Rob’s pedagogy, much like Lecoq’s, proceeds from a diffusion of authority. One of the more crucial facets of leading the workshops, he told me, was:

“leaving a space so that it’s not just me going ‘I’m teaching you now,’ so that I’m in a position of authority and you’re in a lower position with it all coming to you. It’s going, ‘hey, let’s see each other as equals. I’ve got experience. You’ve got experience as well. How can you discover things?’ I’ll help guide and my job is to be as honest as possible, trying to create a space where people get astonished at a shared discovery. I’ve always loved that idea: how do we discover things? How is knowledge discovered in this first place? I think it’s particularly important in this country, which has a long legacy of things being shoved down.”

For Rob, inquiry, discovery, and knowledge are firmly within a performance matrix: this is where a shared process of contemplation is initiated, provided that sufficient space is left by the pedagogue. Inquiry and exploration, importantly, are also foregrounded here against South Africa’s history. Given a legacy of “things being shoved down,” he told me, it is all the more important that pedagogy does not reproduce hierarchies that stunt free inquiry. Rob’s workshops seek ultimately to cultivate embodied knowledge through a pedagogy that remains sensitive to issues of authority (Dolan 1996; Sutherland 2013a, 2013b).

Instruction in Rob’s workshops was minimal and tended to taper off after a basic explanation of exercises, gradually ceding ground to the participants and their own inquiries into movement, breath, and space. The workshops always began with an intensive physical regimen of exercises, and it was here that Rob’s pedagogy was at its most commanding. The exercises that inaugurated each workshop were not simply warm-up stretches. They were complex, difficult, and counterintuitive motions designed to isolate and exercise particular parts of the
body. In one set of exercises, for example, Rob instructed the participants to “break the alignment” of the body at various points, coaching them to move their necks, extend their chest, move at the knees, and then at the pelvis, all while keeping the rest of the body rigid and straight. These actions were repeated in rapid succession, backwards and forwards. Participating in the warm-up exercises on a sparsely-attended day of the workshop was an uncomfortable and embarrassing (yet productive) way of gaining insight into the corporeality of the expertise (Boyer 2005) that Rob was working to impart. There was a cultivated comfort in their action, the product of sustained and disciplined work, that contrasted starkly with my relative inflexibility and bodily awkwardness.

Rob’s verbal instructions during these stretching periods initially struck me as being quite esoteric. Early in the workshop series, during breathing exercises, participants were repeatedly urged to do things like “feel a connection to the space,” “see the space,” and “see through the walls.” I gradually realized that there was a distinct progression from one exercise to the next, and from one workshop to the next, building toward the cultivation of a sharpened awareness of self, object, and others in a fixed space. Awareness of self, mediated through the breath, grew to encompass the space each participant inhabited. This space was then encountered in a steadily expanding radius: to begin teaching principles of mime, Rob had the participants create a fixed point of space with their fingers that was horizontal to the navel, and had them rotate around this fixed point before directing them out further into the space.

The extent of Rob’s facilitation early in the workshop series was the work of cultivating awareness of embodied movement in fixed space. At the same time, a heightened sense of perception was never an end in itself, but instead a method of working toward more advanced forms of bodily movement. Once he was satisfied that awareness of space was established,
pedagogy began to fade, replaced by moments of play in which participants would explore their own forms of movement. Thus, after several exercises oriented around exploring the self in space, Rob introduced the presence of objects through a series of exercises with sticks. “Allow the stick to go where it wants,” Rob encouraged the group, “give up the responsibility of deciding.” On one level, the participants were merely acting as if the stick was deciding while they controlled the direction and movement of both the stick and their body. Even so, the play of this exercise fostered a type of spontaneity and an immediacy that was free from the calculation of decision. Movements in the workshop were impulsive, and impulse began not in the brain but in the stick, which had become an extension of the body. In this way, the play had begun in earnest.

The following workshop continued its focus on objects, beginning with large sheets of butcher paper. Rob had the participants “take a moment to get to know the paper,” and members of the group were encouraged to touch, feel, and smell their way across their sheets. The paper, he said, was something with its own force and energy, made as it was from a living thing. After devoting a good deal of time to having each participant find the paper’s unique breath—periods of rise and fall, relaxation and excitation, the group made one piece of paper move and breathe together. While this exercise was difficult, the group found some “moments that were connecting” in their movements, and one man described a qualitative difference between moments when their action and thoughts were in concert and when they were not—“you can feel it,” he said.

Eventually, the papers were mashed by each member of the group into a shape of their choosing. These shapes themselves became animated, each with their own principles of respiration, movement, and ways of encountering the world. As the shapes encountered each
other—sometimes with curiosity, other times with aggression—Rob repeatedly emphasized the importance of play, telling them to “leave space” in the interactions. Stimulus and response, he coached, should both be somewhat delayed so as to not close off possibility and options from what the paper itself wants to do, and what the paper manipulated by others might want to do.

In the stick exercises and the paper workshop alike, play began as a solitary project but grew to embrace a world of others. This pattern continued once the workshop turned to address the manipulation of puppets as well. The puppets were made from the same paper the group had explored earlier, wound and taped together by two groups of three participants. Rob had no direction as to what the puppets should look like, although he did guide them in how to fashion a body, arms, and legs. Two puppets thus emerged, each with their own unique traits and characteristics. Moving each puppet, “giving it a life of its own,” was a common project that required the coordinated but unvoiced intentions of three separate individuals.

As they gained increasing fluency in the movement of their puppets, Rob largely left the group to their own devices. The only direction he gave to them was to “find in a gesture” what
they tried to express in words with their puppets, as the immediate impulse was to make them speak. Remaining in silence and communicating through gesture, he told the group, would enhance the possibilities open to their character’s movements, actions, and reactions to the world around it. The use of silence for Rob was more than pragmatic, however: it also grew out of what he saw as ethical necessity. Rob told me that the principles of his workshop teaching were, in fact, first developed with a workshop that taught drama to deaf students, many of whom could not read. This prompted a different approach. “We just started with bodies meeting in space,” he told me. “What does it mean? What do we feel? And once we observe how life is, how connected to life we are, how can we tweak that to make it more deliberate now? What if we come in with this attitude, we’re aware of that, we react to that. You start finding a very almost subconscious language. It’s preverbal. Before any word is spoken. We don’t need words.”

Although the workshops I encountered were with performers who were what Rob would call the ‘hearing,’ the principle was the same: teaching was an act of mapping out a terrain of wordless encounter and exploration of bodies, aimed at opening up spaces of cooperation and play.

Rob’s workshop pedagogy was the most structured when it came to the exercises that developed and enhanced fluency in a range of bodily movements. Conversely, it ebbed to its lowest tide when participants were acting out one or another scenario, either with the sticks or with the puppets. Movement of the body and awareness of space and others, firmly established through rigorous training, set the perimeters within which free play and improvisation was encouraged. Not unlike Lecoq’s auto-cours, participants were largely left to their own devices. These spaces of time were always where the real artistic breakthroughs would happen, as the group collaborated on content together with minimal direction from Rob.
To Rob’s visible disappointment, the men of the workshop did not publically present the results of their explorations in puppetry to the UCKAR students or faculty. It was clear that the group did not mind the scrutiny of the university theatre context—an improvised piece called “possessed sticks” was shown for Rob’s third year class to more acclaim than any of his other students received. Even so, members of the group seemed preoccupied with various other projects. Two of the men, in particular, were always ready to bring the skills they had learned in the workshop across the road and uphill into the townships; always thinking about how puppetry could be employed in shows to teach people about human rights; always wondering how skills of awareness and bodily discipline could feed into their own workshops with township children.

The lessons learned in Rob’s workshop and the results of their contemplation in the space he had created ultimately sent pedagogical ripples outward, as the men took their lessons outside of the university context.

*From post-apartheid to post-Mandela pedagogy*

Rob’s reliance on Lecoq’s pedagogical approach is undoubtedly driven by his own aesthetic sensibilities, which include intensive studies of mask work, mime, clowning, and physical theatre. It is also, however, an expression of a white pedagogical subjectivity that seeks to refashion spaces of learning in the aftermath of apartheid. Aside from small correctives or explanations, he gave few instructions or direction. He did not disseminate knowledge, but created a space for participants to make their own discoveries. Experiments with bodily movement and the discoveries that arise from them are vested in a collective working together.

Rob was not alone in pursuing forms of pedagogy that actively de-centered authority in Grahamstown. Alex Sutherland (2013a) has implemented similar theatre programs both inside and outside of formal academic spaces at the UCKAR, arguing that performance is key to an
embodied knowledge that can probe the complexities of racialized and gendered bodies.

Sutherland is clear that her position as a white, privileged female places her in a position of some authority, particularly when it comes to the theatre program she conducts in a medium-security men’s prison. Even so, the drama pieces devised and developed by the inmates are their own creation, and a number utilized the spaces of play she opened up to experiment with a range of gender identities.

These models of pedagogy are certainly post-apartheid phenomena in the sense that they take whiteness (and more nebulously, the history of apartheid) as the substance of ethical work toward transformation of the learning space. Rob, Reznek, and Sutherland each grapple with questions of identity, diversity, and authority in the workshop space, and Sutherland’s drama program participants in particular actively confront the complexities of post-apartheid black masculinity (see also Ashforth 2004; Moffett 2006; Wood et al. 2007, 2008). These issues, and the configurations of authority harnessed by pedagogues to provoke questions about them, have taken on a new urgency in post-Mandela South Africa, where whiteness continues to be rendered visible and de-centered in ways both large and small.

The post-Mandela edge of Rob’s workshops is found in the discourses and conversations into which the workshop participants entered as a direct result of their own contemplation and discovery. The workshop process culminated in a production called *Waterline*, an intense yet humorous take on Grahamstown perpetual water shortage. Frequent disruptions to the water supply, in the white suburbs, are enough to cause a panic about possible shortages, though there is an ebb and flow to this panic that generally crescendos during festival season. In the townships
of Grahamstown, it is a perpetual crisis of hydraulic citizenship (Anand 2011, 2017)\textsuperscript{44} in which people routinely have to fill buckets or containers from nearby streams. For this reason, the presence of “performers from the community” in \textit{Waterline} stood as a stamp of authenticity, and the work was critically well-received at the National Arts Festival. In its relentless parody of corrupt local government, \textit{Waterline} struck a cord outside of the immediate locale of its production—it received glowing press reviews as part of the Cape Town Fringe Festival, and toured internationally in Amsterdam as well.

Even as the men from the workshop continue to teach their own workshops to others, in turn becoming pedagogues in their own right, they also participate in forms of political theatre that no longer look to apartheid but rather the governing ANC as a target of criticism. One of the men in Rob’s workshops, S’bo, was a pedagogue himself—although a reluctant one. His pedagogy is an anti-pedagogy. He denies the influence of mentors and exemplars, and maintains that he does not want to be either for the children that he teaches. S’bo represents the outer edge of a counter-pedagogical spectrum, and it is to him that I turn next.

\textbf{S’bo}

The first time I saw S’bo was in a performance of Brett Bailey’s \textit{Exhibit A}. A re-creation of the “human zoos” (or ethnographic exhibitions) of the nineteenth century, \textit{Exhibit A} featured grotesque tableau vivants\textsuperscript{45} that depicted the horrors of colonialism as well as modern-day abuses against migrants and refugees in Europe. Despite the amount of controversy that whirled around

\textsuperscript{44} For Anand, “hydraulic citizenship” is “a form of belonging to the city enabled by social and material claims made to the city water’s infrastructure (2011, 545). Anand theorizes at length the “pressure” that Mumbai’s slum dwellers place on the city’s government and engineers. In the case of \textit{Waterline}, this pressure is enacted through politically sharp satire and criticism that seeks to draw attention to the crisis and hold civic leaders accountable.

\textsuperscript{45} “Living statues,” situated in different poses.
Exhibit A (which would only compound with a similar work, Exhibit B) the work was a gripping commentary on colonial history and the voyeurism of the black body. As part of the work, S’bo played a refugee situated on the stairwell between the two floors of exhibits. His blank, glassy-eyed stare met mine for as long as I dared to look at him, and I moved on. He would meet the stares of hundreds of audience members as part of the 2012 National Arts Festival, receiving looks of indifference, compassion, and mockery in turns.

I met S’bo again when I returned to Grahamstown in 2014. As part of the UBOM! theatre company, S’bo played the titular character in The Wangai. Within the hierarchy of the cast and crew of the production—a hierarchy I observed closely through countless rehearsals, performances, and cast meetings—S’bo occupied an intermediary position between the other actors and the two directors. Although he was not a director, the two co-directors of the show (very seasoned and well-respected artists in their own right) took S’bo seriously. They listened to his notes and suggestions and often implemented them, and frequently allowed him to lead the rest of the cast through warm up exercises in the morning. He was a leader and a model cast member: professional, punctual, hard-working, and easy to get along with.

Leading warm-ups, for S’bo, was not about teaching a set of exercises as much as it was an exercise in bringing cast members together in collaboration. His warm-up exercises were often unconventional; they could involve activities from having each cast member perform a series of Kung Fu moves to having the whole cast do a “gorilla walk” around in a circle. Whatever he had the cast doing on any particular day, S’bo’s exercises were not directed as much as explained, at which point everyone did them together. Along with other artists from Grahamstown, S’bo also leads workshops at the Makana Drama Development festival and more informally outside of institutional spaces. By the time I was getting ready to leave Grahamstown,
S’bo was being recruited by a local school as a drama teacher, a prospect that he found very exciting. S’bo enjoyed teaching drama, especially to children.

S’bo never thought he would be a teacher of any kind, and never set out to be one. Even recalling his recruitment as such seemed to leave him a bit uneasy, as he recalled that “when they saw me adjudicating [at a local theatre festival] and talking to the kids, they said ‘wow, you are very good at what you do. You have a very good way of motivating kids.’” S’bo immediately went on to tell me that he is certainly not a motivational speaker and does not want to be recognized as such. Motivational speakers are patronizing and condescending, S’bo told me; they act as though they are better thinkers and as though they know things that other people do not. S’bo’s disdain for claims of epistemic superiority clearly shapes, for him, the model of his own pedagogy:

“I don’t go there saying ‘okay, I know better than you do.’ So, if I’m having a lesson, this is our lesson. We are all involved in teaching this lesson. You’ll be learning something from me, and I’ll be learning from you. I have my guidelines, but I don’t impose them. I don’t go there saying ‘okay, listen. Now we’re going to learn this and you should learn this.’ That is not the best way to teach. But of course, I teach about theatre and my approach to theatre. What I think about how things should be done.”

While S’bo feels that his destiny lies elsewhere (exactly where, he isn’t sure), he feels that teaching others is somehow a part of it and is generally happy in his role as a theatre practitioner (the only label he feels comfortable giving himself). His lessons, however, could never proceed from a presumption that he knows a right or even a good way to act.
The approach that S’bo teaches is relentlessly innovative and proceeds from a rejection of any and all theoretical or philosophical predecessors. It is pre-representational, driven not by any grounded telos but instead by pure experiment, pure event, pure becoming. It emerged during struggles with his own pedagogues as a drama student at Lovedale College (in King William’s Town), where he found it obnoxious to have to learn the theory and method of Grotowski, Stanislavski, and Artaud, among others. “Why are we being taught about other people’s ideas instead of being taught to groom our own?” he asked. “Are our own ideas inferior? I was never a follower. If there is a big trend going on out there, I would think ‘I’m going to do it this way.’” Nor would S’bo posit indigenous dramatic models as an alternative to more Western theatre traditions. His approach is to figure things out for himself without any preexisting model; to take his time figuring out a character he is playing and to examine that character from every conceivable angle. This means his process of embodying a character takes longer, often to the frustration of those around him. “I’ll take my time,” he said, “and then I know when I get it, I take a very big hop, and I’ll get over everyone.” The approach S’bo tries to impart to his learners is to take their own approach, and it teaches it through modeling his own process.

S’bo’s workshops, similar to Irene’s, are aimed at breaking open a dialogical space in which life art and life bleed into each other. “When I teach, I don’t say ‘this only applies in theatre.’ I talk about things in general,” he said. The content of conversation is not restricted to

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46 In a discussion of philosophy in the ancient Greek Polis, Colebook (2000) explains the pre-representational—a contrast from the representationalism of modern epistemology as well as the anti-representationalism of post-modernity—as “a continuity between meaning, ethics, law, the cosmos, and one’s body.” In contrast to an ethics grounded in rules and foundations, “ethics was lived as one’s own, practiced way of life; and philosophy was not a procedure of valid arguments but a practice of self-formation” (2000:50).

47 In this sense, S’bo’s stance is also resonant with the German philosophical tradition of Bildung, which has been given extensive ethnographic attention by Boyer (2005b) and Tinius (2016).
theatre, and he hopes that people who are not even interested in theatre will participate in his workshops. Nor does he tailor the content of his discussions based on the age of his learners. More explicit topics, he said, are things that children are already discussing anyway. In his workshops, no one is wrong. No one is right. Perspectives instead emerge through dialogue and the synthesis of multiple viewpoints.

S’bo does not acknowledge any mentors or formative individuals that helped to shape his pedagogy. For all his work as a teacher and mentor to others, S’bo himself does not want to be seen as an exemplar of any kind either; people can learn from him, but he was adamant that he does not want to be perceived as a role-model of any kind. Role-models, for him, are connected both to teaching and to learning in that their presence does nothing but stymie self-development:

“I don’t believe in role models because you are limiting yourself. When you say ‘okay, so-and-so is my role model,’ you want to be that person. You want to live by this other person’s principles, though you have a mind of your own. It was my decision not to drink, not to smoke. No one taught me how to be a man. I learned from life. I saw that I don’t like the way that someone who drinks does things.”

In this sense, negative exemplars play more of a formative role than positive exemplars for S’bo. Although he admitted that positive exemplars are important, contemplation of a poorly-lived and shameful life seemed far more productive for him than reflection on someone who lives well. A good twenty minutes of our interview, in fact, was devoted to discussing a radio DJ who justified his serial infidelity through the claim that he was “only human.” S’bo scoffed at the way this individual would blame his own decisions on being human, and reaffirmed, at some length, his own ability to think about whether his actions are hurting other people. Positive exemplars, to be
clear, are not totally absent for S’bo, but they only occupy the fuzzy background of an ethics that finds him constantly striking out on his own.

S’bo’s pre-representational aesthetics and ethics are part of a broader philosophy of politics that casts a suspicious and wary eye on leadership, unsure of why leaders are ever really necessary in the first place. There is a certain paradox, he told me, in the fact that people suppose themselves to be free even as they affirm that their power is vested in the hands of political leaders who subsequently ignore them. He doesn’t believe that leaders belong on a pedestal of any kind; the first political mistake that people make is putting them there in the first place. Further, he resents the feeling that he has to vote for anyone, given that he is profoundly unsatisfied with any available choices. “What if I do not believe in any of these people? Who should I vote for? For the sake of voting? That is another kind of oppression,” he argued. S’bo directs the trajectory of his own life and doesn’t feel comfortable vesting power in others, even as he attempts to avoid having other people looking at him as an authority figure.

**Finding a space for S’bo**

Finding a conceptual space for S’bo’s pedagogy and his philosophy more broadly—making them “speak” to broader facets of life in post-Mandela South Africa is not, in any sense, a straightforward task. S’bo was an ideal interlocutor; he was always happy to talk informally and our interview itself was close to three hours long. At the same time, he is a novice ethnographer’s worst nightmare. He is a model of hard work and discipline who does not want anyone to act like him and a teacher who (according to him) does not teach but instead facilitates. Although he is exemplary in a number of ways, he does not want anyone to follow his lead. Unlike Rob, he cannot be linked to a particular cannon of theatre or a particular philosophical movement. His pedagogy does not attempt to implement the ideas of a pedagogue
from another space and place or try to instill it with fresh, localized meanings. He is also unlike Irene, whose dialogical pedagogy claims participation in the Market Theatre’s impetus toward the telling and hearing of uniquely South African stories, finding models in Barney Simon, John Kani, and others. His ethics derive positively from his own introspection, and negatively from spurning the bad examples of others.

S’bo can only be characterized through the traits he rejects, and his ideas seem to resist epistemic or ethical archaeology of any kind. I am certain he would want it that way. Yet the task of writing as a contemporary anthropologist seems to demand that he stand as proof of something: perhaps resistance—or conformity—toward something or other that is neoliberal, or even more crassly, that he is some new species of organic intellectual. Perhaps he could be. My own resistance to presenting him as such is the intuition that, however vaguely, S’bo’s pedagogy does gesture toward something about post-Mandela South Africa, still nebulous enough that it has not yet been named or claimed by anthropology (or perhaps any discipline). It is the intuition, shared by Jean and John Comaroff (2012) that South Africa, and the global South more broadly, is the cutting edge of new epistemic, ethical—and, I would submit, pedagogical—subjectivities.

S’bo does make for an interesting comparison and contrast with Humphrey’s (1997) examination of ethical exemplars in Mongolia; at least enough to characterize the status of pedagogical and ethical authority in this moment. Humphrey contrasts Mongolian conceptions of moral life with Western ones, arguing for the primacy of a self-fashioned ethics over rule-based morality. It is not that rules are unimportant for Mongolians, but simply that it is imperative for each individual (in order to be an individual) to distinguish themselves through their own self-formative choices. Exemplars and pedagogues stand at the heart of this process, providing
models and examples for how to live life well. The radical difference, of course, is S’bo’s steadfast rejection of positive exemplars—declaring anyone to be a model for one’s own actions, for S’bo, cedes too much freedom and creativity. For the Mongolians, by contrast, “a person without a teacher is a no-body,” though of course there is always critical adjustment to the exemplar in a process that is “open-ended and unfinished” (1997, 34).

Yet in other ways, S’bo share many similarities to Humphrey’s Mongolian interlocutors. S’bo places “greater weight on the ‘practices of self’ than on the issues raised by following the rules” (1997, 42-43). S’bo would much rather toss out many conventions—aesthetic and moral—and decide what to do through his own introspective processes. Like them, he sees the importance of negative exemplars as object lessons of how one can go about life in the wrong sorts of ways. S’bo also shares with them something more germane to a post-Mandela South Africa—a wary glance at politically sanctioned exemplars. For Humphrey’s interlocutors, the incessant calls to follow the example of good and sacrificial Maoist heroes began to ring hallow and became grounds for satire and mockery. Like them, S’bo grows increasingly wary of calls to emulate heroes of South Africa’s struggle.

S’bo’s ethics thus combine a distaste for pedagogues to a wariness and suspicion of exemplars more broadly. While there are not many that hold a position quite as extreme as his, S’bo’s ethics do speak to broader facets of a post-Mandela South Africa, where popular exemplars and a legacy of colonial pedagogy are both thrown radically into question—often together. Contestation around broader spaces of pedagogy has long been a harbinger of broader social transformation in South Africa. The Soweto Uprisings of 1976 are perhaps the most celebrated example, but pedagogy in the service of revolution has been a facet of South African life for much longer (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; 1997). The latest iterations have come via
the “Rhodes Must Fall” and “Fees Must Fall” movements. They are, in many ways, a rejection of white pedagogy—a much-needed push to transform the space of university from its colonial legacies, its dominant epistemologies, and the economic inequalities on which it rests. The solutions, within this movement at least, are straightforward: there needs to be more black representation in the professoriate (Petersen 2016), universities should not be named for individuals who are increasingly seen as colonial antagonists (Daniels 2015), and education should be a right rather than an increasingly expensive privilege (Tshabalala 2015). It is not surprising that students in a post-Mandela South Africa grapple anew with the question of epistemic and ethical authority alike.

While my South African friends and interlocutors would likely agree about the importance of these questions, I also found, in various places, a sense of unease around where authority should be vested (if not a corrupt ANC); who ought to provide models for aesthetic theory and practice (if not the Western cannon) and, more fundamentally, who ought to stand as an ethical exemplar (not John Cecil Rhodes, certainly, but increasingly, not Nelson Mandela either). In response to the Rhodes Must Fall campaign, the satirical news site Banana Newsline reported on a similar (but fictional) protest to remove Mandela’s statue: “The traitor must go,” the protestors chanted, as they covered the statue with black trash bags. “Madiba sold our people out when he negotiated with the whites,” one man said. “It’s because of him that white farmers still have land.” Although parodic, Banana Newsline’s fictional protestors make an argument I heard in earnest numerous times. Mandela is not a teacher, a leader, or an exemplar, interlocutors told me. Pensively, they searched for other teachers, other exemplars. Perhaps Shaka Zulu, perhaps Dingane kaSenzangakhona Zulu. Not Mandela. Like the Mongolian rejection of Maoist icons, the state’s promotion of Mandela is becoming increasingly suspect.
Among the interlocutors who put Mandela himself on trial, perhaps the closest analog I found to S’bo during my fieldwork was a man named Sam. Sam is not only a pedagogue but also an artist, and not one who lived in Grahamstown but in Soweto. He was bothered by the question of “why I am here in this world,” and, like S’bo, had a mind that was relentlessly open to different ways of answering it. His metaphysics were drawn from his own readings of Western philosophy, Kabbalah, the Upanishads and Vedas, quantum physics, and a substantial amount of conspiracy theory (including the existence of Atlantis, aliens, and plenty of shadow organizations like the Illuminati and the Knights Templar). His integration of these influences was a bricolage of his own making, and Sam struggled as an artist, against familial and social expectations, to make a living in his own way and to live life free from precedents set by others.

I was reminded of Sam one day when S’bo told me, during a casual conversation, about a documentary he watched about asteroids and supernovas. “Scientists are always predicting disastrous things far out in the future,” he told me, “but the truth is, something catastrophic could happen to the earth at any point. All life as we know it could come to an end.” Sam too saw the world as being on the constant brink of chaos and destruction (although for him it would likely come through the work of a shadow government rather than a cosmic disaster), and both men seemed perfectly comfortable going about their lives with full acknowledgement of this fact. But their similarities end with their common hunger for contemplation of life’s mysteries. As a practitioner of forum theatre, Sam’s aesthetics were the aesthetics of the oppressed (Boal 2008), and his pedagogy was the pedagogy of the oppressed, drawn from his own training with a pedagogue who was himself a student of Augusto Boal. While Sam’s philosophical horizons and creativity were similar to S’bo’s, S’bo’s rejection of any mentor or exemplar sets him apart even from someone as epistemically eclectic as Sam. Sam’s knowledge comes from everywhere.
S’bo’s knowledge does not, according to him, derive from any place other than his own introspection.

Even so, I do see something of S’bo in the restless spirit of many of the black South Africans that I talked to as they wrestled with exactly who might best tell them what it meant, as black South Africans, to live a good life. Some find the answer in the Economic Freedom Fighters, whose populist and nationalistic rhetoric seeks to shape South African in the model of Zimbabwe through nationalization of industry and seizure of property from whites. Some look to the philosophy of Black Consciousness and those who claim to bear the mantel of Steve Biko. From S’bo, there is no answer, only a relentless questioning. In a post-Mandela South Africa, S’bo is ahead of his time. But not by much.

**Conclusion: Counter-pedagogy and Ethnography**

Rob and S’bo, each in their own ways and to varying degrees, are practitioners of a counter-pedagogy. Their teaching does not begin with the presumption of authority but an invitation to participate in spaces of dialog and exploration. Rob’s pedagogy is ongoing—it began with a set of workshops and continued as the group toured *Waterline* in Amsterdam. As the work toured in South Africa, cast members gave their own workshops—most recently in the townships of Cape Town—to others. S’bo’s pedagogical encounters are more temporally fluid—S’bo does not offer a series of workshops as Rob did; he simply teaches when called upon to teach, touring with various theatre groups in between.

The pedagogy of both men points beyond theatre to a certain way of being in the world. S’bo’s workshops, ostensibly oriented around theatre, frequently bleed into life through
conversations about anything and everything, and one needn’t even be interested in theatre to attend. For S’bo, because “life is theatre and theatre is life,” there is no clear demarcation of one or the other in the setting of the workshop. He takes participants through physical exercises, but what he really feels he teaches is his “way of doing things;” an approach that disavows all mentors, influences, and ideologies, and claiming everything as his own creation, for better or worse. S’bo ultimately teaches a relentlessly questioning form of being in the world, but does not want to be seen as a model of a specific mode of life—an ethics that I had a hard time finding elsewhere in South Africa, but an ethics nonetheless. The ethical pedagogy that Rob imparted through his workshops is more ethereal, less oriented around epistemology or morality itself and more phenomenological. A way of knowing self in space alongside other things and beings. A mode of attentiveness and collaboration. Above all, he teaches the importance of play and creation.

Toward the end of The Subject of Virtue, Laidlaw argues provocatively that ethnography itself can act as ethical pedagogue, that “that anthropological thought, in particular the exercise of the ethnographic imagination, can be a mode of reflective self-formation, a form of spiritual exercise” (2014, 224). Ethnography, he argues, plays a pedagogical role in this way when the self is shaped, through engagement with ethnography, to overcome initial puzzlement over a particular way of life. Using the example of Wari mortuary cannibalism, Laidlaw argues that from it we can gain an understanding of a different way of life and orientation toward death that expands our moral horizons; new understandings of mourning, compassion, and duty from a practice that initially strikes many as grotesque and abhorrent. For Laidlaw, ethnography can impart these lessons without at all suggesting that cannibalism is a practice that should be readily adopted.
What are the pedagogical possibilities opened by an ethnography of counter-pedagogues like Rob and S’bo? What can be learned from those who insist, to varying extents, that they do not teach? If both men teach differing forms of being in the world, they are forms of being that are temporally, socially, and politically bound to South Africa. They are post-Mandela forms of pedagogy that participate in broader debates around issues of authority, and more broadly, epistemology, that continue to be the touchpoint in arguments that freedom never really came in 1994 and that only a post-Mandela generation might be able to work toward freedom, however it is ultimately conceptualized. Shortly after I left the field, thousands of students marched on the Union Buildings in Pretoria to agitate for more affordable—and decolonized—forms of tertiary education. New pedagogies will continue to respond to these demands. The ethics of pedagogues in their responses or refusals to respond (so far, they have, by and large, joined with the students) to student demands in South Africa is a key facet in a dynamic of power and freedom. These dynamics are of interest to anyone interested in the formation of the self, the violence of the state, and emerging epistemologies.

To push Laidlaw’s claims of ethnographic pedagogy one step further, it is also worth considering the possibilities of ethnography that is itself counter-pedagogical. What would ethnography be if it took S’bo’s orientation (the more extreme of the two cases) as its guiding pedagogical impulse? Like S’bo, it would simply show a form of life, while explicitly repudiating itself as any kind of guide or exemplar. Such ethnography immediately runs the risk of generating what Laidlaw condemns—an ethnography from Geertz’s “merchants of astonishment” meant to titillate and perhaps shock—that does not lead to any kind of self-formation or greater understanding. It would be odd ethnography, to say the least. Perhaps not even ethnography at all. The counter-pedagogical impulse, however, that could be constructively
extracted is a skepticism of self; a healthy grain of worry that there is not one way to write an ethnography of anything. This principle, it seems, is not qualitatively different than the reflexivity anthropologists are often urged to practice. In that sense, anthropologists are already more like S’bo than might have been supposed.

The more provocative ethical disposition that might be drawn from S’bo’s counter-pedagogy is his disavowal of any mentor, any pedagogue, any teacher, and any influence. This, it seems, is a place to which ethnography cannot follow S’bo. As Jessica Marie Falcone (2013) argues, anthropologists are firmly embedded within networks of giving and exchange that make citational performance crucial. The hau of theory, in the giving and receiving of ethnographic texts, is part and parcel of the discipline itself as a cumulative social science. Ethnography without recourse to precedent would be lonely and, it seems, theoretically impoverished. From S’bo, I suggest, anthropologists might however take more of an impulse for ethnography that strikes out on its own, without worry for pedagogues and predecessors, and without the anxiety of having to “make an intervention” or “fill a gap.” This form of ethnography does not exist and may never exist, but we might approximate it to a degree, rendering ethnography more pliable, less disciplined, and, for that reason, more open to engagement with a broader range of conversation partners.
Chapter 5

Exhibit B: Traveling and Transnational Antiracist Whiteness

Transnational South African Whiteness

This chapter, which draws on ethnographic data and analysis of media accounts, is an engagement with transnational circulations of South African whiteness. Specifically, I engage the work of white South African artist Brett Bailey and his productions Exhibit A and Exhibit B, tracking the works between South Africa, Germany, and the UK. Exhibit A and Exhibit B were re-creations of nineteenth century “ethnographic exhibitions,” in which individuals were brought from Southern Africa, South America, and other exotic locales to be displayed in Europe for a curious public. Bailey’s re-creations of these “human zoos” (as they are pejoratively called) was meant to critique forms of white gazing and colonial history, though its representational strategies and Bailey’s own whiteness would be the cause of intense controversy when the work traveled outside of South Africa.

I examine the debates surrounding the Exhibit series with attention to how Bailey’s whiteness continually shifts as the work travels: in South Africa, Bailey makes the case that he is wrestling with a history of privilege and colonialism and engaging in his own ethical journey. In Germany, however, he becomes a pedagogue foisting a lesson of racial history on others. In London, Exhibit B was cancelled after an online petition and series of protests, and in this context Bailey transformed into an iconoclast and champion for the value of artistic expression.\footnote{Similar protests and debates around Exhibit B also broke out in Paris after the work’s cancellation in London. In this chapter, I focus on the debates in London, which preceded the largely analogous protests and arguments once the work came to Paris.}
Far from being monolithic, I argue, whiteness can be a space of freedom for ethical work in one context but can become constrained and contested as it crosses borders. The legitimacy of antiracist South African whiteness, I ultimately argue, is increasingly eroding in the context of a post-Mandela South Africa.

**Transnational Circulations of Whiteness**

My examination of Bailey and the shifting terrains of South African whiteness is in dialogue with critical whiteness studies, which has grown substantially as an interdisciplinary endeavor over the last twenty years. Drawing upon histories of colonialism, segregation, apartheid, and more enduring regimes of privilege, anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers and others have challenged whiteness as an unmarked racial category (e.g. Dyer 1997; hooks 1992), drawing attention to the visible and invisible privileges of whiteness (e.g. Frankenberg 1993; Page & Thomas 1994) and productively complicating the view that whiteness is a uniform and homogeneous construct (e.g. Hartigan 1992, 1997, 2005; Perry 2002). The burgeoning field that whiteness studies has become makes it a difficult task indeed to contain these studies in a succinct literature review—literature reviews on whiteness themselves tend to be fragmented and topic-oriented rather than comprehensive (e.g. Grimes 2002; Manglitz 2003; Martin-McDonald and McCarthy 2008). No longer a sub-field of critical race studies, whiteness studies itself has even been deemed worthy of periodization via “waves” (see, for instance, Twine and Gallagher 2008 on the “third wave” of whiteness studies).

Given the rate at which scholarship on whiteness continue to proliferate, it is curious that so few scholars of whiteness have addressed its transnational dimensions, that is, the circulation of whiteness between and across national borders. Existing volumes on the theme of transnational whiteness (e.g. Moreton-Robinson, Casey and Nicoll 2008) do not actually take the
movement of whiteness or white people through differing contexts as their object of study. The situation is very much the opposite, in fact: studies of whiteness that do not originate from within the Global North are counted as “transnational,” degrading the term into a vacant signifier not unlike the nebulous category of “world music.” Others (e.g. Boucher, Carey, and Ellinghaus 2009) address the colonial (and thus transnational) origins of whiteness through historical approaches, though the emphasis in these studies is more on the formations and colonial trajectories of whiteness rather than its movement across borders. Borders themselves, and white circulation between and through them, remain undertheorized in critical whiteness studies.

Studies of indigenous sovereignty have a good deal to contribute in this regard, showing not only the historic entanglement of race with borders, but the incomplete and ongoing work of whiteness (especially in settler-colonial contexts). Historically, these studies point out, the ability of whiteness to move easily across borders is not simply a function of whiteness, but is constitutive of whiteness itself. In settler-colonial contexts like Australia, Moreton-Robinson (2015) argues, white migration provided necessary reinforcements in service of a white European identity for the nation-state, and the state, in turn, provided incentives through easy access to citizenship and property, conferring a sense of belonging for whites upon arrival in a new place. Possession of these rights, of course, is built upon the dispossession of land and of sovereignty from indigenous peoples (Kauanui 2008; Schech and Haggis 2004). The history of settler-colonial borders is a history of whiteness in the making.

At the same time, borders are more than history frozen into a sense of place; they continue to mediate the politics of citizenship and belonging through projects of settler-colonialism that remain ongoing. In Simpson’s ethnography of the Mohawks (2014), for example, borders become an ethnographic pressure point at which discourses of citizenship,
sovereignty, and belonging are revealed. Simpson compellingly shows the entanglements of borders (and by extension, nation-states) with indigenous sovereignty by privileging moments of refusal—moments when she and others steadfastly reject the predication of U.S.-citizenship and assert indigenous sovereignty and belonging in response. These acts of refusal are a direct challenge to the settler-colonial ambition to either eliminate or assimilate its indigenous populations.49

The most compelling studies of whiteness across borders thus far follow the impulses at work in Moreton-Robinson, Simpson, and others, carefully showing not only the mechanisms through which whiteness facilitates its own circulation, but also the instability, precarity, and anxieties that continue to haunt projects of white nation-building. Lundström (2014), for example, examines the experiences of white Swedish women in their migrations to the United States, Spain, and Singapore, ultimately arguing that “whiteness, as a social construct, assumes different shapes cross-nationally and is moulded by individual actors and transnational relations” (2014, 167). Lundström theorizes whiteness as a “form of embodied and institutionalized cultural capital that can be converted into other forms of capital across social space” (2014, 13). Through a multisited ethnography, she tracks the shifting nature of Swedish whiteness as it becomes “re-installed” in new racial terrains. Through the course of Lundström’s ethnography, Swedish whiteness emerges as a “fluid, contextual, and relational construction with unstable boundaries” (2014, 12), not least because of the mediation of whiteness through the constitutive matrices of gender and sexuality. Whiteness for Lundström’s informants was an undeniable asset at times,

49 See also Kauanui, who argues that whiteness “constitutes a project of disappearance for Native peoples (2008, 10-11). Kauanui, like Simpson, argues that settler-colonialism works to domesticate indigenous sovereignty through discourses of “recognition,” in an attempt to enfold indigeneity into the nation-state. Borders, both figurative and actual, are a place where this work unfolds in Kauanui’s account as well as Simpson’s.
but it was also attended with gendered expectations of labor and domesticity depending on the context.

As a settler-colonial context, South Africa has likewise proven a productive springboard for studies of white movement across borders. The end of apartheid and the transition to a non-racial democracy have been attended by the departure of significant numbers of white South Africans. British South Africans in particular, as Andrucki has argued, have readily harnessed the power of a “visa whiteness machine” (2010) to gain access and citizenship in the United Kingdom and, by extension (at least until Brexit) to the broader European Union. Transnational mobility, Andrucki argues, “is not incidental to, or an epiphenomenon of, whiteness in South Africa, but is immanent in it” (2010, 360). South African whiteness is mobile, constantly shifting between contexts and adapting as it does so.

The study of these circulations has allowed for a more robust theorization of the mutating properties of whiteness as it crosses borders. Andrucki (2013) examines the “imaginative geographies” that shape perceptions of South Africa and the United Kingdom for white English speaking South Africans who regularly circulate between the two contexts. Similar to Moreton-Robinson’s (2015) work in the context of Australia, Andrucki articulates a powerful sense of South African belonging rooted in ontological connection to land and place. Once in the United Kingdom, white South Africans do not feel at home as whites but instead feel isolated, yearning for a more “authentic” life on the African continent. For Andrucki, imaginative geographies serve to figure South Africa as “African,” a status that is deployed in frequent comparisons.

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against the drudgery, boredom, and loneliness that attends a life in the “soulless” United Kingdom (2013, 5).

Pauline Leonard (2013), by contrast, focuses on British whiteness and its mutations upon entry to South Africa. Focusing on labor in particular, Leonard examines the changing fortunes of white British women by comparing apartheid-era immigrants with their post-apartheid counterparts. The privileges of British whiteness, she argues, are more ambiguous and more precarious in an era of post-apartheid employment driven by Black Economic Empowerment laws. Although whiteness still “works,” by and large, to confer access to resources and entry into high paying industries, many of those privileges, according to informants, seem to be eroding.

South African whiteness, of course, is not monolithic and uniform. While many white South Africans have chosen to immigrate abroad or retreat to the white enclaves of Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Durban (or even the primarily Afrikaans white “homeland” of Orania), there are others who have chosen to reflexively and dialogically cultivate new forms of whiteness. Taking whiteness as a substance of ethical work on the self, some white South Africans deliberately cultivate new “hybrid” identities that embrace facets of African culture (Steyn 2001), and might go as far as embracing indigenous forms of African religion (Teppo 2011; Wreford 2007). The end of apartheid, these scholars argue, was a time of great anxiety for white South Africans, but it also came with opportunities to forge a new whiteness for a new South Africa; an anti-racist strain of whiteness that would fully embrace and dwell alongside black South Africans.

These newer, less intransigent forms of South African whiteness move across borders as well, and have done so largely through aesthetic export. During the height of apartheid resistance, the works of white South African directors like Athol Fugard and Barney Simon
toured abroad to critical acclaim, bringing the indignities of apartheid to European and North American audiences and further stoking anti-apartheid sentiment. Simon in particular was relentlessly committed to cross-racial collaboration in the production and performance of theatre and to telling uniquely South African stories that exposed apartheid’s racism, urging audiences to see that new forms of racial relation were possible (Stephanou and Henriques 2011). After apartheid, works like William Kentridge’s *Ubu and the Truth Commission* further excavated a South Africa’s racial history and the extent to which whiteness itself could be brought to justice. One needn’t widen the scope far to see newer, more complex aesthetic exports that peddle new forms of South African whiteness: rap/rave group Die Antwoord has taken the Global North (and the United States in particular) by storm, promoting and celebrating a hybridized, bastardized, lower-class white identity that revels in impurity and mixing (Krueger 2012; Lewis 2016; Marx and Milton 2011).  

Brett Bailey’s *Exhibit* series is thus situated within a lineage of anti-racist theatre and performance with a fairly celebrated history. More importantly, his tour of *Exhibit B* offers an approach to circulations of whiteness that differs substantively from Lundström, Leonard, and Andrucki’s studies of white migration. Rather than seeking the advantages of a new life outside of South Africa, Bailey remains in transnational locales only temporarily. His movements and interactions with local racial contexts thus cannot be understood as the relocation of whiteness in a new racial terrain, but instead as an attempt to promote a form of whiteness as worthy of import into new locales. Not unlike Barney Simon or Athol Fugard, that is, Bailey sought to draw on a South African form of antiracist whiteness to tell the story of colonialism and  

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51 The domain of literature is another area in which these forms of South African antiracism are readily visible; authors like J.M. Coetzee and Antjie Krogg have explored South African antiracist whiteness at length.
apartheid, and also to suggest that a reflexive and diological form of whiteness is possible and worthwhile. *Exhibit B* is an attempt to put forward a particular antiracist subject position as a worthy alternative to local white subject positions already in place.

The controversy that surrounded Bailey as he toured the work in different European locales reveals the steady depreciation of anti-racist South African whiteness as worthy subject position in transnational settings. Far from a passive migrant subject to the constraints of a new racial context, his role as the director of an extremely controversial theatre piece makes Bailey a catalyst that exacerbated local racial debates about the meanings of whiteness. As *Exhibit B* makes evident, South African theatre still has the uncanny ability, when travelling abroad, to occasion deliberate and earnest reflection on issues of race. At the same time, Bailey found himself confronted with a radically different set of racial terrains than Fugard or Simon may have dealt with.

In this regard, it is helpful to return briefly to Lundström’s metaphor of the “re-installation” of whiteness in new locales (2014, 3). It is unclear if Lundström means to use this metaphor in a technological sense, likening the process of whiteness crossing borders to the transfer of, for example, a word processing program to a new computer. If this is her intended meaning, she does not deploy it at the depth she could have, speaking, for instance, of failed, impartial, or incompatible re-installations. The metaphor in this sense is helpful for understanding the argument I will advance about antiracist white South African subject positions in a post-Mandela South Africa. If we imagine local racial dynamics as a diverse set of operating systems, antiracist white South African subject positions are increasingly rendered incompatible. They are, at the very least, glitchy in some systems, and may even be (to stretch the metaphor a bit further) flagged as a malicious form of malware.
Beginning in South Africa—where I draw primarily from my own ethnographic engagement with the work—the chapter then shifts to Germany and the UK, tracking the *Exhibit* series toward a more robust understanding of South African whiteness across borders. Extending arguments made in a previous publication with regard to the work in Berlin (Vlachos 2014), I argue that Bailey’s encounter in London reveals the dissipating cultural capital of South African whiteness—the transnational white face of a post-Mandela South Africa. As a study in ethics, the chapter also reveals that antiracist work on the white self does not easily travel.

**Exhibit A: Technologies of the (White) Self**

*Exhibit A* played in South Africa as part of the “performance art” program at the 2012 National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, giving audiences the opportunity to “gaze at a variety of people from across the continent” for fifty-five rand (approximately five dollars). Held in a darkened and dreary two-story schoolhouse strewn with leaves and dirt, the performance began when individual audience members were called, one at a time at random, to enter the building alone. Once inside, audience members were confronted by a series of tableaux—
vivants depicting grotesque scenes of colonial horror: a Herrero woman in a German prison camp scraping the skulls of fellow prisoners to prepare them for export and anthropological study; a woman lying chained to a bed in the quarters of a French colonial officer; a “pygmy couple” displayed in curiosity cabinets alongside measuring tape, taxidermy animals, and a copy of Darwin’s *Origins of Species*. In the last room of the top floor, a Namibian choir of disembodied heads sang a series of dirges in Xosa and Tswana against the backdrop of historical photos of decapitated heads exported to Europe for study. The lower floor of the building modernized the themes of transnational racism with a specific focus on African refugees to Europe: in one room, a man sat bound and gagged on an airplane seat, and a nearby placard listed the names of a number of refugees who had died of strangulation and asphyxiation during deportation flights.

*Exhibit A* was an intense and uncomfortable work to experience as an audience member, not least because the tableaux were staged with live actors who returned my gaze with their own. As I wandered from room to room in a stupor, I met, for as long as I could, the gazes of each of the performers, who returned stares filled with anger, rage, pain, desperation, and a range of other emotions. *Exhibit A* had undeniable beauty and power as a work, but its beauty was always mediated by grotesque reminders of a painful colonial history as well as a history of the black body presented as spectacle for white European and American audiences (Andreassen 2015; Corbey 1993; Lindfors 1999). Unlike the happy or dancing natives who would have appeared in ethnographic exhibitions held in Paris, London, Berlin, or Chicago, *Exhibit A* sought to turn voyeurism and spectacle on its head through the ongoing, silent interrogation by each of the cast members.
After exiting the school, audiences could sit and debrief around a fire, discussing the work with each other or simply pondering in further silence. The mostly white audience members attending my performance, and many other afterward, expressed feelings of grief, shame, and disgust in response to the work, and were unsettled by what they had seen. Black cast members, with a much more intimate view of audiences, experienced these emotions firsthand as they witnessed raw and vulnerable bouts of crying and apology from white audiences.

These visceral displays by audiences were, paradoxically, the real performance of Exhibit A, according to Brett Bailey. At a public interview, he made it clear that the work was deliberately constructed in this way when he noted that “The performers are told, as they sit there, that the performers of this piece are the audience moving through, that you’re actually the audience, and you’re sitting watching a lot of people coming to watch you. You are the audience, they are the performers.” In this way, Exhibit A, it turns out, was performed by mostly white audiences, choreographed with a myriad of expressive reactions for reception by the tableau-vivants. The cast, according to Bailey, had the power of the gaze at their full disposal.

Exhibit A’s cast took this instruction to heart, and at least one of them (who I later came to know as S’bo when I returned in 2014) used the opportunity to conduct his own ethnography of white emotion. As I talked with him about his participation in the work, he frequently mentioned the opportunities he had to “see through” the audiences. While I initially took this comment to mean that he was trying to see things from their perspective, the reality that eventually emerged was quite different: audience members had become transparent to him. Given the hundreds of reactions that he had witnessed, it was not hard to guess that an audience member was feeling sad, intimidated, ashamed, or overwhelmed. He had the power to categorize, classify, and discriminate between different audience members and draw generalized conclusions
about the range of possible reactions from the audience. As he stood frozen on the stairwell between the two floors, he engaged in a sophisticated study of how people might respond once the gaze is turned back on them.

Despite the feelings of guilt and shame that this reversal of gazes provoked in its (overwhelmingly white) audiences, Brett Bailey denied in public discussions and elsewhere that the intention of *Exhibit A* was meant to shame people:

“People say to me, did I make this work to shame people? And it’s like, no, not at all. I made this work to excavate. Another thing that’s in this work is that I’m a white South African. My family has been here since 1674, the one side of my family. They were probably slave owners; they were complicit in everything that’s happened here, really. My own society, my people have been immensely enriched by a lot of these atrocities here. And also I was born in 1967, I was conscripted into the army, the role models at school were the priests, the guests on TV were putting forward a philosophy of racism, of racial superiority. So I can’t ignore that that is part of my cultural DNA, my intellectual DNA, it’s part of who I am, I can’t deny it. I was brought up with that, and it’s the soil that I absorbed as a kid. How do I unravel that? What were the roots of that? What was that all about?” (Quoted in Vlachos 2014:61)

As I have argued elsewhere, Bailey’s narrative hinges on metaphors of archeology and excavation. Establishing his ancestral connection to the land and simultaneously problematizing it, he described the work as a process of digging down to the roots of his own racial past and an archeology of his racialized experiences as a white South African growing up during apartheid. For Bailey (in this setting at least) the work wasn’t meant to compel shame in audiences, but was instead a response to the shame he felt as he encountered the history of ethnographic exhibitions
and mined his own ancestral history in South Africa. It was also, importantly, conceived and devised alongside a cast of black South African performers with whom Bailey regularly discussed issues of personal and social South African racial history (Vlachos 2014).

The ethical thrust of Bailey’s work—not least in his impulse toward excavation—corresponds quite well to arguments made by Paul C. Taylor in “Art, Education, and Witness; Or, How to Make our Ideals Clear” (2009). Taylor argues that “a certain kind of perception is essential to ethical practice,” and that “cultivated aesthetic experiences, both good and bad” facilitate the development of this perception (Taylor 2009, 25). Taylor’s approach hinges on a post-analytic philosophical intervention into critical race theory. Although critical race theory is “an essentially ethical enterprise,” he argues, it “cannot realize its ethical purpose until it demands some manner of self-excitation from the ethical agents that its genealogical analyses mean to inform” (2009, 26). Aesthetic encounters are an integral part of this process of self-excitation; they allow the cultivation of a creative ethical sensitivity that responds to the particulars of context rather than the intransigent ethical principles of a more consequentialist or deontological stripe.

For Taylor and Martha Nussbaum (whose aesthetic theory he draws from), the complexities of ethical life call for an ethical agent who is more of an improvisational artist; someone who can internalize and begin from a set of moral norms or traditions and apply them to the particulars of a situation at hand, rather than operating as a simple a rule-computing machine. “Certain works of narrative art not only model this process but also insist,” Taylor argues, “on the truths that require it” (2009, 28). Adding a Foucauldian twist to his account,

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52 Taylor, who identifies as a post-analytic philosopher, stresses “the subordination of conceptual analysis to empirical, even experimental, inquiry” (2009, 26).
Taylor goes on to assert that a complete (and virtuous) internalization of rules of conduct necessitates “a critique of the constitutive power of the rule,” and more generally, “a critical relation to the norms that constitute the self” (2009, 30). It is precisely in the aesthetic realm, Taylor argues, where we readily find such opportunities for such critique, and by extension, a kind of self-excavation.

The upshot for post-colonial contexts, in Taylor’s account, is the need for relentless self-excavation of colonial histories and the ways in which it has oriented perception, and it on this point that Taylor’s work is most germane to Exhibit A:

To be postcolonial is to exist in a state of at least nominal disaffiliation from colonial relations of dependence and exploitation, but it is also to remain affected by, and to continue to have to work through, the legacies of those relations, and their persistence in altered forms. This is the condition not just of obvious colonial powers and their former colonies… It is also the condition of *herrenvolk*, or “master race,” societies like South Africa, Australia, and the U.S. (U.S. possessions notwithstanding) after the abandonment of *de jure* forms of ethnoracial expropriation and oppression. We pledge in these places to do better, to come to grips with our histories and transcend them, and to make ourselves into viable multiracial democracies. But we can pursue this aspiration responsibly only if we excavate the legacies of the past, unearthing the deposits that the past has left in our economies, cultures, and psyches. This means, among other things, attending to the specific perceptual lenses and models to which our colonial legacies predispose us in our attempts to interpret and navigate the social world around us” (2009, 30).
Art can and does play an integral role in facilitating this post-colonial excavation and self-critique. It does not even need to be morally good or commendable art; many of the examples that Taylor draws on from *Dances With Wolves* to *The Last King of Scotland* evince deeply problematic forms of whiteness. Nonetheless, “the right artworks, even, and perhaps especially, ethically problematic ones, position us to ask: ‘what does it mean that I respond to this piece as I do? What kind of person am I, for this work to resonate with me?’” (2009, 35).

Taylor’s insights allow for a principled, sympathetic reading of *Exhibit A*: in its process of inception, construction, and production, *Exhibit A* was a technology of the self that allowed Bailey to work toward a different sort of (white) subject position: one characterized by racial reflexivity and informed by dialogical relationships with others. In its performances, it rhetorically functioned as a mode of justification for this subject position, critiquing and working to upend a legacy of white voyeurism that began in colonialism and persists through problematic forms of cultural representation (Butler 2010; Naidu 2009, 2011; Rassool & Witz 1996; Rogerson 2004; Witz et al. 2001). Transforming its audiences into a spectacle, *Exhibit A* was a work that Taylor might find interesting (even if problematic) for its structured critique and reversal of colonial forms of gazing and interrogation of histories of European exploitation. Even as it disturbed its audiences and drove them toward emotions of shame and grief, it staged

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54 In this regard, it is important to note that *Exhibit A* was explicitly positioned in South Africa as a response to *The Spear*, a painting by white South African artist Brett Murray. *The Spear* was a parody of “Lenin Lived, Lenin Lives, Long Live Lennon,” a propaganda poster created by Viktor Semenovich Ivanov. In *The Spear*, Jacob Zuma’s head replaced Lenin’s, and his penis and testicles were exposed. *The Spear* generated so much outrage that the work was ultimately vandalized and covered in white paint. A quote from Achille Mbembe referencing *The Spear* served as an epigram for the *Exhibit A* program: “What has irked many is the realisation that, after almost 20 years of freedom, the black body is still a profane body. It still does not enjoy the kind of immunity accorded to properly human bodies.” (Mbembe 2012).
intimate and personal encounters that forced audiences to attend to their own forms of seeing and being seen.

Although *Exhibit A* received a good deal of critical acclaim, not everyone was apt to give the production such a sympathetic reading. During a chance meeting with Bailey and members of his production company in one of the festival’s recreational areas, Bailey told me that there had been a lively academic debate about the ethics of the piece. Many people, it seemed, felt that *Exhibit A* recreated the very violence that it set out to critique. Performance artist Jane Corrigall echoed these criticisms after seeing the work, arguing that *Exhibit A* is “a problematic work that reaffirms the stereotype of the Africans as victims…Viewers are meant to confront their own guilt—complicity in the atrocities or even their ignorance of them should induce it. It’s a farce from both sides; a game that exposes a desire to scrutinize others, the thrill of the grotesque, which is masked, erased, and forgiven by the subsuming guilt that automatically ensues” (Corrigall 2012, para. 13). I told Bailey I had been hearing the same sorts of critiques from other festival goers, some of whom had not seen *Exhibit A*. “Well, fuck them,” Bailey declared. Confident in his cast and in the hard racial work he had undergone in creating *Exhibit A*, Bailey pressed on throughout the festival, to mostly critical acclaim.

Bailey, though, would not be able to brush off his critics with such ease once the work began a broader European tour. As criticism of the piece increasingly gathered momentum, he found himself at odds not only with liberal academics but also with a growing body of antiracist protesters who refused to accept that the piece could be anything but “the masturbation of white guilt” (Akala 2014) and a cynical attempt to exploit a painful colonial history to make a name for himself. In the sections that follow, I track debates that attended showings of *Exhibit B* in Berlin and the UK to argue that the white subject position Bailey cultivated in South Africa was not
ultimately transferable to other contexts. Whiteness is context-specific and bound by local histories, but so are white antiracist subject positions: they are not readily portable, nor readily installed beyond the contexts from which they originated.

Exhibit B: Race and Representation in Berlin and London

Guilt and Catharsis in Berlin

A few months after Exhibit A’s staging in South Africa, Exhibit B\textsuperscript{55} began a lengthy European tour as part of the “foreign affairs” program of the Berliner Festspiele. It was here that protests around the Exhibit series began to erupt, as a group of antiracist community theatre activists protested the work and challenged the legitimacy of Bailey’s antiracist stance. Bailey’s responses to the protests were not dismissive as much as they were combative; Bailey was willing to engage detractors, but he was unwilling to put into question the fundamental impulse of the work, which had undergone a significant shift from its South African iteration.

\textsuperscript{55} Exhibit A and Exhibit B are largely the same work. The structure of the work and many of the tableaus remained the same, while some tableaus were modified to address local racial histories. For example, Sieg (2015) points out that in Belgium, one of the actors playing an asylum seeker wore a shirt reading “Zwarte Piet is racisme!” to address the longstanding practices of blackface that have been subsequently banned in the Netherlands (2015, 252).
No longer approaching the work as the excavation of a racial past and the cultivation of new white subject positions, Bailey was much more explicit in this context about the centrality of grief and shame, telling media that the work includes “a kind of catharsis—this is definitely something Europeans need, and I give it to you with the help of a black cast” (Vlachos 2014, 62). Rather than a work driven by self-excavation, Bailey thus sets up Exhibit B in this terrain as a work of antiracist pedagogy; the orchestration of a ritual that will lead other whites through emotions of grief and shame to new forms of racial consciousness. It is this shift, I argue, that followed the work as it circulated in other European contexts.

*Bühnenwatch* (Stage Watch), a theatre advocacy group that has the aim of “bringing racist traditions and practices on German stages to an end” was vocal in its criticism of Exhibit B, arguing that the work fails on any relevant level to reverse historical forms of voyeuristic gazing. Their critique is worth quoting here at length:

Despite claiming his seemingly anti-racist intentions, Brett Bailey reproduces the idea of Africans as objects, serving purposes of entertainment, comfort or, in this case, the education of white people. The artist claims that the people exhibited in the ‘Völkerschauen’ of the 19th and 20th century were exposed to the European gaze—and that his work ‘reverses’ this gaze. We cannot see any reversion here…After all, it is not whites, but Black Africans that are standing motionless for over 45 minutes—some of them almost naked…The staging will purge feelings of shame in white people, but there is no analysis of sources and mechanisms of racism, so there is no fostering of a critical discussion. It is not anti-racist to mirror their own everyday experiences of racism to Black members of the audience. Here, painful Black history is being abused to advance
the careers of white protagonists and to soothe the bad conscience of a white audience that is constantly ignoring the voices of their Black fellow citizens (Bühnenwatch 9/29).

Far from reversing colonial forms of gazing, Bühnenwatch argues, *Exhibit B* simply reproduces them.

Bühnenwatch’s broader criticism of Bailey’s antiracism unfolds from two directions. Firstly, on a formal level, Bailey enacts racism through the positioning of black bodies in the work. Far from a passive artistic choice, they argue, Bailey actively exploits his black casts by deliberately positioning them as victims. “Standing motionless” and “almost naked,” they serve only as showpieces. Second, and more fundamentally, Bühnenwatch argues that *Exhibit B* is a piece made by a white artist for white audiences; a cynical attempt to prick the liberal white conscience at the expense of its black cast and the pain of black spectators. Worse still, it does so without generating the any impetus toward antiracist analysis or action. It recklessly uses black histories for shock value, that is, and does not sustain any commitment to critically questioning and working against current forms of racism in Germany or elsewhere.

These two arguments would continue to haunt *Exhibit B* as it traveled beyond Germany. The second in particular, I argue, is the more damning of the two in terms of Bailey’s attempt to develop, promote, and export a form of white antiracism. As the work continued to tour beyond Berlin in the Netherlands and France, it garnered critical acclaim but also increasing amounts of criticism. Following a performance at Edinburgh in August of 2014, Bailey and a local British cast of actors got ready for a run at the Barbican in London, and it was here that critiques of Bailey’s antiracism would come to a head.
London Closure

The protests against Exhibit B in London, which would ultimately lead to the closure of the show, began with a change.org petition with the title “Withdraw the racist Exhibition ‘Exhibit B—The Human Zoo’ from showing at the Barbican from 23rd—27th September.” A letter attached to the petition, which was delivered to the administration of the Barbican, argued that Exhibit B was an “outrageous act of complicit racism” that does not expose but instead reinforces colonialism and acts as a “caging instrument of white supremacy.” The petition steadily gained momentum and support from antiracist protestors in the UK, ultimately gathering nearly 23,000 signatures.56

It was not the petition itself that resulted in the closure of Exhibit B, but instead a protest of nearly two hundred people at the Barbican who, on opening night, made good on the petition’s promise of direct action should their demands not be met. Accounts of the protest diverge. Demonstrators were quick to point to the fact that, despite police presence, no arrests were made and that the protest was largely peaceful (Odunlami and Andrews 2014). Bailey argued in a Facebook post that the protestors stormed the building seconds before the opening. The Barbican, citing the “extreme nature of the protest and the serious threat to the safety of performers, audiences, and staff,” cancelled all performances of Exhibit B.

The controversy generated by *Exhibit B* and its cancelation by the Barbican set off an explosion of debate that reached beyond the theatre industry, beyond the United Kingdom, and beyond Europe, reaching international media outlets from the New York Times to Russia TV. Numerous opinion pieces advancing arguments at the intersections of race and representation would continue for months afterward. While these debates cover a wide range of rhetorical terrain, they collectively reveal the shifting significance of South African antiracist whiteness abroad.

Writing from mainstream media outlets, free speech advocacy think tanks, and personal blogs, supporters of *Exhibit B* held fast to arguments that the closure was an open and shut case of artistic censorship. “For those committed to the defense of free inquiry and artistic expression, this is not a complicated matter. And it would be only slightly more complicated if the work in question were indisputably racist. The right of artists to express themselves as they see fit must be inviolate, as must the right of audiences to make up their own minds about the merits of what they produce,” argued Jamie Palmer (2014, para. 6). Playwright and theatre critic Bonnie Greer argued that by getting *Exhibit B* cancelled and preventing her from seeing the work, the protestors had “quite simply refused me the choice to live my own life. This, in its own way, is a tyranny too” (Greer 2014). For Kenan Malik, the closure of *Exhibit B* “shows how even those who see themselves as progressive and as defenders of free speech can often be less than fulsome in their defense of artistic freedom” (2014, para. 2).
It is also worth noting that the London cast members themselves felt censored by the work’s closure. Stella Odunlami argued that “my freedom of expression was taken the moment the protestors decided to attempt to storm the venue, causing it to be deemed unsafe. It was at that moment that the protestors retained their right to free speech and I had mine taken away” (Odunlami and Andrews 2014). A joint statement by the entire London cast of Exhibit B echoes this sentiment, arguing that they had been “censored and silenced by protestors, who truly have an ill-informed and misguided perspective of this significant and informative piece of work.”

Supporters of Exhibit B did not miss the irony of this silencing from critics, paradoxically driven by arguments that Bailey silences his own cast (Atkin 2015, 141).

Staunch opponents of Bailey’s work responded to these arguments only to a limited extent. While Kehinde Andrews argued that “art is not beyond censorship when offensive in nature,” (Andrews 2014), protestors, by and large, focused their arguments on a sustained criticism of the work’s problematic forms of representation and of Bailey’s form of antiracist whiteness. The actors, opponents argued, are placed in extremely compromising and degrading
positions of victimization. Exhibit B, after all, featured women performing as Sarah Baartman and other exotic specimens who were naked from the waist up, as well as a woman chained to a bed in a context of rape. The nudity in particular led to charges of sexualized racial exploitation:

“I find the whole exhibition perverse and akin to racial porn,” Sarah Myers argued. “This was about sexual excitement in seeing semi-naked women and men, in bondage, the power of the audience being in control, the subjects being objectified, and in short getting off on it and then feeling guilty for getting off on it” (Jamal 2014). Further, whether the actors were nude or clothed, opponents of the piece frequently cited the effect the work would have on its black audiences, forcing them to “confront the history of their objectification, the systematic denial of their personhood” (Atkin 2015). For these critics, the power of the gaze given to the actors by Bailey would not be enough to mitigate white voyeurism.

Racial representation, it is argued here, is problematic to the extent that it bleeds into reality, augments voyeuristic impulses, and re-traumatizes black communities and audience members by forcing them to confront unreflexive and insensitive reminders of a painful history. Some defenders of Exhibit B would insist that mimesis of is not akin to endorsement for (Martin et al. 2014); calling the impulse to accuse Bailey and supporters

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57 Also known as the “Hottentot Venus,” Sarah Baartman, a Khoisan woman from Cape Town, performed on the stages of London and Paris. As the Hottentot Venus, Baartman was described in one program as a “most correct and perfect specimen” of the people of South Africa (Strother 1999:25). She was repeatedly subject to lewd demands, groping, and prodding from audiences, and upon her death, her genitals and skeleton were preserved, remaining on display at the French Musée de l’Homme until 1974 (see Crais and Scully 2009).
of supporting historical human zoos “deeply problematic” (Walling 2014). While these arguments are a suitable defense on the grounds of Bailey’s intention, they failed to answer the sustained critique of representation, rooted in a phenomenology of black experience under which black communities continue to feel daily forms of marginalization. With Bühnenwatch, these critics argued that antiracism should not entail mirroring experiences of racism to black audiences.

**Challenging Antiracist Whiteness**

While opponents of the work thus focused a good deal of energy decrying its problematic forms of representation, criticism of the piece as a fundamentally white endeavor were far more common. These forms of critique meet Bailey on his own racial terrain, taking him at his word that the *Exhibit* series is indeed the product of a white South African who came of age during apartheid. Yet it is whiteness—and South African whiteness in particular—that makes the piece so problematic for those who agitated against it. *Exhibit B*, opponents of the work argue, is an attempt to re-center whiteness, and an insidious one for the ways that it cloaks its intentions in anti-racist rhetoric. Its attempts to cultivate white antiracism, according to this line of argumentation, only happen at the expense of black bodies, and the guilt that the work provokes is counterproductive at best.

In a critique of *Blood Diamonds/Terminal* (another work by Bailey produced for the 2009 National Arts Festival in Grahamstown), Andrew van der Vlies argues that the work “seems calculated as one to be experienced by the privileged, and experienced as shocking and/or cathartic. In a hostile reading, this might be judged no more than an attempt by Bailey to deliver forms of affect to the affluent, an affective experience for those who can come and go” (van der Vlies 2013, 500). While rhetorically setting himself up in contrast to this hostile reading, van der
Vlies nonetheless declares *Terminal* to be “a safari into the marginalized lives that make possible the kinds of comparatively privileged lives lived by most audience members” (2013, 501). In a similar way, critics of Bailey relentlessly charged that *Exhibit B* was a work designed for a white, affluent audience. In London, the twenty-pound ticket price was prohibitive to many, ensuring that well-heeled white liberals would be the only audience in attendance (Schutte 2014). Others drew attention to the classist connotations of the venue itself (Akala 2014) and to the hopelessly deluded elites that praised the piece while knowing nothing about the demographic it purports to represent (Abbey 2014). The result, all things considered, is a work of theatre created by a white artist, promoted by a white theatre space with a white executive board and funded by a white city government—all of whom “have determined what they think is anti-racism in a modern London” (Jasper and Govinda 2014).

It is quite reasonable to suppose that the price of admission to Bailey’s zoo in London was prohibitive to lower-income theatre-goers, thus ensuring a certain (white) class composition for an audience that would in turn have their experiences affirmed by elite upper-class white art critics. The more vexing problem for Bailey’s opponents, however, is found in the teleology of the piece: *Exhibit B* does not de-center but radically re-centers whiteness. Its central protagonists, critics argued, are not the black tableau vivants depicting colonial atrocities but instead its white audiences. Confronted with a display of unbearable atrocities, they are moved to feelings of guilt that are, presumably, worthy of esteem. Far from standing in solidarity with black victims of violence, *Exhibit B* is more about the affirmation of antiracist whiteness than the atrocities that it purports to depict (Jenkins 2014).
In this analysis, guilt itself is not necessarily the object of criticism, but instead the fact that, in a cynical utilitarian calculation, the moral weightiness of this guilt will seemingly always trump the costs of its production in and through black bodies (Muir 2014). “It’s a twisted dynamic,” Jane Corrigall argues, “because guilt can only be appeased through the play of victimhood” (2012, para. 14). Exhibit B, that is, hinges on a racialized division of moral labor whose ultimate product is white purity. The power of Exhibit B derives from a dynamic whereby black suffering and the silent pedagogy of the gaze culminates in a heightened historical racial sensitivity, expressed through emotions of guilt.

The forward moral trajectory of the guilt produced by Exhibit B is not entirely clear—especially to its critics—and for this reason is another focal point for criticism. Akala (2014) and Schutte (2014), for instance, both express skepticism that Exhibit B fosters a commitment to ongoing antiracist activity or solidarity with groups who currently suffer from marginalization and racism. Michael (2015) allows that some white audience members might be well-versed in critiques of structural racism; these individuals will have no problem assessing and interrogating their own discomfort after seeing the work. Others who are more racially naïve, however, will feel discomfort without any adequate tools to interpret it appropriately, which might shut down rather than encourage further conversations about race. Overall, the work’s structure gives rise to a cathartic experience of white guilt, but it remains unclear how, for Bailey’s audiences, this guilt becomes productively deployed after the performance is over.

Bailey’s own writing makes it clear that he has moved beyond his own sense of racial guilt to “cast off what no longer fitted—those ideas and concepts born of a sheltered education and apartheid conditioning; all that marshmallow-soft whiteness. To allow myself to be anew” (2003, 12). For Bailey, this included prolonged periods of living in rural and isolated areas of
Eastern Cape province among the mPondo, working with a sangoma to learn indigenous rituals and forms of healing. There are frameworks for making sense of this alternative form of whiteness in South Africa in critical whiteness studies; Teppo (2011), for instance, studies the transformation of a spiritual landscape that after apartheid has made indigenous African forms of religion (at least in principle) available to whites. Other nascent white subject positions occasionally make a splash in South African media, particularly when white South Africans intentionally move into the townships or depressed inner-city areas as an expression of solidarity (Smith 2013).

Of course, Bailey has his South African detractors (and he had them well before Exhibit A), who have frequently made the case that he has appropriated—aesthetically and otherwise—the history and traditions of African cultures. Even so, it could at least be said that 1) Bailey is sensitive to the history of apartheid, and has been publicly reflexive about his role in apartheid society as a white South African, and 2) has adopted white subject positions informed by African spirituality and performance traditions as an expression of these subject positions. At the same time, these local South African racial sensitivities, cultivated through years of study, travel, and contemplation, do not travel well. They are not taken as evidence of accomplished racial work in other contexts; they do not provide evidence of sensitivities to localized racial tensions in other locales; they do not provide resources for how his white European audiences might process their guilt in a similar way. Bailey’s failure to acknowledge local specificities of race, interestingly enough, is one point on which supporters and detractors of Exhibit B seem to converge.

While sympathetic to Exhibit B, Damian (Damian et al. 2015), for example, provocatively implicates both Bailey and broader voices of debate around Exhibit B, critiquing the ways in which racial heritage and artistic intention are given priority rather than the “ways in
which it acts in different contexts.” Without attending to local configurations of race—their historical precedents and current trajectories—*Exhibit B* does not fully engage conversations about race that are of immediate import to its audiences. *Exhibit B*’s tableaus undergo alterations between one city and the next, in particular to identify and depict real migrants who have been killed during deportation. With the exception of the choir (which has remained constant), the actors in each city are also new, drawn from pools of local talent and subjected to a rigorous interview process. Beyond these changes, opponents and supporters alike concede that the formal elements of the piece remain static and do little to interrogate local racisms.

Comparing *Exhibit B* to similar attempts at merging art with ethnographic practice, Chikha and Arnaut (2013) describe in some detail the work that Bailey performs in order to localize the work to its audiences. Nonetheless, they go on to argue that Bailey’s on-site adaptation

> “Is not, however, pursued with regard to the local categories of debating alterity, be it in connection with ex-colonized subjects, migrants, or allochthones. In Belgium, for instance, the distinction between Francophone and Dutchophone is an important national grid on which other categories of otherness and different cultural attitudes towards ‘others’ are articulated. Instead of people engaging with these local categories, they are submerged in the racial dyad black and white” (2013, 675).

This dyad, they go on to argue, compresses more nuanced differences and inequalities in favor of the work’s forms of reversal and meta-representation (676).
Sieg (2015) gives a more sympathetic reading of *Exhibit B* despite its cursory treatment of local racial dynamics. While finding it “irrefutable” that “Exhibit B is not attuned to the complexities of nationally or locally specific contemporary racisms or to the way that blackness relates to other categories of difference” (2015, 256), she argues that there are more redeeming qualities of the work that seem to trump this deficiency. For Sieg, the work “indeed approaches anti-racist empowerment” as “a two-pronged intervention in European discourses of security on the one side, and in the restructuring of European museums on the other” (2015, 250-51). In terms of the latter, Bailey’s tableaus draw upon museum conventions that “isolate, decontextualize, and elevate objects through lighting, frames and pedestals (252). At the same time, she argues, “the addition of a live person disrupts familiar viewing expectations and throws into startling relief habits of looking and knowing” (258). But the real ethical thrust of the work, she contends, turns on the work’s invitation to the viewer to bear witness to the casualties of European securitization. In drawing links between the colonial abuses of the past and the current treatment of migrants, *Exhibit B* promotes a form of witnessing that “inaugurates a dialectic of receiving evidence and transforming that evidence into new ethical imperatives that guide individual behavior and social transformation” (264). These ethical imperatives, for Sieg, are a call to respond to an emergency that transcends the borders of any particular nation-state.

Sieg’s sympathetic (though not uncritical) analysis of *Exhibit B* is a plausible interpretation of Bailey’s intentions for the work, bolstered by Bailey’s own arguments in the Guardian that “Exhibit B is not primarily a work about colonial-era violence. Its main focus is current racist and xenophobic policies in the EU, and how these have evolved from the state-sanctioned racism of the late 19th century” (Bailey 2014). On Sieg’s reading, Bailey is not addressing his critique of contemporary racism at the level of any particular nation-state, but at a
higher level of scale that moves beyond borders. The racial dynamic given priority here is intricately bound up with questions of national belonging, citizenship, and transnational patterns of migration. Bailey does address the structural particulars of nations like Germany and the UK insofar as he calls attention to facets of securitization within those countries, pointing out specific individuals who have died during deportations. But the work does little to speak to what Sieg identifies in the German context as Alltaggrassismus (everyday racism), “the linguistic and perceptual traces that perpetuate racialized patterns of exclusion” (2015, 256) that German antiracist activists and scholars have been pointing out for some time.

While conceding that Exhibit B does not adequately speak to ordinary, everyday forms of European racism, Sieg would “weigh its blunt reductivism against its ambitious transnational range and historical scope, which attends to national specificities but places them within a larger, European racial imaginary in a way that is unparalleled” (2015, 256). The assumption that Exhibit B’s range and scope is weightier than its problematic forms of representation, of course, depends entirely on whose scale is being used. Sarah Myers’s criticism hinges entirely on the fact that a white South African is degrading black actors to make a convoluted point about history, as do the arguments of many of Exhibit B’s most vocal critics. None of the work’s opponents, in fact, make reference to its attempts to address Europe’s immigration crises. The spectacle of semi-nude black bodies depicting scenes of colonial abuse, for protestors, is sufficient to negate any ethical traction that the latter half of the show might make.

Such objections are, in every case, coupled with demands for greater representation in the arts industry. Bühnenwatch’s frequent protests about the use of blackface in German theatre are two-pronged, criticizing not only a harmful form of caricature but the simultaneous paucity of available roles for black German actors. In the United Kingdom, protests against Exhibit B
responded in a similar way to severe racial underrepresentation in the upper echelons of the arts industry. “Breaking News: In 2016, a group of middle aged white people have (yet another) meeting on ‘diversity’ in the arts,” reads a sarcastic headline from Uprise, one of the many groups behind the protest of Exhibit B (Uprise 2016). The lack of racial diversity on the Barbican’s board, for many, was likely why the show was allowed to proceed in the first place (Akala 2014).

Bailey’s failure to take these calls to dialogue seriously is compounded by the fact that his reputation, history, and ethics are not readily intelligible outside of his own context. Exhibit A generated some controversy in South Africa, but garnered more praise than criticism. A public discussion about the work as part of the Thinkfest! program at the National Arts Festival was met with friendly questions and comments that didn’t require Bailey to justify the work morally as much as to explain its representation and aesthetic precedents. Most telling, perhaps, was Anton Krueger’s introduction for Bailey: “I don’t think Brett needs a lot of introduction. If you’re sitting here you’re probably aware of his pedigree as one of the most innovative, intelligent, mind and soul-bending artists from South Africa” (Krueger 2013, 2). Part of this pedigree is aesthetic, of course: South Africans will be familiar with Bailey’s attempts to blend indigenous performance traditions with “a handful of Western avant-garde and a dash of showbiz” (Bailey 2003, 9). But part of this pedigree is also racial: the story of a white subject position forged through intensive engagement with African religion, ritual, and life-worlds.

In South Africa, Bailey can refract the politics of representation through a personal narrative of transformation, reflexivity, and ongoing dialogue. He has plenty of South African detractors to be sure, but he also has the ability to respond to them with a set of justifications that are at least intelligible and that have precedent, even if they are ultimately rejected. Few South
Africans, for instance, would express the same consternation and shock at a white South African who aspired to be a sangoma as they would have twenty years ago. These cases remain rare, but after apartheid they have entered the catalogue of ethical freedoms made newly available to white South Africans (Teppo 2011). Bailey’s deployment of African aesthetics and spirituality, for him, were earned through hard work, patience, learning, and dialogue with black South Africans.

No analogous frameworks for the justification of racial virtue are available to Bailey once he leaves this racial context. No frameworks, that is, that would easily allow the re-installation of antiracist South African whiteness in a new context. Once beyond his own borders, as Sieg perceptively notices, protestors do not credential his antiracist trajectory elsewhere, but instead reject the “whistle-stop nature” of Bailey’s current work and its pronounced lack of commitment and care to local (racial) contexts, which contrasts with longstanding local efforts to utilize theatre for the formation of racial consciousness (2015, 255). “I think I was made into a type,” Bailey has argued subsequently. “I was seen as a racist South African. That immediately typecast me. Now explaining the work has become part of the modus operandi. Although I’m not sure it’s useful” (Crawley 2015). The demand for an explanation and a justification of Exhibit B is simultaneously a demand that he justify a claim to antiracist solidarity anew in each context. The transitory nature of this form of whiteness nearly guarantees that such justifications won’t be accepted.

**Traveling Whiteness, Transnational Anti-racisms**

Broadly speaking, it remains the case that visible and invisible benefits are conferred through whiteness, and many of these benefits do cross transnational borders with ease. As Andrucki (2010), Leonard (2013), and Moreton-Robinson (2015) note, these privileges include a
greater ease of mobility; the freedom for whites to migrate elsewhere in search of new lifestyles, new opportunities for wealth, and new terrains for the shaping of self. While this freedom does become attenuated through its intersections with gender and class, whiteness moves across borders with relative ease.

The travels of Brett Bailey’s white antiracism, however, complicate this picture on a number of levels. White antiracist subject positions do not travel well. They are unavoidably local, and are crafted in response to place-specific histories in dialog with place-specific others. The scope of ethical freedom for whites who would perform antiracist work is constrained beyond a particular set of borders: the only freedom in movement here is a freedom to begin the work of antiracism anew in each context.

My own antiracist sentiments are illuminating in this regard, and also reveal a paradox at the heart of anthropology as practiced by those of us who continue the venerable tradition of traveling abroad for fieldwork. Many of my own antiracist sensibilities were formed and shaped through more than a decade of engagement with South Africa’s history of race. During this time, I have intensively studied aesthetic, philosophical, religious, and cultural interventions into histories of colonialism and apartheid. I formed close relationships with black and “coloured” South Africans that transcended the utility of fieldwork, making and learning from many mistakes. I have felt emboldened by crossing into spaces where few white South Africans dare to tread, and have reveled in showing various forms of antiracist solidarity to South Africans in townships like Katlehong, Joza, Alexandra, and various neighborhoods of Soweto. The impact of these antiracist sentiments is likely far smaller than I imagine, and my task was made undeniably more easy through the privilege of being a white North American, which carried a good deal of cultural capital and assumptions of good will during my fieldwork.
Back in Houston, little of this work matters. My fieldwork and studies of South Africa have given me the impetus to cultivate a subject position rooted in antiracism in Houston, but this subject position was not conferred automatically. I cannot simply produce a “good white” certificate from South Africa to gain trust and rapport with communities of color in Houston. I can only imagine the obnoxious ring my voice would carry if I did attempt to put my fieldwork forward as a valid antiracist credential. The antiracist subject position to which I aspire is only starting to be built through deliberate and intentional relationships with others, making and learning from mistakes, taking seriously critiques of whiteness by indigenous peoples and people of color, and engagement with local aesthetic, philosophical, religious, and cultural interventions into local Houston racial histories. It takes time to cultivate trust and rapport, and by the time I do so, I will likely be on the verge of moving to a new context, depending on where the winds of academic fortune blow. I doubt I am alone in this.

There are, to be sure, white anthropologists who embody sturdy local antiracist subject positions prior to leaving for the field. Whether acknowledged or not, the justifications of those subject positions and the subject positions themselves rarely mean anything to foreign interlocutors. Subject positions are forged anew in each context, and chunks of them are left behind upon return, regardless of whether the white anthropologist wishes to carry them. This is but one form of constraint with which white anthropologists must reckon along with Brett Bailey.

Bailey, of course, is not an anthropologist. He does evince some ethnographic sensibilities, at least to the extent that Chikha and Arnaut (2013) can confidently argue that his work constitutes a significant rapprochement between art and ethnography. It is also the case that the *Exhibit* series was constructed from extensive archival research into the darker corners of
anthropology; particularly the discipline’s early complicity with racial science. Nonetheless, his *Exhibit* works were not the product of sustained, reflexive ethnographic engagement, especially outside the confines of South Africa.

This is not to suggest that Bailey needed or needs to be an anthropologist to engage in the kinds of antiracist interventions that he hopes to accomplish. Yet something like an intensive ethnographic approach would be necessary to dialog, to cultivate trust and rapport, and to intervene into a set of local racial dynamics to lend local antiracist legitimacy to the work he hopes to accomplish. Any open and earnest forms of dialog, however cursory, would have at least shown goodwill and may have mitigated some of these tensions in advance. More sustained and lengthy engagement with local populations would be even better, although it would have made the tour Bailey embarked on much more complicated (and likely expensive), logistically speaking.

Current iterations of racialized discourse in Europe do make attention to local racial dynamics substantially more complicated. European anxiety about borders has taken on immense weight in conversations of race, particularly in the wake of terroristic attacks in France, Germany, and Belgium. Conversations about race in Europe increasingly turn on “a (racialized) distinction between ‘deserving’ or ‘real’ refugees and so-called economic migrants” (Fernando and Giordano 2016). One could wonder, then, where all this talk of race leaves European populations who are currently (and were historically) raced outside of this newer lens. Sieg (2015) suggests that Bailey’s transnational antiracist intervention was rejected, at least in part, because of tensions “between relatively recent arrivals from Africa (many performers recruited by Bailey were asylum seekers) and more established minorities of colour in Germany and the UK” (2015, 251). Whether or not this tension exists and to what degree, it is clear that more
established diasporic black populations in the United Kingdom (and in France, which saw similar protests to *Exhibit B*) felt largely excluded and marginalized from a performance that purported to advocate on their behalf. To the extent that black UK citizens already feel marginalized and underrepresented in the arts industry and more broadly, a shift in racial attention toward more transnational concerns is going to exacerbate such a dynamic.

It is interesting to note that Bailey’s new work in development, *The Raft*, will focus much more intensively on the plight of asylum seekers from Syria and elsewhere. As he continues to tour *Exhibit B* and *Macbeth* in Europe, Bailey has begun spending increasing amounts of time visiting the camps of asylum seekers, particularly in France and Greece. The reception of this (as yet) unfinished work remains to be seen, but it may at the very least suggest a growing ethnographic sensibility in how Bailey is choosing to construct new works.

It is unclear whether Bailey will attempt another reckoning with European racial history, at least in the form of a work like *Exhibit B*. The controversies around the *Exhibit* series and its travels through Europe show that Bailey will need to work against the constraints of South African antiracist whiteness and its depleting value abroad. South African antiracist whiteness is no longer extended the assumption of good will (if it ever was), but must prove itself anew in each locale to which it travels: something anthropologists too should keep in mind as they pack their bags to and from the field.
Epilogue

The Rocks and the Stones Along the Way

The Olive Tree Theatre occupies the top floor of the Yarona building opposite the Pan African shopping centre on 3rd and Watt St in Alexandra, a township situated just across the freeway from the exorbitant wealth and consumption of Sandton City. The theatre space itself was, in a very real way, built up from nothing. Beginning only with the barest of concrete floors and ceilings in an empty, industrial space, the theatre has grown into a beautiful and vibrant meeting place for film screenings, poetry readings, workshops, and theatre performances. The space itself is a work of art, appearing more complete and more aesthetically striking every time I would go to visit and, for now, visit from afar via social media. It reflects the tireless work of a woman and an artist who came to be one of my dearest South African friends during my fieldwork and in the years after.
Ntshieng Mokgoro is the artistic director of the theatre space and of Olive Tree Theatre Productions, and is an accomplished artist in her own right. She is the first black female recipient of the Standard Bank Young Artist Award for drama for her production of *The Olive Tree* in 2009. This is in addition to numerous other awards. She has been interviewed for *O Magazine* as well as *Drum Magazine*, and the women’s theatre festival she spearheads each year receives considerable media attention. She has toured throughout South Africa and all over the world.

*Ntshieng (right) mentors a group of women as part of a film making workshop, March 2014.*
Ntshieng is a woman who occupies a number of very demanding subject positions. She is not merely a theatre artist but also mother; not merely a mother but the sole financial provider of her household as her husband struggles to find work. She provides not only for her children and husband but also for her extended family—brothers, sisters, and others who likewise struggle to make ends meet. When there is money, she also provides food for the children who come to the theatre space for dance or drama classes. Artistically, she is a writer, director, and producer of theatre in addition to being a workshop facilitator, mentor, and pedagogue.

Olive Tree Theatre Productions, which occupies the bulk of her time and creative energies, was formed with multiple goals in mind. The first is to address gender disparities in the theatre industry. Through Olive Tree Theatre productions and the theatre space, Ntshieng told me, she wants to “give a platform to upcoming female directors because I had experienced the hostility towards female directors and the lack of access for space to stage work…A lot of women who are creative felt they have been sidelined and have chosen to quit the industry.” To address some of this disparity, she mentors young female directors from Alexandra and elsewhere, helping them produce shows and helping them write scripts—for which they retain primary writing credits. Ntshieng also hopes to turn the space into a vibrant community arts center that will expose the Alexandra community to theatre:

“For me, Olive Tree is for my people—for developing an audience in Alexandra. A whole lot of people do not go to the theatre and their excuse is ‘Windybrow, Market Theatre—it’s far, you have to take a taxi and walk and catch another taxi; the show starts at eight and then you have to go back at ten, late at night.’ The other thing is that our kids are not exposed to the magic of theatre. All they know are amateur plays that are
performed at school and they think that is theatre. I still want to do magical shows for my community. I want this to be a haven for kids to come here and watch a show.”

Finally, the space and the theatre organization are both explicitly conceptualized as a bridge between community theatre and professional theatre—a space where residents of Alexandra can see world-class actors and artists and also a space where local artists can become professionalized into the industry.

If these three goals do not sound like a tall order, especially when stacked against the constraints of financially providing for her entire extended family, the fault lies entirely with me. Beyond these considerable challenges, Ntshieng has had to operate with no real funding despite repeated applications—the theatre space was set up thanks to donation of equipment like stage lights and generators, and the space donated—at first with a fair amount of ambiguity about how long it could be occupied. While Ntshieng has a volunteer administrator as well as several volunteers to help her run the space, but much of the responsibility for the success or failure of the theatre space and Olive Tree Theatre Productions rests entirely on her shoulders. At times, juggling this myriad of roles has been too much even for her to handle.

There was a particular day when all of these projects began to come unraveled in the space of about twenty minutes. The theatre space was hosting a double-bill that night that included a work from “The Stars of Alex,” a group of children from a local primary school (the same school Ntshieng attended as a child) that had, in collaboration with volunteers from the Netherlands, developed a work about their own dreams and aspirations as children. The work, which I had seen in rehearsal, was fantastical and whimsical in its imagery, and at the same time, hard-hitting in its messages of the realities that many children living in Alexandra have to face.
The children and their mentors were proud of the work, and excited to perform in the theatre space. As the children began unfolding their theatrical debut, however, disaster struck: some of the children, leaning against the scenery backdrop from behind, caused the tall wooden panels to come crashing down, knocking into lights and other equipment and bringing an abrupt halt to the show.

Ntshieng did not see this catastrophe happen—she was busy taking an emergency phone call with the actors of a production she was directing at the Windybrow theatre in downtown Johannesburg. The actors did not want to perform that night. They felt demoralized from repeatedly performing to a nearly empty theatre, and were saddened by the death of Nelson Mandela just a few days before. Ntshieng had to convince them that they had an obligation to the theatre and to any ticket holders to perform the work. When she was not on the phone with them, she was on the phone with one of the co-owners of the Yarona building, who apparently had not authorized the use of the space past six p.m., which meant that the second theatre group—bringing its own large audience of friends and associates with it—would not be able to perform. To complicate matters further, the co-owner of the building, who was white, preferred to mediate through Ntshieng’s white volunteer assistant, and preferred that she be present to supervise the use of the space. Nthsieng was faced with the task of convincing the owner—through her white proxy—to let the performance happen. As some of us tried to put the scenery back together for the children—some of which was visibly broken and likely to fall again—the power in the space went out. The children were devastated, and some felt strongly that they never wanted to hazard the risk of performance again. Their white mentors, who had developed the performance with them, had returned to the Netherlands and were not present, so Ntshieng had to try to console them the best she could, even in the midst of the other chaotic scenarios unfolding for her.
Added to these burdens, as Ntshieng would tell us later, was the pressure to make sure that my wife and I—the white folks visiting the space—were enjoying ourselves and watching a successful night unfold, and seeing her at her best. An astute observer of racial issues—especially given many of her own experiences—Ntshieng rightly pointed out that a failure or shortcoming on the part of one black person is often generalized as the failure of an entire race (e.g. “black people can’t ever run things well”). This confluence of events and pressures—all very stressful in themselves—eventually made Ntshieng break down in tears. “I don’t even know who I am anymore,” she cried.

In a later interview, I got a chance to talk with Nthsieng about that day. “What makes you pick yourself back up and keep going after having a day like that?” I asked her. Her response is worth quoting at some length:

If I quit, I’m not quitting alone. There’s a whole bunch of people who are looking up to me. People who I give hope. People I’m a role model for. So if I quit, then I fail them and I feel responsible for them, because then where would they go? Who else would they look up to?... If it’s this hard, it means I have to go back and look at the truth of the matter and maybe approach everything and try to be honest and try to find out: what are the wrongs. Not being emotional, but realistic. What is it that I can change and not change? If there’s something I can change, why not change it? If I can’t change it, instead of being bitter, can’t I find something else? You realize that you actually thought you have arrived at a certain point, when you are only just starting. So let the journey carry on. You come to that point where you kick the blanket and say ‘I started this journey and I have to keep moving until I get it right.’ I said to somebody one day: maybe this is my dream but maybe I’m not meant to see this dream coming alive but to spearhead it.
Somebody might step in and run with it. That’s okay—it wasn’t for me, it was for us. If I quit than the next person who’s supposed to run with it will fall into the pit and won’t be able to get out. I have to keep paving this hard road so that it becomes smooth for her when she runs or he runs on this. Maybe I’m the one who’s chosen to clean up the rocks and the stones along the way. It’s fine—I’m going to do that. It takes all of your energy. It exhausts you. It also digs out things and strengths that you are not aware that you had.

Ntshieng continues to push on, despite moments when everything seems to be crashing down around her—moments that lead to basic questions of who she is and how she ought to live. Her hard work, by and large, has largely been rewarded: the theatre space continues to flourish and continues to host important events like the annual Women’s Theatre Festival. She continues her pedagogy as well, mentoring and training up others who will come after her.

There are several reasons why I chose to conclude this dissertation with a set of reflections about this space and Ntshieng. The most straightforward of these is that I wanted to find a way to honor her both as an artist and as one of my most important interlocutors and friends during my fieldwork. But this story—of a moment where everything collapses and one must move on in the aftermath—highlights many of the themes that have animated this dissertation. It also provides an opportunity to address one common response that I have received to my focus on (a Foucauldian) ethics in a post-Mandela South Africa.

**An Anthropology of South African Ethics**

In her response, Ntshieng’s ethical work is shown to be work on her own self. When things go wrong or when she feels like giving up, she has her own technologies of self that allow her to step back and assess what can be improved and what cannot be. Those things she cannot
control are let go, but these decisions are only arrived at after a satisfactory amount of thought from what she calls a “realistic” perspective. Yet in focusing on Ntshieng’s work on herself—and the projects of self-shaping that have animated the other characters in the dissertation—it may seem as though ethics is only about the self. Perhaps, the objection might go, the importation of Foucauldian ethics as an analytic is too Westernizing and too Global-northernizing in a context where moral and ethical frameworks are more communitarian. Further, haven’t I simply reduced everyone to mindless autopoietic automatons, especially with the insistence that a good deal of the theatre I witnessed is only incidentally directed at audiences?

The telos of Ntshieng’s work on herself, however, is not on behalf of herself but instead the community she desires to serve, and this is crucial. The project is for them, the rewards and benefits are for them, and the abandonment of her project means that they will suffer. They are the reason she must keep going; the reason she must keep wrestling with uncooperative actors and a building owner who, at the time, preferred to dialog with her white counterpart rather than her.58 The subject position Ntshieng works to occupy, if there is one, is that of a visionary—a visionary, Ntshieng admits, who has to be comfortable with much hard work that comes with little immediate payoff. She also needs to be comfortable transferring her own successes onto her community rather than claiming them as her own. She has already done so: when she received her standard bank young artist award, she noted that “the award belongs to the community, it is just that it is through me.” The subject position of visionary is a nodal point through which her work flows outward to others.

58 Ntshieng now has a much better relationship to the building’s owner, who has subsequently much more supportive.
In a similar way, the ethical work of KFTG and its members (discussed in chapters one and three) begins in the self but never ends there. It empowered the members of KFTG to reach out to their neighbors and others with valuable information, and led to pedagogical projects dedicated to shaping and transforming others. Brett Bailey—controversial as he is and misguided as he may be—has a genuine desire to translate the transformations of his own whiteness to others as well. There exists, within the work of ethics I have described in South Africa, a productive tension between the interpersonal and the structural, and between the social and the collective. Ethics needn’t put these categories at odds with each other: they certainly were not at odds for Foucault, who maintained that the care of the self always, simultaneously, involved the care of others as well.

The individual and the social are held in productive tension within local ethical frameworks as well. This is the essence of Ubuntu—an indigenous Southern African ethic summed up by the phrase “I am because we are” or sometimes “a person is a person through other persons.” While Ubuntu stresses the intrinsic value and dignity of individuals, it is also true, as Munyaka and Motlhabi point out, that “one is able to discover a sense of self-identity only in reference to the community in which one lives” (2009, 68). Vices like selfishness thus not only harm larger networks, but also the man or woman from which the vice emanates, insofar as it harms their moral status in these networks. Ethics, in the framework of Ubuntu, is found in the interplay of both individual and collective.

There have been scandalously few direct references to Ubuntu within this dissertation—which ostensibly set out to address ethics in South Africa. This is not without a good reason: Ubuntu was mentioned in situ only rarely during my fieldwork and preliminary fieldwork. In fact, the only mention of Ubuntu I ever heard was from one of the Norwegian visitors described
in chapter one, part of a comment made in passing that was never taken up further. One reason for the absence of Ubuntu could be its ubiquity: Ubuntu is a term that most South Africans are familiar with, and the tourist to South Africa is likely to see its deployment in an introduction to South African life, likely as a justification for hospitality. A far more likely reason for Ubuntu’s absence in discussion, though, could be its baggage as one of the key metaphors of South Africa’s post-apartheid nation-building projects. During the transition from apartheid, it was relentlessly heralded by Desmond Tutu and others as an alternative moral framework to brutality of apartheid, and as a way of moving forward in a joint moral nation-building project. It could be that the language of Ubuntu has been overused and placed among the tropes and metaphors that have increasingly come under question in a post-Mandela South Africa. While Ubuntu as a term is rarely used, though, the ethical thrust of Ubuntu persists, part of a dialectic between the individual and the collective that plays out in South Africa and beyond (Bongmba 2006). In this sense, it has made multiple appearances throughout the dissertation, even if implicitly.

Ubuntu is rarely easy to live out. I certainly don’t want to leave the impression, for example, that it gives Ntshieng pleasure to face hardship so consistently. The reality is quite the opposite—she is consistently stressed out and pushing herself to the limit physically and emotionally. She has also said that she resents being celebrated as a “strong woman” because often, these forms of moral praise for women implicitly paper over the injustices, inequalities, and pressures that women are subjected to on a regular basis and spins a narrative of redemptive suffering. The toll Ntshieng’s ethics takes on her is visible, much like it was for Janet, who sensed that her work was transforming her into a worse person rather than a better one. Such cases make visible the darker side of ethics that is rarely acknowledged. The work of occupying a particular subject position can come with enormous costs to one’s own well-being. This makes
the continual occupation of these subject positions all the more commendable, but does not change the fact that it can be a painful process as well.

Constraints of various kinds play a significant role in the possibilities and limitations of the self in South Africa. Some emanate from the expectations and pressures that come with kin-based relationships, as discussed in chapters one and two. For artists in particular, these can be exacerbated by other, more structural forms of constraint—the political economies of theatre that I discuss both in chapter two and, to a more limited extent, in Ntshieng’s story. Some are institutional (as in chapter three), limiting the ability of artists like Athina and her sympathetic academic interlocutors to fully engage the meaning of bodies in struggle. Sometimes constraints are completely ignored or denied (as S’bo does in chapter four). But they are always present nonetheless, and in making them visible I have traced some of the contours of life in a post-Mandela South Africa: a moment not of rupture but of entangled continuity with the freedoms and constraints of the past.

Race continues to play a significant role as well, attenuating the options that are available for the work of ethics. It continues to correlate in many ways with class: white South Africans are more likely than others to be more highly educated with higher-status jobs and higher incomes. At a minimum, it can be said that little time for ethics exists when basic needs have not been met, and that black South Africans continue to struggle for access to institutions that remain white (though these institutions are increasingly being forced toward change). But race in post-Mandela South Africa is a good deal more complicated than this as well. The presence of well-connected wealthy black elites is in no small way connected to populist political movements, who increasingly see the ANC as the guardians and beneficiaries of white wealth (Mngxitama and Kaganof 2013). Even so, white South Africans, by and large, continue to enjoy more
freedom, ethically speaking or otherwise, than others. Colonial and apartheid legacies continue to shape the selves that South Africans are capable of constructing.

Whiteness, of course, carries its own forms of constraint. They are qualitatively different, of course, but shape the contours of ethical life for white South Africans and white others (like Athina and myself) on the periphery. These constraints, in the dissertation at least, are at their most visible through a transnational lens. Brett Baily’s white subject position in South Africa (chapter five) is accepted by many (even if contested by some), bolstered no doubt by his status as an elite artist. Abroad, however, Bailey has become absolutely toxic for many in the black diaspora, suggesting that the work of ethics doesn’t cross borders. My relationship to Ntshieng is another example: it was only through the cultivation of trust and rapport that she felt comfortable telling me, among other frank and honest conversations about race, that my presence as a white male was initially a source of anxiety for her. I hope and trust that this is no longer the case. But even if Ntshieng and I can now have more open discussions about race, it has meant little in terms of my antiracist commitments once I returned to Houston. I did not return from South Africa with a “good white” certificate that could be shown in dialog with local racial others, a fact that has similar implications for other white anthropologists going to or returning from the field. The most that we (anthropologists) can take back are the forms of listening and postures of learning we gain in the field.

With this in mind, I returned from South Africa with a renewed commitment to issues of race in the city of Houston: a bustling metropolis that, much like Johannesburg, is both stunningly diverse and mind-numbingly segregated.\(^59\) Among other activities, this commitment

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\(^{59}\) In a report for Rice University’s Kinder Institute for Urban Research, Emerson, Bratter, Howell, Jeanty, and Cline (2014) analyze census data from 1990, 2000, and 2010 to argue that despite its oft-touted diversity, “the city of Houston is far more segregated than other areas of the region” (2014, 3).
has led me to involvement as both volunteer and audience member of the T.R.U.T.H. Project, a local organization that uses theatre, dance, spoken word, and visual art (often all present together) as a tool for healing and growth for LGBTQ communities of color. For the T.R.U.T.H. Project community, much like my South African interlocutors, art is a technology of personal and communal growth, a source of freedom, and a means for gathering people to discuss important issues (mental health awareness, issues of stigma, HIV, and police violence, among others). Like many of the South African artists with whom I dialoged, the artists and audiences that make up the T.R.U.T.H. Project are explicit about the forms of freedom they seek and the constraints that they encounter in doing so. The dialectics of freedom and constraint—and the aesthetic forms that make it visible—are present in my own context as in South Africa.

To the extent that ethnography can act as a tool of ethical pedagogy (Laidlaw 2014), ethnography of a post-Mandela South Africa does speak in a pedagogical register to the Global North. The “crisis of liberalism” (Boyer 2016) in the United States and Europe has many parallels to post-Mandela South Africa: populist movements set against nepotistic elites, anxieties about borders, and, increasingly for the United States, new forms of reckoning with a white supremacist past and present. It would not be surprising to see, as in South Africa, new
conceptions of the political that cast only a passing glance at elections. New possibilities for ethical life in the Global North will be opened and/or foreclosed in the coming decades, just as they have been in South Africa in the last twenty years. As the Global North continues to evolve toward Africa more broadly, those in the Global North can look to South Africa for new forms of freedom and new forms of ethical life. They can also look to South Africa to understand the new forms of constraint that might emerge from the Global North in the coming years. An ethnography of South African theatre, in particular, should also prompt them look to South African artists and follow the impulse to craft and continually shape the self as a work of art.
References


