

Sounding the Body's Meridian

signifying community and “the body national”
in post-apartheid South African theatre

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June 2009
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**Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts
(Drama and Performance Studies) in the School of Literary Studies, Media, and Creative
Arts, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg.**

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ABSTRACT

Sounding the Body's Meridian examines the ways in which notions of belonging are constructed through the display of bodies in performance, specifically the registers of private and public body that have been revealed in the theatre's attempts to locate a post-liberation notion of South African-ness in historical narrative. The author investigates various ideas of the imagined community constructed in postliberation performances of South African history as a form of embodied historical-social intervention. This investigation is undertaken with specific reference to claims that are made of South African identity in terms of its public culture, especially the inscription of nationalist ideology as a performative act that operates both upon and through the 'citizen' bodies that it mediates. The study pursues a notion of the body so mediated, and (perceived) essential "characteristics" that describe its claims to authority and "authenticity": the "meridian" or line of essential energy that activates its power to signify on behalf of other bodies like it in the debate and transaction of social values.

The discussion is framed specifically from within the context of Mbongeni Ngema and Mark Fleishman's oeuvres, and their respective production of the values and meaning of post-apartheid South African democratic citizenship, and their attempted location of an "authentic" notion of belonging in the re-membered histories of colonialism and apartheid. While the discursive tactics of the theatre and its display of *bodies as sign* is the focus of the dissertation's arguments, it addresses various critical perspectives that inform post-colonial critiques of empire and discourses of post-liberation nationalisms in order to assess the ways in which a progressive theatre can countervail the problematic assumptions and epistemic falsehoods of "officialised" nationhood. These include, inter alia, the pressing questions posed by various gender, culture and race theorists in their interrogation of the contexts in which collectivized social memory is both constructive and destructive of true liberty at both the macro- and micro-levels of social experience.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Dr. Veronica Baxter who (under grant from the South African National Research Foundation) provided the Performance and Ethnography Bursary that funded my research, and who supervised this process.

I owe a debt of gratitude also to Professor Hazel Barnes for seeing me through, as well as the many friends, colleagues and acquaintances whose insights helped to shape this work, and without whose continual support it might never have seen the light of day.

It is with love and profound respect that I thank my parents and family especially. For your love, for your trust, for your support, for your laughter – an embarrassment of riches and everything else besides in this world that you, above all others, have made possible – I am most grateful. Your generosity humbles me.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation takes the making of an imagined community (Anderson 1991) of the South African nation as its central theme. It investigates a postcolonial (or alternatively, postliberation or post-apartheid) discourse of national identity in South Africa in specific relation to embodied aesthetic practice within the theatre. Targeted for special attention are two practices within the theatrical canon: a private (or personal) testimony of collective suffering as a signifier of belonging, and an arguably public (or official) imaginary that gives expression to “new nation” mythologies. Here, dissonances and disjunctures between sites of “authentic” South African-ness, and the implications thereof, are key aspects.

In an age of unprecedented human migrations, continuing social injustice, and the burning issue of national sovereignty that has followed hard on the heels of decolonization, neo-colonialism and globalization (with their bastard twin offspring of climate-change and the nascent war for finite non-renewable resources) the identity of *the Nation* – as sovereign and authentic – has been a leitmotif of post-colonial attempts to frame postliberation nationalisms within discourses of global power. This is primarily a result of the necessary attempt to reclaim (or rescue?) previously colonized peoples from the boxes into which they had – as a matter of established practice – been previously pushed under the purview of colonial/imperial practice. It is in part an attempt to rediscover the regionally specific identities, experiences and values of previously colonized nations, and in so doing, to stake their own claim to authority in the global exchange of ideas, values and goods. On yet another level, to reconstruct a sense of nation in the context of the historic denial of the values of the indigenous people of whom such nations were often mostly composed, is as much an act of sociopolitics as it is one of psychological healing...

If we conceive of ourselves as a Nation, within which boundaries do we place that conceptualisation? If there is such a creature as an “authentic national subject” (Chipkin 2007) that signifies the ideal of that nationhood, who belongs within the domain of that description, and who does not? And certainly more problematically, who assumes or reserves (with the attendant presumption of the power to so dispense) the authority to make such a determination? Any attempt at establishing the grounds upon which we might call ourselves South African, and the value systems that define us as so, necessitates an interrogation of these issues. This attempt to self-conceptualise typically finds its expression in readings of the history that precedes our contemporary circumstances, deployed to validate a new national status quo. Let us for the sake of brevity agree that South Africans are, as a nation (in both the complex psychosocial sense, and the more literal geopolitical sense) the product of a complex history characterized largely by a series of appropriations and counter-appropriations: a constant struggle for or against the usurpation of resources, territories, peoples and cultures.

Following Phillip de Boeck, this “originary narrative” of the New Nation becomes the source of the powerful mythologies that underwrite any nation’s existence (De Boeck 1998: 31), and thus tends to be the primary site where the validity of its national formations are contested as a function of its internal national politics. Take for example the national monuments that form such an integral part of most countries’ public spatial practices: in South Africa, Constitution Hill (Johannesburg) and the District Six Museum (Cape Town) are prime examples. However, between the geopolitical and psychosocial concepts of the nation, a rupture occurs. This is due in large part to the fact that the stability and endurance of the former (the geopolitical) relies on the stability and endurance of the latter (the psychosocial) construction of the content of “nationalised” space. The geopolitical nation (its social relations, its political imperatives, its value systems, the distributions of its wealth and authority) relies upon the assumption of a character, an *us-ness*, that separates it from other nations and gives validity to its expressions of sovereignty, be they discretely geographical, political, social, cultural, economic (or more complex matrices at the intersections of geopolitical, socio-cultural, socio-political, and socioeconomic relations). So while the geopolitical fact of South

Africa's material existence can scarce be disputed (which according to this paper's terms of reference it shall not be), the content and nature of its psychological character is somewhat more difficult to ascertain. On the one hand, we have the national citizen constructed within the bounds of a democratic nationalist project (and the imperatives of nation-building that underpin its polity), and on the other we have the authentic nation/subject described by his very antagonism to – and often consequently, his omission from – the terms of this nationhood (in spite of his problematic but undeniable validity as an “authentic” subject within and of such a nation).

If in (as Chipkin argues in terms of the democratic nation-state) ‘...what matters is...the limit and character of ‘the people’ in whom power is supposed to repose’ (Chipkin 2007: 3), then the question towards which I direct my argument is the various forms through such a people are re-presented. I question whether in its imagining of “the people” of whom the South African nation is purportedly composed, the aesthetic practices of a postcolonial/apartheid/liberation theatre disrupt, displace or delimit the boundaries of belonging after apartheid, and whether the marks of such belonging – as embodied in the reproduction of various claims to “authentic” national subjecthood – offer a more progressive reading of nationhood than that which was possible under the strict policies of theatre before transformation.

My hypothesis is that the dissonance between these various sites of authentic South African-ness is potentially experienced at two extremes of aesthetic practice within the theatre. The first of these is the private body produced as a progressive signifier of belonging (bearing its markers of a personal history of subjecthood as testimony to a history of collective suffering); and the second, a public body (with its purportedly authentic, sovereign signs of belonging, and thus the locus towards which a new collective democratic imaginary necessarily projects itself) that gives popular expression to the nationalist mythologies of the “new nation” (Bhabha 1994; Chipkin 2007; Root 1996; Zita 1998). In both cases, the terms of address instantiate a particular public whose meridian (or central defining characteristic) of authentic national subjecthood is produced and experienced as specifically coded performances of the body.

The separate bodies of work produced by Mbongeni Ngema and Mark Fleishman are interesting because of their very engagement of these issues both at the narrative and structural levels of their work. Both practitioners' theatre articulates with questions of power and identity through a performative engagement with the history of South Africa and 'the people' in whom its markers of belonging ostensibly reside. Critically, the trajectory of their work will be viewed in light of the sociopolitical referents that designated it within the politics of apartheid, and post-apartheid, South Africa. The intention is to ascertain, firstly, whether there is any internal variance in their thematic and structural treatments that gives credence to a reading of disjuncture between private and public bodies and/as narrative, given the socio-political conditions under which the work was produced. This will form the basis of my interpretive study of the imagined boundaries of the nation constructed through an historicised imaginary that gives specific content and shape to various ideas of new South Africa's democratic nationalism.

I question whether, in the deployment of the body as sign, the aesthetic principles brought to bear in *re-membling* the nation reinforce a perceived limit of "authentic" South African-ness, or actively open up the boundaries of imagined nationhood (Werbner 1998) by delimiting the degree to which such markers of belonging are located within the metanarrative of black anti-colonial struggle. Does such re-membling rehabilitate the divisive notions of belonging that characterised pre-liberation concepts of the South African nation, or does it further the egalitarian principles of the hard-won reforms upon which the new "Rainbow Nation" is founded? If their work places at the heart of its discourse the contested histories that give credence to the political imaginary of a new South Africa, then in what senses can such a discourse be said to reside in the performing body; and do the bodies displayed within such a discursive practice signify a new, progressive nationhood?

This research, then, travels through several territories simultaneously. In general terms, I interrogate aesthetic systems of representation as performing a particular discursive labour that rehearses and instantiates ideas of nationhood: the dissertation explores the

production and consumption of bodies as signifiers of “authentic” South African-ness, and the extent to which such signifiers may be considered to address, and thus produce, particular publics as the “authentic” limit of the nation. Theatre and (in the Butlerian notion of performativity) its stylised repetition of meaningful acts, is the theme for this larger politics; that is, that nationhood is signified and articulated through specific embodied citations that either disrupt or maintain the imagined limits of belonging to such a demos. Of concern at both levels is the insertion (or its potential) of a space of signified meaning that gives credence and agency to a national subjectivity that lies beyond the perceivable borders of an essentialized notion of the South African who “belongs”.

Theorising Representation and Performance

The definition of performance that the following arguments rely upon is certainly a deviation from the way that performance has been traditionally understood in the theatre. On one level, I attempt to create a frame in which performance might be understood as a discursive practice that is implicated in the process of creating and maintaining nationalist public ideologies. On another level then, the search for a broad notion of performance also attempts to account for the various conditions under which we might view the bodies constructed within performance as being constitutive of alternately hegemonic or subversive ideas of authentic belonging. Henry Bial (2004: 57), for example, suggests a definition in which performance is ‘a tangible, bounded event that involves the presentation of rehearsed artistic actions’ or ‘any activity that involves the presentation of rehearsed or pre-established sequences of words or actions’ (cited in Harmansah 2006aI: source unpaginated). This definition certainly articulates with the Butlerian performative as a repetition of meaningful acts that generate and sustain particular meaning(s). However, in this sense, such a definition fails to address the complex performative significations that underpin the ideological apparatus of a nationalist political imaginary (as well as improvisation in “traditional” theatre terms, for example) because it excludes the significations of meaning that can occur when this process of inscription is less transparent: it ‘assumes that all performances are discursive

and that its significations are apriori to the acting' (Harmansah, 2006aI: source unpaginated).

Harmansah suggests (as I do in this dissertation) that '[i]f we are to consider performance as a pervasive "central element of social and cultural life" (McKenzie 2005)' – and in so doing, to effectively interrogate performance as an ideological or political act experienced at both levels of discursive practice under discussion here – 'then we ... have to embrace a much broader conceptualization of performance outside the "performing arts' (Harmansah 2006aI: source unpaginated). The "open" definition that he then formulates in an attempt to account for the gaps revealed in Bial's argument, is based on a triangulation of other definitions that have been offered. Citing McKenzie (2005) on one hand, he notes that performance, increasingly, has been unbound from its disciplinary imprisonments and has more recently come to be seen to entail 'the presentation or reactualization of symbolic systems through both living and mediated bodies' (Harmansah 2006aI: source unpaginated). This is an epistemological turn that marks 'a shift away from fixity of structures, systems, disciplines, and more towards processes, practices and fluidity. Performance is then a bodily practice in one way or another, individual or social, usually associated with signifying acts or meaning' (Harmansah 2006aI: source unpaginated). Citing Ian Hodder (2006) on the other hand, Harmansah suggests that, comparably, performance is 'an interpretation "acted out for someone (including oneself). It is always, consciously or not, staged, and it is thus always theatrical"' (Hodder 2006: 85; cited in Harmansah 2006aI: source unpaginated).

The definition that Harmansah offers is very useful. Admittedly, it takes no small mental contortion to come to grips with what is clearly an elusive concept. He playfully tortures the various definitions into the dense proposition that the term "performance" refers thus to

...[d]iscursive and non-discursive dispositional practices and transformative bodily acts of embodied subject(s) (and sometimes of objects/things/artefacts) in the social realm and the everyday, where representations [and] social significations are unbound and fluid, while material bodies continuously come to presence as potent, inexorable, spatialized and spatializing entities. (Harmansah 2006aI: source unpaginated)

Unpacking this unwieldy phrase reveals a comparatively simple theoretical framework that can capture the performing body in both the senses in which I pursue it for this dissertation. That is, the body that – even while its social performances may be ‘nondiscursive, habitual in Connerton’s terms, those that constitute the habitus in Bourdieu’s terms, mundane and everyday, not necessarily political, ideological or goal-ridden’ (Harmansah 2006aI: source unpaginated) – nevertheless underwrites an idea of nationhood by displaying the requisite allegiances to a notion of “authentic” belonging.

The other sense in which I pursue a notion of the performing body is rehearsed in the more obviously “produced” or mediated bodies – ‘discursive, intentional, consciously oriented towards certain goals’ (Harmansah 2006aI: source unpaginated) – that underpin theatrical praxis and its self-evident process of meaning-making.

It is important to note, however, that even though I follow this definition of performance as an overarching principle, it does not fully account for the other practices of representation that are also referred to in this dissertation. For while performance is always a form of representation, it does not necessarily follow that representations are thus always performed: performance is not a requisite condition of representing. Even though these terms may at times be used interchangeably in this dissertation, it is always with this qualification in mind. The intention is to generate a theoretical view-point in which my discussion of specifically embodied practices of representation (i.e. performance in the senses I have already described) can be seen to inform and problematise our understanding of the larger (oftentimes, non-embodied) practices of representation that similarly engage in the construction, maintenance and distribution of nationalist ideologies.

As Roger Chartier (1997) has proposed,

[a]s long as one speaks of a human reality (e.g. a piece of landscape, a historical event, a cultural artefact) vis-à-vis its signified image (a map, a historical text, a documentary photograph), re-presented to the world of things, and in the world of things, through a symbolic language; he finds himself immediately in the polemical waters of representation. Representation is therefore an epiphenomenon of existence, an effigy of reality.’ (cited in Harmansah2006b: source unpaginated)

In this way, I approach history as a problematic in both the terms in which it is explored in this paper: as a performative ideological act in the mode of theatrical historicization (evidenced in both the pre- and post-liberation theatre practices of Mark Fleishman and Mbongeni Ngema), and the not-necessarily-embodied signification and historicization of a national public in the various other symbolic languages of nationalist discourse (for example, through official public architecture).

Diana Taylor's seminal work, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003) is particularly useful for making sense of the ways in which history is a product of mnemonic representations in which the authority with which it is vested is co-extensive with the form that its production takes. She argues that, by and large, the tendency of western scholarship has been to view material artefacts or "archives" – buildings, literary texts, documents, archaeological remains, videos, films, and CDs – as authoritative records of social or communal memory because they are supposedly enduring materials that can be physically located in material space, time and circumstances (Taylor 2003). Conversely, the 'supposedly ephemeral *repertoire* of embodied practice/knowledge' (Taylor 2003: 19, original emphasis) – which includes spoken language, dance, and sports rituals for example – is dismissed because of its very mutability and contingency (Taylor 2003). The seeming stability of the archive is privileged, thus, as the fundamental mark of verisimilitude, whereas the instability of repertoires, contingent on individual bodies that read and perform them, is the antithesis of this.

Taylor's project is to bring into focus the problematic relationship between the authoritative knowledge that such archives represent or cite, and memory embodied in performative repertoires which cite personal or intimate experiences and relationships within the lived social world.

It is on similar grounds that Chartier (1997) avers that

History[,] as well as the many other branches of the social sciences[,] attempt[s] to capture "the modalities of the discursive construction of the social world"[.] and

approaches the past more and more to see “connections among practices and representations,” since none of the sources for human history can any longer be considered outside the definition of representation. (cited in Harmansah2006b: source unpaginated)

The recovery of the body that “wears” its history, in this sense, is to reveal and unsettle the ideological assumptions and circulations of power of which such archival histories are constitutive, because in the ruptures between the official record and the embodied memories of its signifieds, a contingent historical truth can be activated that offers a view of history-making as a process in which particular genealogies of power and agency are reified both by textual and bodily inscriptions of memory (McKenzie 2005 cited in Harmansah 2006aI, source unpaginated; Taylor 2003). The embodied significations that inhere in performance repertoires, then, can be read in their own right as ideologically loaded, whether or not the performances in which they are deployed are self-consciously political in nature or not. The personal and private, then, indexes a human geography that is always already public and political.

This goes some way towards destabilizing the traditional view of representation in art as ‘a disinterested and therefore politically neutral activity’, and places it firmly within the realm of the social activities concerned with ‘the material processes of production of ideas, beliefs and values in social life...“a whole complex of signifying practices and symbolic processes...[in which the] lived experiences of various social actors” (Eagleton 1990: 28-29, cited in Owens 1992: 88) can be seen as ‘an inextricable part of social processes of domination and control’ (Owens 1992: 88). And further, in this sense we can understand the processes of theatrical representation as a critical break with the “epistemic falsehood” that suggests ‘ideology [is associated] exclusively with the dominant classes, ruling elite or the state’ (Harmansah 2006b), for it is in theatre and performance that the body is, first and foremost, the agent of change.

It is specifically when discussing the writing of history as an ideological gesture that this provides a way of comparatively analysing different historiographic modes, and the implications of the theatre’s engagement of the same ideological issues through the

body's performances. It is in this sense that we can come to view firstly, 'dominant ideologies literally [as] social products [that] emanate from the micro-practices and much smaller scale ideologies and trends in the social world' (Harmansah 2006b: source unpaginated); and consequently, to view theatre as a critical strategy that potentially disrupts this condition by finding these 'connections among practices and representations' (Chartier 1997, cited in Harmansah 2006b: source unpaginated). In this way, we might arrive at an understanding of an ontology of the body (and its performances in de Certeau's terms) that does not 'los[e] sight of the agency, materiality, spatiality, temporality and performativity of the body' (Harmansah 2006b: source unpaginated), even as it shapes and is shaped by the collective social memory – both archival and repertory – that underpins the imagined national community.

If theatre is a practice rooted in bodies, then in ours, it is the black body that has most commonly come to describe its public form wherever such description is in pursuit of an "authentic" subjectivity that resists the hegemony of imperial/colonial/apartheid ideologies. That is, in spite of whatever the private realities individual bodies offer in mitigation or outright repudiation of the assumptions and elisions underpinning our National Democratic Revolution, it is the public perception of *being a body like* those reproduced that qualifies it as belonging "authentically" (Chipkin 2007; Zita 1998).

The Body National

Former President Thabo Mbeki's seminal speech (on behalf of the African National Congress at the adoption of the Constitution in 1996), *I Am an African*, is instructive of the ambiguities that typically confound any attempt to define nationhood as a singular identity that is shared on all fronts by all the peoples that it attempts to draw into its purview (Chipkin 2007). In this speech, Mbeki states that as an African:

I owe my being to the Khoi and the San whose desolate souls haunt the great expanses of the beautiful Cape...I am formed of the migrants who left Europe to find a new home on our native land. ... In my veins courses the blood of the Malay slaves who came from the East. ... I am the grandchild of the warrior men and women that Hintsas and Sekhukhune

led, the patriots Cetshwayo and Mpephu took to battle, the soldiers Moshoeshoe and Ngungunyane taught never to dishonour the cause of freedom. My mind and my knowledge of myself is formed by the victories that are the jewels in our African crown, the victories we earned from Isandhlwana to Khartoum, as Ethiopians and as the Ashanti of Ghana, as the Berbers of the desert. I am the grandchild that lays fresh flowers on the Boer graves at St Helena and the Bahamas ... I am the child of Nongqause. ... I come from those who were transported from India and China... (cited in Chipkin 2007: 99-100)

And so the rhetoric continues. What is notable about this speech is its very inability to come to terms with precisely what it is that constitutes the South African measure of population (Chipkin 2007) as different to the measure of African-ness he describes above. At one level, it posits being African as flowing from the multiple historical identities of the people that have claimed Africa in the past – from its indigenous inhabitants, to its colonisers and those they brought here as slaves. However inclusive this definition may be, there nevertheless is a limit to its perception of who is authentically African. In Mbeki's terms, Africans are so not only because they are bounded by common territory and (in spite of its heterogeneity) a common history, but because that history is, critically, defined by a constant struggle for or against institutionalised forms of oppression (Chipkin 2007: 101). In this sense, Mbeki is not merely referring to apartheid, but insinuates another term altogether: colonialism. Neither of these terms are used, but it is clear that they are definitive in describing a state of African-ness, and "the people" that hold such status (Chipkin 2007: 101). However, *I Am an African* is

...profoundly ambivalent about the precise identity of 'the people'. There is a constant shifting between two registers. On the one hand, the term includes both the *perpetrators* and the *survivors* of the colonial 'crime against humanity'. On the other hand, it refers exclusively to those who lived and struggled against this terrible injustice. In the first definition, 'those migrants who left Europe to find a new home on our native land' are included in 'the people'. They are not easily 'Africans', however, according to the second. Or rather, they only become Africans when, in the words of the Constitution (Chapter 3), they 'recognise the injustices of the past'. What should we make, though, of the phrase '*our* native land' in the reference above? Who is the subject there? The *indigenous* inhabitants of Africa? Does Mbeki imply a hierarchy of 'Africanness'? Or worse, does he imply that immigrants, especially those from Europe, but including those from India, Malaysia and China, can never quite become authentically African? (Chipkin 2007: 101)

What Mbeki's speech rehearses is a central theme in this dissertation. He suggests that the limit of belonging to the democratic nation is not just a function of territorial and historical formations, but is fundamentally rooted in a transcendent notion of humanity contextualised by its struggle against colonialism. Chipkin states, then, that on these grounds, 'the nation is produced in and through the struggle for democracy. This is precise. It is not important if the nation in question is composed entirely of the people of South Africa or of the people of the continent as a whole. What is important is that ... the meaning of 'being African' changes' (Chipkin 2007: 102). Further, to be "authentically" African on these terms is to seize *the right to determine* the very meaning of being African by understanding the 'racist power at work in apartheid and colonial taxonomies. Africans are authentically so when able to 'see' themselves through liberated eyes. This, it appears, is the mark of authenticity' (Chipkin 2007: 102).

To problematise nationhood in this sense is one of the primary concerns of this dissertation. In the same way that Chipkin questions the implication that there is a hierarchy of "authentic" belonging determined in terms of the individuals' proximity to a perceived national identity and mission that arises directly from the struggle against colonialism or apartheid, so too do the arguments presented here.

Much is made of South Africa's "exemplary" transition from apartheid to democracy. And rightly so: it is not my intention here to diminish the very real and positive gains made by this country in the pursuit of its democratic ideals. As is commonly observed – with many other postcolonial nations (in Africa particularly) serving as salient comparisons – the transition was made with relatively little bloodshed. The political situation might easily have swung in the opposite direction, with a bloody civil war its lamentable and inevitable end. However, the seemingly benign celebration of a revolution justly fought and won conceals too easily the serpent that lurks beneath the surface of any nationalist political formation: the coercion of various cultures, languages, religions, and genders into a reductive category of belonging defined by its apparent sameness, a "homogenous national public" that in its very

conception must necessarily exclude that which falls outside of what it can possibly imagine as belonging to – or as being fundamentally of – itself (Anderson, 1991; Bourdieu 1991; Chipkin, 2007). So in a democratic nation with a citizenry predominantly comprising heterosexual, black males for example, these traits become the very suggested limit of what it might be to belong to such a nation, or to be an “authentic national subject” *per se* of such a nation (Chipkin 2007).

This logic is precarious at its benign best (especially when one considers the breadth of cultural, religious, political, linguistic and other sub groupings that actually fall under the ambit of the democratic nation-state). But as I shall argue, when it is at its most cynically distorted, it facilitates a more malignant adventure in othering, and can readily license unacceptable prejudices like homophobia, xenophobia, and racism (the last sometimes prefixed by the word “reverse”, an absurd qualification that ostensibly differentiates this from some other illegitimate form of racism). These distortions represent an inherent antagonism to the imagined “other(s)” that stand at the Nation’s fragile borders, threatening always to destabilize the integrity of its treasured political, social, economic, cultural and religious formations (Anderson 1991; Bhabha 1994; Chipkin 2007). Importantly, *to belong* with all the designate signifiers bestows upon the bearer of such markers the rights of being a citizen in its fullest sense. That is, the enjoyment of the political freedoms objectively (and theoretically) guaranteed by a liberal and egalitarian constitution is determined by ownership of the subjective markers of being South African under such conditions (Chipkin 2007).

Under the purview of apartheid, these “marks of population” were constructed primarily along racial lines, with political power flowing to South Africa’s citizenry according to racial categories (Chipkin 2007). It was a given project of Afrikaner Nationalism to establish and maintain a form of nationhood to which non-whites could not belong. This practice was institutionalised with the adoption of laws and policies that sought to marginalize and undermine the non-white South African population, as well as through the deliberate division of public space within the republic (Hutchison 2005). In its most basic sense, this was rehearsed in the apartheid government’s attempts to literally reduce

non-white South Africans to the status of non-citizens, whose place of belonging was not the Republic of South Africa, but the Bantustans (or “homelands”, but really just figments of politically and culturally independent “states”) scattered within the geopolitical boundaries of South Africa (Hutchison 2005; Chipkin 2007). In this sense too, the Bantustans were thus an imagined community of others described and maintained through the logic of the Afrikaner Nationalist state, its racist rhetoric and its politico-legal demarcation of physical territory.

This “non-citizenship” was also enforced in less perceptible ways. The systematic coercion of non-white bodies into menial forms of labour is one example, the intent and effect of which was to provide a ready workforce to service the various industries upon which the South African economy relied. This is a salient case in point that will be explored in greater depth in this dissertation. Suffice to say here that the non-white body was ultimately reduced to the status of a consumable commodity whose labours were readily available for the projects and political agenda of white imperial capital (Gilroy 1993; Zita 1998). And even though the homeland system was engineered by the apartheid government, the principle to which this speaks was by no means a unique invention. Rather, it was an extension of systemic imperial and colonial practice, where slavery was perhaps the most obvious coercion of the black body into the projects of white capital. In other words, the commodified black/non-white body already had a long pedigree that flowed from a history of global power in which class and economic divisions existed as a direct function of entrenched systems of racial hierarchy (Gilroy 1993; Taylor 2003). It is in these terms that the exercise of global power can be read tacitly in and through the construction of notions of the body, primarily by theorising the body as a living repository of a history of global power enacted by, through and between different bodies (Chartier 1997). To understand the ways in which the body is constructed, maintained and reproduced, then, is in some ways to reveal the history of the politics that it conceals beneath its surface (Bourdieu 1991; Chartier 1997; de Certeau 1984; Kruger 2004; Oesmann 2005; Taylor 2003).

The optic of post-colonial theory thus directs a significant portion of its critique at destabilizing or problematizing notions of the body as a means of addressing the history and effects of global power relations. Under this rubric, gender, race, and bodily facility all find currency as sites where the imbalance of power is experienced, constructed and maintained (Bhabha 1994; Magubane 2005; Mbembe 2004; Root 1996; Taylor 2003). The tensions between the body politicised (as black/white, male/female, heterosexual/queer, able/disabled, and the degree to which such markers describe an historic ownership and distribution of power and agency), and the material body (the body as a physical “thing” existing in “objectively” quantifiable time and space) are central to this project. It is my contention that to explore the dissonances of the body – as an objective fact, or as politicised when it is deployed as sign and extended beyond the material limits of its physical existence – reveals the ways in which (in Althusser’s terms) various “ideological apparatuses” (1971) can be said to act upon and through the body (Bourdieu 1977 & 1991; de Certeau 1984; Taylor 2003).

In “Preparing Ourselves for Freedom”(1990), Albie Sachs avers that in South Africa during apartheid, modes of liberal artistic production were defined along clear lines, with one central objective: the removal of the Afrikaner Nationalist government whose brainchild the apartheid system was. The given imperative that drove a politically conscious public art was the liberation of South Africa from an oppressive regime that licensed – to the detriment of non-white South African citizens – rule by a white minority. Art (or at least an art that sought to fulfil more than a merely decorative function) was closely allied to national politics. The ideals of the Freedom Struggle (or alternately, the maintenance of a status quo through silent or active complicity) were the imperative that gave content and shape to the forms that would arise from within the South African milieu (Brink 1997; Sachs 1990; Kruger 2004; Sitas 1996).

So too was the case in South Africa’s theatre. On the one hand, the state sponsored an “official” theatre that celebrated whiteness - and particularly the struggles of the Afrikaner Volk - as the legitimate centre of South Africa’s sociopolitical, socioeconomic and geopolitical national formations. To its peripheries were relegated stories that gave

credence to other ways of being that in any way displaced or disrupted this metanarrative and its fundamental ideological assumptions (Brink 1997; Sachs 1990). There developed on the other hand, then, a vibrant “struggle theatre” – spearheaded by companies like the Junction Avenue Theatre Company and others – that sought to undermine the mythologies of Afrikaner Nationalism and its fantasies of racial superiority (Brink 1997; Hauptfleisch 2007; Sitas 1996). This theatre was driven by the need to destabilize the status quo of white authority, and attempted to imagine a South African community beyond the racial hierarchies imposed by apartheid (Hauptfleisch 2007; Sitas 1996). Politically conscious practitioners at the time, then, typically engaged in a “theatre of protest”, in and through which the many voice(s) of the subjugated “struggling mass” could be given primacy. This attempt to reposition the dominant voice of “official” South African history was an attempt to assert a measure of agency for the disenfranchised, disempowered, typically non-white subject that apartheid institutionally silenced (Brink 1997; Sachs 1990; Hauptfleisch 2007; Sitas 1996).

The cynic will readily note – and not without just cause – that this also gave certain artists “struggle credentials”, which they relied on to generate economic capital and/or the various other forms of capital that underpin social value-systems (Sitas 1996; Bourdieu 1991) . After the imposition of sporting and cultural sanctions against the apartheid government from the mid-1950s (Hauptfleisch 2007), when the international community was largely indisposed to any form of engagement with South Africa and its institutions, it gave these artists access to a world from which they would otherwise have been excluded had they not taken a position of exception to apartheid. More significantly for this dissertation, the same credentials in post-liberation South Africa became marks of an artist’s legitimacy, arguably providing the bearer with readier access to post-liberation government tenders and project funding. Even though this is an opinion that is readily challenged by the beneficiaries of the government’s largesse, Mbongeni Ngema’s *Sarafina II* project – as well as other similarly dodgy allocations of funding from the public purse – certainly gives credence to this assertion (Pearson 1996), and is a theme that will be explored in greater detail.

However, because the vast majority of the historically disenfranchised South African population was black, this would also prompt a persistent (and highly problematic) conflation of blackness (as a racial taxonomy) with the political concerns of “the struggle”, subsuming into its purview the heterogeneous identities of those disenfranchised by apartheid. This generated a trope of politicized “Blackness” (upper-case indexing in this case a specific trans-ethnic genealogy of political or ideological affiliation) as the primary locus of the democratic imaginary in struggle theatre (Davis & Fuchs 1996; Hauptfleisch 2007). So although by varying degrees women, coloureds, and immigrant Indian (and even Chinese) communities did not enjoy the political freedoms of their white counterparts, this marginal constituency was collectivized within the broad politics of a “Black” anti-colonial/anti-apartheid struggle, a tactical manoeuvre of resistance that Gayatri Spivak (1988) terms “strategic essentialism”. To some extent, this collectivization of the identity of “resistance” also necessarily included those white people who had committed “class suicide” by aligning themselves with the anti-apartheid struggle, whether or not it was out of genuine objection or, as one might say, “bending over blackwards” in pursuit of the capital that came with this sexy politics.

In 1994 however – with the first “free and fair” elections of the new South Africa marking the advent of democracy – matters would become decidedly more complicated in a world of artistic production where the dominant idiom had been one driven by the anti-apartheid struggle. The sea change that democracy heralded necessitated a shift away from the politics of the past in which liberation was the cause célèbre, to one that celebrated and validated the idea of the ostensibly liberated “New Nation”. Nation-building became a new imperative for artists, with its objective no longer liberation, but the development and maintenance of South Africa’s new democratic institutions (Brink 1997; Hauptfleisch 2007; Sachs 1990).

The fundamental issue here is that the language and rhetoric of nation-building relies on the same unproblematic generalizations about the South African community as those deployed in service to Afrikaner Nationalism. The most notable of these is central to my dissertation: the presumption that there is a definable community in the first instance –

homogenous, agreed, discrete – whose traits can be objectively measured and used to differentiate “authentic” South African-ness from an inauthentic (and by implication, improper) idea of the same. In this light, the imperatives for a “committed” post-apartheid practitioner are revealed to be as treacherous as those of the Nationalist theatre of apartheid, because it too is concerned with describing (and in so doing, limiting) the perception of what it is to belong to an imagined South African community. The two positions differ only in the form of “imagined community” (Anderson 1991) that they invoke.

Where once, the definitions were based on the racial hierarchies of Afrikaner Nationalism (and before that, centuries of colonial rule), this “new” South Africa was a progressive, liberal and democratic community (or at least in its theoretical form), whose rhetoric now polarized around the revolutionary and his others: the South African who belongs because his ideology toes the party line in direct opposition to the anti- or counter-revolutionary whose ideology does not. The critical similarity between these seemingly antagonistic political world-views is their reliance on the same rhetoric of opposition: the insider who belongs, and the outsider who imperils or disturbs the seeming continuity and order of that to which he cannot be seen to belong. But what of the subjectivities that inhabit the less easily definable territory somewhere between these two extremities – those citizens who by virtue of their disruption of both these conditions neither fully “belong”, nor can be said to be “outsiders” in the true sense (if, as I argue, such a sense can be said to even exist)? More pointedly, it is the elision of what these bodies potentially signify that is of concern.

Given the end of the so-called struggle period, one must question why “Blackness” in the sense described above has endured as the central trope of our post-liberation democratic imaginary. Based on this logic, it is a reasonable assumption that the elisions that might have arguably been necessitated by a strategically essentialist project of resistance would no longer be necessary. However, as my investigation aims to show, this is still often the case. It is a performance of nationalism that is the main concern of this study, and the various sites where embodied practices of nationalist discourse are brought to bear. It is

my contention in this dissertation that, in the same way that theatre under apartheid evinced a crisis in its representations of blackness, so too does the theatre of a liberated South Africa. It is perhaps now more relevant than ever to ask these questions, given the more subtle forms of exclusion that give the lie to the fundamental principles of our democratic imaginary. The xenophobic violence that swept through the country earlier this year begs the question: why (when we should have been outraged and horrified by even one such instance of intolerance and hatred within the borders of our “free nation”) did it take so long for us to respond to the crisis – and even then, when we did, with a somewhat diminished enthusiasm for the principle of universal justice enshrined in our much-vaunted constitution?

When one looks at this recent spate of attacks in light of the nascent Zulu ethnic nationalism that became the leitmotif of ANC president Jacob Zuma’s campaign for the highest office in the land, a more thorough investigation of these issues is not only important, but necessary in my view. As Laclau and Mouffe argue, Gramsci’s concept of the “modern prince” as a symbol or nexus of social and political control not only articulates the ways in which hegemony is maintained within a modern democratic political economy, but demands that we recognise, by contrast, ‘that the very identity of social agents [is] indeterminate and that every ‘mythical’ fixation of it depends on a struggle’ (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: 41-42) that instantiates and (re)secures the frontiers of the purportedly liberated nation. Insofar as Jacob Zuma constitutes just such a “modern prince” – the very embodiment of a popular postliberation South African imaginary of nationhood – the rhetoric of anti-apartheid struggle is undeniably implicated in the production of hegemonic postliberation South African nationhood delimited at the intersection of politically efficacious discourses of ethnicity, race, gender and class.

If it is given that we are indeed a nation – an imagined community of South Africans contained within and bounded by the nation-state’s geopolitical borders – then it is my contention that there is a direct correlation between this and the ways in which our national theatre writes these same ideas upon and through the bodies that it chooses to represent. In these terms, it is not the unselfconscious performance of nationhood that is

of concern, but the self-conscious modes of such performance – when it is not incidental, but deliberately directed at a specific audience, with specific objectives in mind. The labours of performance demanded of the bodies that are in Althusser's (1971) term *interpellated* or *hailed* within both representational systems operate through specific temporal and spatial modalities which collude in the production of discursive meaning (Bourdieu 1991; de Certeau 1984; Harmansah 2006; Taylor 2003). This might suggest, then, that the body is merely a surface upon which history, time and space act in order to generate meaning. However, I wish to underline that to understand the process of ideological inscription in this way is to overlook the body/subject's potent presence as an agent that itself *acts upon* time and space, and which can (as I shall argue) be deployed to disrupt such meaning structures (Taylor 2003).

[two]

**AN EXQUISITE CORPSE:
HISTORY, BLACKNESS, AND THE RE-MEMBERED NATION**

*...but she wasn't conscious of it. It was her body that did it, with the cunning
and silence of bodies everywhere.*

Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex*: 27.

...

This chapter will deal specifically with the notion of the black body as a site of colonial and post-colonial/post-apartheid mythologies. In this sense, I will attempt to problematise more thoroughly the themes already alluded to in the first chapter's discussion of the location of "authentic" nationhood in light of the democratic project's stated aim of reclaiming the terms under which such "authentic" nationhood and belonging are so defined. It is my argument here that given the democratic project's seizure of the official means of producing national identity in the public sphere, the ideology that attends this "re-inscription" still largely relies upon the same fundamental assumptions. Insofar as a theory of National Democratic Revolution is necessarily concerned with the re-imagination of colonial history as a locus of its project of nation-building, my intention is firstly to show the ways in which this project still relies upon and reinforces the problematic ethnographic and historiographic practices of representation that it simultaneously attempts to ascribe to unreformed colonial and apartheid discourses.

In this sense, I will pursue over these remaining chapters the postliberation democratic national theatre's (re)inscription of national identity through particular spatial, temporal and narrative modalities which produce or contest the "body national", and the particular publics or counter-publics that are interpellated by such significations vis-à-vis authenticity and belonging.

Secondly, I aim to show how the methodology of a (newly) “nationalist” theatre like that of Mbongeni Ngema is insufficient on its own merits as a means of addressing the complicated histories that form the core of post-apartheid South Africa’s “official” ideological communal formations as per the spirit of Thabo Mbeki’s *I Am an African* speech. In this sense, I will pursue a theory of dialectics as an aesthetic methodology that begins to address the problematic valuing of “authenticity” and “truth” in the making of nationhood through an historical lens. While Bertolt Brecht’s Epic Theatre was concerned with historicization as a critically engaged methodology of theatre-making, I refer to Brecht here to inform and enrich my discussion of the ways in which theatre praxis per se has attempted to address the making of meaning as a political act, and the ways in which such a politic necessarily inheres in a theatre that addresses historical memory in order to re-narrate nationhood. If it is ‘the measure of authenticity’ (Chipkin 2007) that is at stake in both praxes, my aim is to explore how a truthful idea of the “authentic” South African nation might be located through the signification of body at both these extremes of the post-liberation theatre.

I proceed from a notion of what Cheryl McEwan refers to as the “archival violence” of pre- and post-liberation South African historiography (McEwan 2003: 743): in her argument, specifically the exclusion of women from dominant accounts of national history. It is from this violence that we must recuperate, McEwan argues, if we are to reconstruct a “truthful” notion of the present through the shaping of communal memory (McEwan 2003). I consider the erosion of the material and discursive agencies of the black body manifest in colonial (and therefore unreformed) treatments of the black subject through a brief discussion of Sara Bartman. This offers a descriptive position from which we might then consider – in the context of negotiating and producing postliberation South Africa’s communal memory through theatre performance – the privileged significations of the male, black body as an extension of this same act of archival violence, here perpetrated against not just women, but the many other subjectivities marginalised by this construction of the exemplary postliberation South African citizen and the ostensibly “authentic” belonging he signifies.

On these grounds, the anachronistic production methodology typically employed in Mbongeni Ngema's theatre is explored in the subsequent chapter as exemplary of an uncritical mediation of history that produces the black body as trope. I argue that such a methodology at once marginalises alternative significations of the provenance of the new nation, and thus reproduces and maintains a limit/threshold of the imagined community of South Africa that does not significantly depart from the spirit in which its colonial and apartheid forbear was constructed. His work represents, ironically, the apotheosis of racist nation-making, and is in the given terms of Mbeki's ambiguous notion of democratic citizenship, *inauthentic*. In contrast, the "counter-ideological" form of problematic nationhood exemplified by the work of Mark Fleishman primarily is explored thereafter as being (in real-world terms) closer to the "authentic" nationhood so ambiguously described in Mbeki's *I Am and African*. However, while I theorize the latter theatre practitioner's work as a progressive and complex counter-ideology of ways of belonging to the South African nation, it is not my intention to present it as wholly unproblematic. Instead, its openness to – and indeed, provocation – of critique is framed as one of its critical strategies. It is this same provocation of critique that is entirely absent from work like Ngema's, and of which nationalistic ideological formations (both the colonial, and the postliberation "counter-ideology" that attempts to disrupt it) are seemingly so intolerant.

Neo-colonial Inscriptions of Black Subjectivity

Since the day that Sara Bartman first came to public attention, she has represented many things. Sara (or *Sartjie* as she has come to be commonly known, an infantilisation of her name that speaks volumes in light of the direction her life took) was born in the Gamtoos Valley, and first came to international attention when she was transported to Europe for "scientific" display in 1810 (Crais and Scully 2008). She was a curiosity, and presented to the both the European public and academy in a manner not far from that of a circus freak show. Her very difference to the white European standard of female beauty won her the moniker (disparagingly it has been argued) *The Hottentot Venus*, and she was represented as a biological study of the differences between Caucasians and Khoisan women, legitimising the insistence that there were distinct

biological differences between white Europeans and their colonial subjects, and in some part justifying the project of colonialism as a “civilising” mission (Crais and Scully 2008).

While she was being described at one level in the seemingly objective taxonomies of scientific enquiry (as a “curious” and exemplary “specimen” of African femininity), Sara Bartman was also objectified as a sexual fetish. Her *physical* difference conjured a fantasy of her “exoticness”, titillating the colonial sexual imagination with its suggestions of the wild, almost animal fecundity of which all Africans were supposedly possessed (Crais and Scully 2008). This particular production of Bartman as an archetypal signifier of “all bodies African” enunciates, in Edward Said’s term, an “orientalist” discourse that produced and maintained the imperial frontier of European “civilization” by objectifying, inscribing and consuming non-European bodies – raced, gendered and hypersexualised – as the perennially exotic “other” (Said 1979).

It is thus not entirely surprising that she would end up working as a prostitute in Paris (Crais and Scully 2008), earning an income by satisfying the sexual urges of white men fascinated by the novelty of her body. And was this not a natural progression, given that the authoritative language of science had already mapped out the anatomical terrain that would legitimise this fantasy? When considered in this sense the fact that her genitals were at one point even pressed in wax as a part of this ongoing anatomical “study” (Crais and Scully 2008) is as symbolic of this nexus between scientific knowledge-making and its assumptions, as it is of the colonised “native” body produced and consumed as spectacle.

Her body was, in this sense, colonised both as an object of racialised scientific enquiry, and in the sense that the result of this mission was the derogation of any autonomy she might have had over her own body (Zita 1998; Crais and Scully 2008). On these grounds, she would in later years become a symbolic embodiment not only of the urgent need to address the racist assumptions of colonial “science”, but also of what would develop into robust feminist critique of the historic ownership of women’s bodies (Zita,

1998; Crais and Scully, 2008). And later yet, when the Musée de l'Homme in Paris finally disinterred her preserved body parts (skeleton, brain and genitalia) from the case in which they had been displayed since her death, and returned them to be buried in South Africa in 2002, the world seized the symbolism of the moment (Crais and Scully, 2008). “Sartjie” once again became property. On one hand, the French government used the occasion to underline their commitment to historical redress for the project of colonialism, and thus regained some of the moral ground they had lost with the increase in calls for colonisers to make amends for the still-apparent effects of their various occupations. On the other hand, the South African government went to considerable lengths to make it understood that Sara’s “return home” was more than just that: it was a symbolic emancipation of the black body from centuries of racial oppression, not only underlining the postcolony’s reappropriation of the means of self-definition and self-determination, but by inference, reaffirming its claim to an historical grievance against racist colonial authority in the first place.

The various attitudes towards Bartman represented above are clearly related in terms of this dissertation: very little is known about the kind of person Sara Bartman actually was, but her body remains even after her death (or perhaps more accurately, *especially* after her death) as a potent symbol of the ways in which the native body was co-opted by official practice under the purview of colonialism, and more recently, as a symbol of the postcolony’s arguable transcendence of a history of suffering under racist colonial rule. In both cases, it is her body that is the site of these appropriations and counter-appropriations, and upon the surfaces of which the grand narratives of colonialism (its prejudices both informing and informed by the “knowledge” made by its sciences) and liberation (the product of anti-colonial endeavour) are both inscribed.

And significantly, with the reliance in both cases on physical descriptors (her “primitive” features that legitimised pseudo-scientific and racist colonial taxonomies, and her likeness to “the people” of the African postcolony to whom she finally “came home”), Sara Bartman becomes, in Jean Baudrillard’s term (1985), an empty simulacrum: a surfeit of signs or “hyper-real simulation” that is entirely excessive to (and often, finally

becomes independent of) the material facts towards which the sign supposedly gestures. While Baudrillard specifically framed such an excess as representing, finally, an abrogation of agency, Deleuze (1986) alternatively argued that simulacra enable resistance by allowing the production of sign systems that deliberately push against those already taken up as supposed “truthful” representations. In both the cases explored above Sara Bartman’s body is nevertheless the objectified through appropriations and counter-appropriations that write over the material facts of her life in the pursuit of particular efficacious performances, embodying either a colonial fetish of savagery, or the validation of a post-liberation grievance with regards to the former: she is never an agent of the antagonistic discourses into which her body is subsumed.

Harmansah suggests that this has been, until only recently, one of the shortcomings of archaeological, ethnographic and historiographic praxis (Harmansah, 2006b). Until a nascent interest in performance and embodiment recently began to critically inform these fields of inquiry, their insistence had been on ‘taking the body as a surface, as a screen upon which symbolisms are encoded [and] social structures...inscribed’ (Harmansah, 2006b), without the possibility of imagining anything beyond the descriptive limits imposed by this taxonomy. It is under these conditions that historical subjectivities lose a vital dimension that might help us understand their – and through them, our own – location within history better; when

the irreducible materiality of the human body, its practices, its gestures are ignored, and the embodied subjectivities of past social actors as individuals are overlooked, when the human body is rendered passive and deprived of its agency to change the world, its performativity denied. (Harmansah, 2006b)

The effect of this is that it all too often obliterates the specificity of the place or person that might very well have been the reason for noting its importance in the first place – the human subjectivity recedes beneath the weight of the monolithic histories that are superimposed over it. With Bartman, she eventually becomes a non-specific, free-floating signifier of various (often not even mutually supportive) politics: an empty simulacrum after Baudrillard (1985), or in Bhabha’s terms (1994), a *trope*. In reproducing Bartman as an historical sign of a homogenised black experience of

colonialism – as uncomplicated testimony of the collective suffering of black people under colonialism – she is ‘deprived of her agency to change the world’. In this sense, Chipkin’s postulation of Africanness (following Mbeki, in which being able ‘to see through liberated eyes’ (Chipkin 2007: 102) is a primary mark of its authenticity) is confounded by this failure to recognise the agency of Bartman as a ‘social player’ in the narrative repositioning of colonial and apartheid history. Instead, her treatment as uncomplicated sign merely points to an internalisation of the racist ideology that persistently attempted to define black people always as subjects, and thus, only replicates in Chipkin’s terms, the ‘racist power at work in apartheid and colonial taxonomies’ (Chipkin 2007: 102). Sara Bartman is once again reduced to being *Sartjie*, an infant-woman *to whom history happens*. Bartman returns to the present as a dismembered corpse that can only be re-membered – or rendered into meaningful being – only as a function of the descriptive taxonomies that either reproduce or (ostensibly) disrupt official scriptural practices. She suffers, in this sense, a second metaphysical death even as her body is brought forth as a potent symbol of a victory against racism.

It is from this particular crisis of representation that the black body has always suffered, firstly in its problematic portrayal in the official literatures of the colony and, then, in those of the post-colony (Bhabha 1994; Said 1979). Bartman’s story here demonstrates the persistent colonial and post-colonial (re)generation of the black body as either the object of colonial fetish and spectacle, or the black body as a reliquary vessel for the hopes, ideals and aspirations of a postliberation black identity steeped in, generated through, and constantly regenerating its own history of subjecthood.

Muñoz argues that

Both [ethnographic and pornographic] discourses are teleologically cognate insofar as they both strive for the achievement of epistemological utopias where the “Other” and knowledge of the “Other” can be mastered and contained. Ethnotopia can be characterized as a world of limitless observation where “we know them,” whereas pornotopia is a world where “we have them”, “a world of lust unlimited.” (Muñoz 1999: 71)

What Muñoz suggests here is that, in the same way that pornography eroticises the bodies of the subjects portrayed, so ethnography parallels this by exoticising the bodies of its “native” subjects (Muñoz 1999). As in the case of Sara Bartman, when these representational practices operate together in the same process of signification, they encourage a form of subjectivity that can only be narrated in terms of the frisson that it provokes: an ethnopornography. Muñoz coined this term in specific relation to the fetishization of the “native” body as a systematic practice of ethnography. However, if we consider pornography in its broader definition (from *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 1998 edition) as ‘the depiction of acts in a sensational manner so as to arouse a quick, intense emotional reaction.’ – in other words, as connoting more than just erotic arousal, but a psychological excitation – then we might come to view all historical theatre as an ethnopornography of sorts, in which the depiction of acts visited upon and by the body aims to produce an intense reaction of sympathy, awe, rage, pleasure and so forth. It varies only in the extremity of its lewdness, and the degree to which its desire for this intense emotional reaction is mediated by its simultaneous provocation of more meaningful enquiry.

Insofar as this describes a main complaint of this dissertation, it is this: that the black body is insistently – even after the end of colonialism and apartheid – described by and as trope when it is deployed in service to a nationalist historical imaginary, often even as it attempts to counter-narrativise and reclaim the histories that have made it so. In the context of the production analysed later in this dissertation, the ways in which the body is performatively framed as a counter-narrative of the archives of colonial and apartheid history necessarily imbricates with the issues I have mapped out: if the repertoire that the performing body performatively cites in performances of the historical hails or interpellates any particular public of like or unlike bodies, it necessarily does so in tension with the system of signs that are always-already scripted over its surfaces. The political efficacy of any performance, then, both depends upon and arises out of the ways in which such tensions are mediated.

History, Politics and the Theatre

Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre played a significant role in shaping the aesthetic of South African theatre. From the first early student South African productions of his plays in 1958, to professional productions of *A Caucasian Chalk Circle* (first presented in 1963 by the state-subsidised Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal, followed a year later by the more influential collaboration between the Serpent Players and Athol Fugard) as well as other seminal Brecht works, the theory and practices of Brecht's theatre appear time and again in both the official state-sponsored theatre of apartheid and (more frequently) in that of resistance or protest theatre (Kruger, 2004). Of this latter category, *The Coat* (devised and performed by the Serpent Players in collaboration with Fugard in 1966), would be the beginning of a continuing exploration of the possibilities offered by Brecht's model, which would culminate in the Serpent Players' two most recognised (and recognisably) Brechtian productions, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* in 1972 and *The Island* in 1973 (Kruger 2004: 215-216). Kruger suggests that both plays 'evinced a Brechtian attention to the demonstration of gest and social situation and encouraged audiences to analyse rather than merely applaud the action...[Further, b]oth plays are also credited with preparing the ground for the distinctively South African political theatre of the 1970s and 1980s' (Kruger 2004: 218).

With anti-colonial theatre's gradual shift towards a more indigenous idiom steeped in locally specific symbolic systems and the heterogeneous dynamics of signification this brought into play, the Epic Theatre form in this context was immediately subversive in its own right. It is a form that by its very nature is about disrupting structure, authority and the fixity of its meaning-making systems (Kruger 2004): its techniques 'seek above all to defy the processes of identification upon which bourgeois drama is founded' (Oesmann 2005: 11). Kruger is careful, however, to note that the tendency to over-determine Brecht's role in the emergence of South African political theatre offers at best an incomplete account of oppositional theatre practice in South Africa, which had in fact

existed well before Fugard's debut in the 1950s but did not make extensive use of Brecht until the 1970s. The black literate class that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries made innovative use of African, American and (African) American

performance practices ... to challenge exclusive Western claims to civilization and modernity in the name of universal emancipation. (Kruger 2004: 219-220)

However indebted the South African anti-apartheid oeuvre may be to other styles and form – including the critical role of Meyerhold and other performance and cultural theorists in shaping Brecht’s own ‘most politically and theatrically advanced work – the *Lehrstücke* [learning/teaching plays]]’ (Kruger 2004: 220) – this chapter’s concern lies less with the history of the development of theatre as resistance to colonialism and apartheid, than it does with how such resistance politics is manifested in a postliberation theatre that addresses a particular national public as the “authentic” limit of the postliberation South African nation. I submit for the purposes of my argument that a nationalist theatre is one characterised by its delivery of a ‘consistent ideological message’ (Oesmann 2005: 45) that is uncritically supportive of popular (or populist) public ideologies in varying degrees of extremity. These might range from the benignly patriotic, to stridently militant, jingoistic or xenophobic assertions of nationhood. In all cases, it can only be, at best, reductive because of its necessarily narrow focus on maintaining the ideological status quo, and can by no means be considered to be a “peripheral” or marginally political cultural act.

Brecht’s extensive writing and practice posited theatre as a medium that could, through ‘the transformation of passive spectators into social and political agents’ (Kruger 2004: 220) activate alternative ways of understanding and dealing with problematic socio-political relations. His methodology is rooted in his use of the historical fragment to ‘[present] a prehistory that is not a history of events, but the production of conditions from which the future is to be built’ (Oesmann 2005: 191). Importantly, Oesmann notes, it is through the human body that this potential future is negotiated and revealed. In the context of this dissertation’s arguments, the theory and practice of Epic (or dialectical) theatre provides a theoretical and practical model from whose position on history, body, theatre and politics we might begin to assess the correlations between the theory of performance explored in the previous chapter, performance as self-conscious political act in the theatre described hereafter, and the body as the primary tool for the social significations in both. Critically, the dialectical form derives a substantial amount of its

discursive power from the contradictions and ambiguities that it simultaneously reveals between bodily action and the text that it “realises”, and between the structure of narrative and the meaning(s) it seeks to generate. It is this particular aspect of the Brechtian methodology – its production of contradiction and tensions between potential meanings, rather than cohesion – that I wish to mobilise in conversation with the broader concerns of this dissertation vis-à-vis the signification of history as a potentially counter-ideological act vested in the critical emplacement of the body as a signifier. If we return briefly to Taylor, repertoire as embodied citation, in this sense, destabilises the fixed archive even as it appears to re-circulate the very metanarratives that it cites in the act of performance. What is key here, though, is that performance imperils the authority of the archives in the very moment of citation, re-asserting the agency of the body as the contingent site through which knowledge is made, experienced, interpreted and reproduced.

If, as Brecht writes, ‘men recognize the truest picture of their life by certain features, in the arrangements of figures in certain dispositions, which signify the true interests of the men of this time’ (in Oesmann 2005: 193), then there is a strong case to be made for understanding the dispositional practices of the body as always already political. The various interpretations possible of such embodied acts enable a critical dissection of the larger social realities towards which the performance gestures, provoked and enabled by the material world that the performance both inhabits and rehearses. If such a history of possibility derives ‘from the observation of people’s unconscious performance of gestures...[t]heatre, then, can provide a space where the observation of gestures can be rehearsed for a continuous negotiation of the historical process’ (Oesmann 2005: 194). Consequently, Oesmann avers that with Brecht’s central theory on embodied signification, *gestus*,

we are able to read contradictory gestures as other history and ... also as other ideology ... To read *gestus*, one must understand the contradictions that work against the creation of coherent meaning and train one’s perception instead on that which can be accurately perceived: human action ... Any relation to the past or the future depends on people observing whomever is physically present. Gestures defy verbal explanation, and the body engages in mimetic action that, in Brecht’s theatre, replaces intellectual

comprehension. Any understanding, then, remains located in the present tense and in the interpersonal or social realm. (Oesmann 2005: 195-196)

This argument is reminiscent of those already introduced in the first chapter and rationalises in “purer” theatrical terms the assumption that performance (as an epiphenomenon of existence), is an act of social re-enforcement or (re)inscription through what in Connerton’s terms (Harmansah 2006b) are the *habitual* practices of the body, those which constitute the *habitus* in Bourdieu’s term (1991), or the “repertoire” according to Taylor (2003). In all these senses, the repetition of meaningful acts (in very specific ways) is located as the source of social truth-making, and from which meaning of the past, present and potential futures can be made. The notion of mimetic activity is crucial to Brecht’s conception of *gestus* as the primary form of social recognition that lies at the heart of the theatre’s meaning-making. In his view, mimesis – the ‘organic adaptation to otherness...in which adaptation refers to the subject’s physical adjustment to the object, an adjustment through which the subject acquires sensuous knowledge of the object’ (Oesmann 2005: 41) – is an activity that ‘offers a strategy for survival and action that overcomes our inability to comprehend the history that is emerging around us’ (Oesmann 2005: 44). The implication is that we access subversive knowledge of the other through a dynamic of physical mutual understanding between subject/self and object/other, which understanding is predicated on the very awareness of the difference that the subject/self must adapt to in order to accommodate the position of the object/other. Here, not only are we estranged from the content of what we are engaging with, but from the very process that habitually governs our decision-making. Again, note here the essential contradictions that such a complex positioning of viewership invites, and the reflexive mirroring of “knowing” that this calls for.

While on one hand, mimetic activity in Brecht’s world is about adapting to this difference, adaptation becomes on the other hand an assertion of sameness because it requires the ‘mirroring of the knower in the unknown, of thought in its object’ (Oesmann 2005: 44), or of self in the other. This is the condition of Brecht’s dialectic at work that I am pursuing in terms of a national postliberation theatre and its display of bodies, for while social recognition rests, thus, on the perception of “likeness” through unconscious

bodily dispositions, it is also always outside of the subject's control (Oesmann 2005). The 'true interests of the men of this time' (Brecht in Oesmann, 2005: 45), then,

...become obvious not in what we intentionally communicate, but through the way we unconsciously relate to one another. Mimetic knowledge is thus not translatable into facticity, but depends on ever-changing social relations... What has not reached the realm of conscious knowledge can become a matter of experience through mimetic activity. (Oesmann 2005: 45)

What is suggested is that whilst objective or factual truth might be seen to exist in the empirical sense (i.e. as "facticity"), the body can only understand and represent such truth always as a function of its own subject-position: truth is posited as relational, an interpretation of possibilities contingent on the individual circumstances that frame them. That is, while we might be able to ascribe some interpretive truth to the "facts" represented through bodies, *gestus* makes at best a potential truth amongst the many potential truths that are available by virtue of the inherent differences that exist across any number of bodies. Further, such relational truth can only be made sense of through the lens of other bodies and their dispositions. In the same sense that Eugenides invokes the notion of a body that acts without its owner's conscious knowledge, yet with the "...cunning and knowing silence of bodies everywhere..." (Eugenides 2002: 27) that so similarly behave, *gestus* is fundamentally a way of representing through the body's significations *in relation to* its disruption or reinforcement of intended or seemingly "inherent" meaning. Such meaning (which necessarily exists a priori to its signification in performance within a lived network of social relations of which we may or may not be consciously aware) is at once citational and familiar, yet estranged within the larger architecture of the performance in which it is self-consciously deployed: the "showing" that is "shown" in the "showing" in Brecht's playful turn of phrase.

Bhabha (1994) and Edward Soja (1996) refer to such spaces of polyvalent citation as *thirdspace* – hybrid spaces of discursive potential in which significations are released from their disciplinary imprisonment, and activated as radical counter-inscriptions by their deployment within contexts that foreground the very process of dis-location as a rupture with the undergirding politics that delimit the authority of the seminal referent (Bhabha 1994). Recall here Heidegger's argument vis-à-vis simulacra earlier in this

dissertation. What is produced in “thirdspace”, then, is a multi-vocal, hybrid field of citations in which meaning can neither be fixed nor limited because it is always already in the process of becoming something else even as it is supposedly arrested in the moment it is perceived (Bhabha 1994; Soja 1996). The optic and political efficacy of thirdspace has significant implications in my discussion of a theatre founded on equitable dialogue rather than didactics, particularly because the dialectic in Brecht’s sense is not necessarily the mode of signification deployed in the productions with which I deal in this dissertation.

If, then, ‘[m]imesis as carnal knowledge, combined with intentional estrangement through theatrical space...produces a...field of forces of contradictory interests in which a critique of the mimetic activity can take place... [and which] repeatedly undermines any consistent ideological message’ (Oesmann 2005: 45), I proffer a notion of thirdspace, then, that is mimesis’s teleological cognate, and as such, an alternative way of framing the kind of discursive labour in which dialectical performance is invested. I thus argue through the critical lens of a dialectical theatre – and more loosely, performances that similarly estrange meaning-making and authority by producing thirdspace – that a theatre that posits South African-ness as a consistent and measurable collection of traits and ideological stances merely rehearses the aphorisms of the status quo. It is neither interested in nor conducive to the heterogeneous dynamics of what it seeks to represent, but merely relies on stereotype and cliché to invoke its myopic view of a world in which contradiction and difference are obliterated as avenues for exploring alternative (re)presentations of the history from which such a community might imagine itself as having originated.

Not only was a lot of the theatre being made in opposition to apartheid specifically involved in revealing truths about South African politics then, but it also experimented with new ways of making this truth apparent. A direct result of this experimentation with making meaning was that the theatre began drawing from an increasingly diverse selection of codes, practices, traditions and forms in its pursuit of this goal. David

Coplan offers an instructive perspective on this process of hybridised signification, describing it as

a creative syncretism in which innovative performers combine materials from cultures in contact into qualitatively new forms in response to changing conditions, needs, self-images, and aspirations. In South Africa, stylistic elements from many sources have been recomposed into new frameworks of meaning, reflecting changing moral relations, systems of identity and value, and realities of power. (cited in Balme 1996: 67)

Whilst, as Balme notes, Coplan's description of syncretic representation issues from the perspective of an ethnomusicologist, his remarks nevertheless capture the similar impulse that defined much of the oppositional theatre that came out of the anti-apartheid milieu (Balme 1996: 67). Coplan's comments suggest two things. Firstly, that the traditional "divisions" between different cultural and artistic disciplines and practices made for a "pure" art that just did not have the capacity to recognise the complex cross-fertilizations that were such a fundamental part of the dynamic life that ran under the skin of South Africa (and especially the experience of life as a black South African). Secondly, that eschewing such a notion of "purity" across different disciplines could thus make a more "truthful" idea of South Africa, in which the expression of diversity and change was in and of itself a stance in direct opposition to the classist and racist communal structures that were the foundation of apartheid.

Of course, these two interpretations are not exhaustive of the many possible reasons behind the experimentation that led to the development of syncretic practices in this country's theatre. However, they certainly are persuasive grounds for reading the syncretic strategies of the theatre discussed in the next chapter as a deliberate subversion of the apartheid status quo; and further, for reading the syncretic strategies of the plays discussed in the fourth, fifth and sixth chapters of this dissertation as similarly subversive of the nationalist mythologies of post-liberation South Africa.

I have selected the work discussed herein not because it is particularly important in contrast to the work of other practitioners – indeed, there is an abundance of similar material that I might have used to illustrate my arguments. However, Ngema's work is, at the one extreme, an exemplary instance of theatre deployed in the service of state-

hood: while this may not necessarily reveal anything that can irrefutably be called “Ngema’s agenda” as an artist, the government’s extraordinary patronage of Ngema’s work is certainly an indication of the kind of theatre that is implicitly considered to be an efficacious and relevant address of the “official” national public. My argument is that this is precisely because Ngema’s work displays the qualities that exemplify the nation as it “ought to be shown” – that it is the very embodiment of an official fantasy of nationhood. Conversely, the work explored in subsequent chapters is significant because it exemplifies the ways in which the return to a dialectic mode of production can open up a problematic space of imagined nationhood whose multivocality is a progressive expression of the heterogeneous dynamics that a nationalist fantasy of postliberation nationhood necessarily suppresses. In both the former and latter cases, nationhood is contested on the common ground of national history (as the communal memory upon which the nation’s enduring integrity is founded) and the various ways in which this is re-imagined and embodied as an account of the experience of belonging to the imagined community of South Africa.

Whilst my interpretation is critically informed by the various theoretical concerns of authenticity, belonging, meaning and scriptural authority explored thus far in this dissertation, I will proceed on the premise that the theatre communicates these ideas through performance, and the complex dialogue set up between spectator and performer in real space and time. My analysis of the performances is based on Balme’s two broad concepts of *frames* and *codes*. *Frame* (which he adapts from Erving Goffman), ‘denotes the way in which theatrical communication is organised on a macrolevel’ and can be used to show how ‘plays organise narrative, execute shifts in time and space, play with questions of genre, and organise relations between performer and spectator’ (Balme 1996: 67). Framing can further be divided into three categories:

- Dramaturgical framing, which informs, narrates, tells us where and when the action takes place, etc. Naturalistic drama has to utilize the device of exposition, with varying degrees of subtlety, to provide this information. Non-naturalistic forms have recourse to a large vocabulary of devices ranging from prologues, direct narration to banners and voice-overs. Temporal and spatial transitions within the action are also communicated in this way.

-Performance framing. The sets of conventions which control the shift from the everyday world to the fictional world of the theatrical performance and the behaviour of both actors and spectators which obtains during the performance. On certain cues (lowering of house-lights, lifting of the curtain) the “theatre-goer” becomes an “on-looker” (Goffman's distinction); the actor assumes his role and, traditionally in Western theatre, in so doing divorces himself in varying degrees from his personal identity.

-Generic framing. The information provided to orientate the spectator as to what genre of theatrical performance s/he will be witnessing, which should in turn influence his activity as a spectator. For example, spectatorial behaviour will/should be different in a night-club show or music-hall performance than in the performance of an Ibsen play. Generic framing influences of course performance framing. It is a component of the “horizon of expectation,” a term introduced by the theorists of reception aesthetics to denote primarily reading strategies. (Balme 1996: 68-9)

On the other hand, *code* denotes the organisation of meaning at the theatre's microlevel, and refers to ‘the individual codes – linguistic, gestural, kinesic, aesthetic – at work in the plays’ (Balme 1996: 67). Theatrical presentations, Balme argues, can be “mapped” in terms of the codes they deploy under the conditions that frame their *production* of meaning. My primary interest is the non-textual or non-verbal communications that run parallel – and often antagonistically – to the textual communications of meaning within a theatre concerned with questioning and countering the problematic assumptions of conventional scriptural practices. In other words, I will attempt to map these productions through their use of codes that specifically enable the dynamic “mirroring” of a South African reality, and which in Chartier's terms can make ‘connections among practices and representations’ (cited in Harmansah 2006b: source unpaginated) apparent in ways other than the problematic authority of the textual archive that these plays engage.

This method will hopefully capture the complex interplay of factors that affect my reading of the form and content of the communities imagined through the lens of these performances, and the potential implications thereof.

[three]

**SPECTACLES OF THE NATIVE BODY:
NGEMA AND THE PRODUCTION OF NEW NATIONALISM**

Mbongeni Ngema's theatre was one that developed out of the popular entertainment techniques and style of Gibson Kente's township theatre, allied to the principles and methodologies of Peter Brooke and Stanislavski (Jones 1994). But like many other South African theatre practitioners at the time, Ngema's oeuvre was one strongly informed by the nascent protest theatre idiom of the mid-1970s to late-1980s. This was a theatre that had become increasingly radical and confrontational in its attitudes towards the apartheid system's impositions (Kruger 2004; Hauptfleisch 2007). Hauptfleisch further notes that three major trends occurred during this period:

[f]irstly theatre and theatre practitioners finally seemed to discover the power of performance as a socio-political weapon. Secondly the first genuine and wide-ranging attempts at transcending the racial, linguistic and other barriers at understanding through the process of theatre were undertaken – both through the workshop format and through the conscious employment of a polyglot linguistic form – notably the urban patois referred to as Tsotsitaal (Gangster Language). Thirdly there [was] a significant and noticeable shift in the theatrical paradigm, away from the institutionalised and imported European forms towards the more informal yet pervasive indigenous performance tradition. (Hauptfleisch 2007: 17)

The form that this theatre took was increasingly influenced by the improvisational techniques already explored in the European theatre pioneered by the likes of Meyerhold, and workshopped productions would constitute the majority of the production output in this regard (Hauptfleisch 2007; Kruger 2004; Sitas 1996). It was the Market Theatre that would launch Ngema's international career with the play *Woza Albert!* in 1981 - which was devised with Market Theatre doyen, Barney Simon and Percy Mtwa (who would similarly emerge as a leading black South African performer/playwright). The

collaborative nature of the work they were making stemmed from the collision of the rehearsal and formal production techniques of conventional “western” theatre, the sophisticated improvisation and free-play techniques utilised by Simon (Henriques & Stephanou 2006), and the indigenous idiom that black South African practitioners like Gibson Kente had already popularised, and in which Ngema had received his formative performance instruction (Jones 1994; Hauptfleisch 2007; Kruger 2004).

While Ngema has often been attributed with the development and popularisation of the “archetypal” township theatre aesthetic upon which his work is so heavily reliant, such a determination is in fact ahistorical. Gibson Kente had been making influential work many years prior to Ngema, Mtwa and Simon’s *Woza Albert!*, and it was Kente’s idiom of indigenous popular black theatre that was appropriated for the creation of *Woza Albert!* (Jones 1994). It was while touring with a production of Kente’s *Mama and the Load* that Ngema and Mtwa first read Grotowski’s *Towards a Poor Theatre* and Peter Brook’s *The Empty Space*, and which resulted in the conception of *Woza Albert!* (Jones 1994: 74; Balme 1996: 70). Barney Simon only joined the *Woza Albert!* team after Ngema and Mtwa absconded during the *Mama and the Load* tour (forcing its cancellation), and later approached the Market Theatre for help with developing and staging the project (Jones 1994: 75). The *Woza Albert!* collaboration would also be one of the most profound influences on Ngema’s aesthetic, and would influence other major works of his, including *Asinamali* (1985), and the hit musical *Sarafina!* in 1987 (Hauptfleisch 2007), both of which were nominated for the Tony Awards in their respective years of production.

Ari Sitas (1996) attributes Ngema’s success to a variety of reasons. He argues that

Mbongeni Ngema’s craft was to take back onto the stage the performance genres that were developing in the townships around him, with their powerful orality. His distinctive contribution was to have understood and to have redrafted this orality together with the tension between the defiant body language of Black Consciousness and the strutting of urban cultures into a new style of telling stories. It was a small step before all this turned into a reinvented popular musical genre. At first his and Percy Mtwa’s *Woza Albert!!* and his *Asinamali* were not revolutionary in terms of content; they were like so many other struggle stories in South Africa. They were simple and effective and shed light on ordinary people’s pain. What was exciting was their performance, their movement, their

shifts from aggro to soft, from poise to the ridiculous, from humour to protest. By the time of *Sarafina!* he found himself developing a musical style which launched hundreds of imitation effects into the townships. Sarafina, the part, became the archetype of emancipated, political young-black-womanhood. (Sitas 1996: 6)

Ngema's style, in terms of the linguistic, aesthetic and kinesic codes it deployed to make meaning in performance, was not dissimilar to Kente's. I would add to Sitas' comment then, that Ngema's success resulted from doing what Kente (and other practitioners) had already been doing, but from a distinctly militant anti-apartheid stance that cultural activists had long been arguing should be a primary function of the black theatre in the context of the intractable aggressions of apartheid (Jones 1994: 70): that on these terms, it was as much a result of his appropriation of Kente's style and form as it was a result of the opportunistic deployment of this popular idiom alongside the overt liberation politics that were the *raison d'être* for a politically conscious oppositional theatre. While Ngema, Mtwa and Simon's 'adherence to a Grotowskian performance ethic and aesthetic preclude[d] them of course from utilizing the large-scale resources of a Kente-style musical production' (Balme 1996: 70) for *Woza Albert!*, it was not long before Ngema's work went back to the exact same "large-scale" production methods that Kente utilised.

By the time that *Sarafina!* catapulted him onto the international stage, Ngema's relationship with the theatre seemed to have drifted from a primary concern with asserting the politics of a legitimate struggle for black emancipation. Although his theatre was still framed in this politics, it became as much about developing the form – irrespective of content and context – into a readily consumable popular public theatre. It is thus not entirely surprising that what had begun as an experimental, hybrid and dynamic theatre (*Woza Albert!* still stands as stellar example of these early years) predicated on an agenda of challenging and transforming the socio-political landscape, would eventually ossify into a formulaic, two-dimensional form of theatre that was just as much about filling seats, international public acclaim, and the potential for extraordinary financial gain. As André Brink laments, as his international profile grew,

in due course...Mbongeni Ngema turned toward mere political opportunism, relinquishing both ethical and theatrical integrity in the process [which] did more harm than good both to the struggle against apartheid and to the status of theater in South

Africa. The fact that at present his pen appears to be at the disposal of any cause provided the money is right, sadly raises questions about his early achievements against apartheid. (Brink 1997: 167)

In the heady years of South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy, Ngema was frequently hailed as one of the leading lights in the struggle for transformation in the performing arts. The credibility he had gained as a cultural activist in the anti-apartheid struggle would stand him in good stead with the new dispensation: locally and internationally popular productions like *Woza Albert!*, *Asinamali!* and *Sarafina!* were considered important examples of the theatre's mobilization of anti-apartheid sentiment, because of their exposure of the conditions that defined the experiences of black people under apartheid (Brink 1997; Balme 1996; Sitas 1996). So even while other black struggle theatre icons like Winston Ntshona, Percy Mtwa and Kente would eventually fade into relative (international) public obscurity over the years following the shift to democracy, Ngema was able to continue producing work under the patronage of the new ANC-led democratic government.

Ngema's current tenure as associate musicals director at the Playhouse in Durban – a publicly funded institution – is a prime example. Whilst this appointment was in recognition of his history of successful production, it was also premised on the notion that he would enable the necessary “transformation” so desperately needed by the Playhouse and other institutions that were seen to be maintaining or perpetuating the production of spaces of white cultural privilege (Bell 1997). His pay check comes directly from the fiscus and could, as a reasonable expectation, be considered a mandate to act in the public or national interest; or alternatively, his pay check comes from the public purse *because* his work is considered to serve the national public interest. Although the truth in all probability lies somewhere between these two positions, the latter is nevertheless *sine qua non* for the former. The question really ought to be, then: if we are to consider the display of bodies in the theatre as its primary method of signification and identification, in what ways might the bodies produced in Ngema's theatre signify – or strategically encourage identification with – the specific kind of community of which a postliberation nationalist government is desirous? Whether it is a

celebratory spectacle of “African” (read *black* African) heritage, or an overtly political production like *Sarafina!*, the fact that Ngema’s work is consistently about (South African) black people and their stories, underlined always by the theme that these stories all share – the fight against the tyrannies of colonialism and apartheid – is undeniably significant. Across the spectrum of his work, the black body is consistently produced as a trope of political struggle against the usurpation of material spaces, traditions, values, beliefs and practices considered to be “authentically” South African. Further, the black body so identified is almost exclusively that of the black Zulu male. While this may be the product of the personal context from which Ngema comes, it is nevertheless relevant that it is this particular frame that lends his work cachet as a production of postliberation South African-ness.

In post-liberation South Africa, he became (and arguably still remains) the unofficial “official” voice of a liberated South African theatre that sought to contest and reclaim black identity by wresting it from the clutches of colonial and apartheid practice. And although the fundamental groundwork had already been laid by forerunners like Gibson Kente and Sam Mhangwane, one need only look at the number of imitators that “Ngema’s” style of musical theatre has spawned in the years since he first became famous in order to understand the extraordinary impact Ngema has had on the black “township musical” scene (Hauptfleisch 2007).

Township Theatre: Aesthetics and Conventions

Theatre was by no means a whites-only affair when Kente began his experimentations with theatre. Some successful productions had already broken the glass ceiling for black artists in the theatre, and had largely black casts as well as black practitioners in key production positions. However, these productions, it was felt, did little to advance the cause of black liberation because they were tailor-made and pre-packaged for the consumption of white (international in some cases) audiences and had ‘almost no appeal to black communities in South Africa’ (Jones 1994: 68). *King Kong* (1959) on the other

hand, seemed to be the beginning of a break with this trend, and ‘had a far-reaching, cross-cultural ability to enchant’ (Jones 1994: 68). Part of *King Kong*’s “ability to enchant” the black audiences that previous productions had largely failed to reach came from its deployment of a narrative with which many black South Africans were familiar. This rewritten story was told using the popular entertainment techniques of western musical theatre fused with the definitive jazz sounds developing in cosmopolitan black/multiracial urban spaces like Sophiatown (Jones 1994: 66). The production was on these terms not only an emphatic demonstration of successful cultural co-operation across the colour bar, but was for many black practitioners, an emphatic declaration of the self-worth of black artists, and their importance as makers of an internationally recognisable public art in spite of the gate-keeping efforts of apartheid state censors. Black composer Todd Matshikiza’s centrality to the realization of *King Kong* went some way towards signalling the reclamation of the means of the cultural production of black South African life. Kente’s decision to take the leap into theatre-making was significantly influenced by *King Kong* partly for this very reason (Jones 1994: 66).

However, while Kente was interested in the syncretic methodology he had seen used to such great effect in the making of *King Kong*, he also saw a cautionary tale in Matshikiza’s complaints about the difficulties of working collaboratively as he had done whilst making *King Kong*, chief among which was his white counterparts’ lack of respect for his ideas (Jones 1994: 68). Kente tried unsuccessfully to find a black scriptwriter for the first project that he envisioned, and ‘was left with no choice but to write his own libretto and score for the play he called *Manana, the Jazz-Prophet*. He [subsequently] authored every one of his productions [thereafter]’ (Jones 1994: 68). As Jones explains, Kente

began to make a name as a completely self-sufficient artist and entrepreneur, and saw to it that he never suffered the collaborative nightmares and incursions that had so bedraggled and disgusted Matshikiza. He read whatever books he could find on the subject of theater, including Konstantin Stanislavsky’s writings, and applied the ideas he found where they served his needs and supported his instincts. (Jones 1994: 68)

Kente’s method of making theatre thus developed as one in which he was the auteur par excellence of his theatrical world, and the natural privileging of his voice as the final

authority in the meaning-making process. The actors, musicians and other production team members were thus, in some ways, only there to effect this vision of the world, not to participate critically in its making of meaning. Kente's style was physically gruelling and exacting in the demands it made of its performers. Because it was designed to play to large, raucous township audiences in acoustically poor community venues rather than the professional theatres available to white practitioners and their "mannered" audiences, Kente's style of vocal presentation developed directly out of a literal need *to be heard* (Jones 1994: 68): its words were enunciated in orotund, pulpit-declamatory style. Similarly, the articulation of the "emotions" that ran beneath the surface of the texts was an exercise mostly carried out through facial expression, also as a way of combating the conditions under which the work was typically performed: the nuances of bodily posture gave way to the performance of emotion in broad strokes that the township performance context (arguably) necessitated. Considering that Kente claims to have derived much of his early influence from Stanislavski, it is no small irony that he would land up moving in the precisely the opposite stylistic direction.

These acting techniques were deployed alongside the fusion of varying musical codes (particularly jazz, kwela, mbhaqanga, rhythm and blues, and traditional choral arrangements (Jones 1994: 171), linguistic codes (the various urban patois which developed as a combination of the recognised "pure" languages spoken in South Africa), kinesic codes (the dances and stereotypical physical behaviours characteristic of township life, for example "stock characters" like the 'tsotsi') and traditional oral performance forms that were familiar to black South African communities and their "cultures" as distinctly different to white South African culture (Balme 1996: 76). Jones suggests that while 'the combined effect of the broad, intense performance style, which resists modulation, and the material itself, which comes directly from the idiom and spirit of the townships' (Jones 1994: 69) might have seemed little more than a vacuous and peripheral entertainment to white theatre-goers unused to this form of production, 'for the great number of black South Africans...going to see a Kente play every six months when one was in town was the only diversion from the less electrifying, less ennobling dramas of daily existence, and an important point of reference in their lives' (Jones 1994: 69).

In what ways was Ngema's theatre different in this context to the township theatre idiom already popularised by Kente then? As I shall shortly demonstrate, the differences were few. This would not be alarming were it not for the fact that between the time that Ngema worked with Kente (1970s), and the post-apartheid period during which we approach Ngema's more recent work, distinct socio-political shifts occurred. One imagines that, at the very least, this would have necessitated a re-examination of the values and methods of the "township theatre" aesthetic as an expression of the concerns of post-apartheid South Africa. Further, I argue, Ngema's seeming disinterest in revising or changing his approach to making theatre after apartheid means that his work remains bound within the conventions established by the township musical format, and is not conducive to a critical examination of South African society since the transition to democracy. Insofar as his view of the world is one rooted within the history that precedes it, I argue that the way in which he deals with history does not and cannot facilitate the complex interrogations of historical meaning that the distinctive conditions of post-apartheid South Africa demand. The ideological message that his work thus transmits comes across as increasingly anachronistic. What departures he does make from the territory mapped by Kente so many years before, are significant for their addition of a specifically ethnic tribalist sentiment to what was already a reductive imaginary of the "authentic" location of black, anti-colonial and anti-apartheid identity.

Ngema produced several noteworthy productions that fall within the ambit of this dissertation's discussion of the style and content of his post-liberation, popular "historical" work. These include alongside the afore-mentioned *Sarafina II* (1995), *Magic at 4am* (which although produced in 1993, falls into the crucial period of détente between the apartheid state and the broad-based democratic dispensation that would come to power after South Africa's first democratic general elections the following year), *The Zulu* (1999), *1906: Bhambada* (2006), and *Lion of the East: Gert Sibande and the Potato Boycott* (2009). These works similarly attempt to describe a state of South African-ness that is at once about the experience of being black

in the context of colonial/apartheid South Africa, whilst attempting at another level to fashion an idea of South Africa beyond the official end of apartheid. These productions were as much about a new South African identity (on the cusp of liberation in the case of *Magic at 4am*), as they were about constructing the very terms upon which such an idea of belonging to a liberated South Africa might be negotiated after the fall of the apartheid state. As such, they are critical points of entry into the debate on Ngema's employment of the "township theatre" aesthetic as indicative of a specific politics of post-liberation South African identity, and contextualise the chronological development (if any) of Ngema's politics from his earlier apartheid-era work to now. The question I want to answer is firstly, the extent to which Ngema's work delivers – if at all – a consistent ideological message if any at all; secondly, the methods by which it does so; and thirdly, the extent to which both the message and the methods of its delivery describe, maintain or disrupt the political imaginaries of a post-liberation democratic "national public". Ngema's work is, in these senses, exemplary of "authentic" postliberation national democratic citizenship produced through the "nationalisation" of the black body and its signification of the public mission. To the detriment of this same public mission, Ngema's style simultaneously rehabilitates the very same neo-colonial scriptural practices from which it aims to recover "national history".

Even at my least suspicious, I must admit that it has become increasingly difficult to extract Ngema's more recent work – that is, *1906: Bhambada* and *Lion of the East* – from the larger recent national politics that defined South Africa's politics in the run-up to what was hailed as the most important general election in post-democratic South Africa. There appears to be a distinct – perhaps fortuitous – alignment between Ngema's theatrical narrative choices, and the stated political objectives of the ruling ANC-led Tripartite Alliance. Consider that the recent split of the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), into "pro-Zuma" and "anti-Zuma" factions most notably at its 2007 National Conference in Polokwane (and later, a further schism that saw the formation of a new party, COPE, the Congress of the People), can in no small part be attributed to the nascent Zulu ethnic nationalism that stemmed from utterances made during Jacob Zuma's rape trial hardly a year prior. One of the chief bones of contention in the so-called "court

of public opinion” that ran concurrently with the trial was Zuma’s highly problematic claim in court that his actions were indeed sanctioned by Zulu culture. T-shirts branded with the legend “100% Zulu-Boy” became synonymous with the pro-Zuma crowds that gathered outside the court-room, and were as iconic to the trial as the kangas that women wore in protest to the claim that the alleged victim’s attire on the night of the alleged rape (a kanga) was – culturally – a signifier of sexual availability. While the trial was essentially a criminal proceeding in which former deputy national president Zuma was being tried for allegedly raping a woman more than half his junior (a close family friend to whom he was a “father figure”), the proceedings also quickly became about cultural perceptions of women within South African society in general, within Zulu culture specifically, and the perception of power blocs within the ANC whose affiliations were seen to be increasingly fractured along ethnic and class lines.

The Mail&Guardian was one of many newspapers that noted the strident tribal-ethnic tone that the trial brought to national politics at the time. In an online editorial, the paper quotes a member of “The Friends of Jacob Zuma” who

...outside the court, explained the trial thus: “The ANC was established by Zulus, then the Xhosas took over and now they don’t want the Zulus back in the seats. So they brought the rape charge.” Zuma has deliberately used tribalism in his fight, undermining the ANC’s century-old anti-tribal philosophy.

Zuma’s assertion that his action was guided by Zulu culture was widely condemned as a smokescreen. Sexism, tribalism and leadership failure on HIV/Aids were grotesquely combined in his defence of unprotected sex – that it was against Zulu culture to leave a woman in a state of arousal. (Robinson, Tabane & Haffajee. *M&G Online*, April 28 2006)

The court’s decision (based on the evidence, I am compelled to add) cleared Zuma of any wrongdoing. But the die had already been cast, and Zuma’s presidential ambitions (for both the ANC presidency, and that of the country) were irrevocably yoked to a problematic rhetoric of Zulu ethnic nationalism: while the fate of the man would henceforth be tied to a broader public debate on the merits and value of “customary” tribal practices in the context of the South African Constitution’s unequivocal commitment to gender reform, this broad debate focussed attention specifically on Zulu

customary practices and their perceived antagonism to national constitutional imperatives related to the role of women in society.

And at yet another level, while the effort to install Zuma as ANC president at the subsequent ANC electoral conference in Polokwane (2007) was at its surface an internal battle between Zuma and Mbeki (then the incumbent) for the presidency of the ANC, it was also predicated on the perception that “the soul” of the ANC had been “hijacked” by the economic class interests of an upwardly mobile, neoliberal black elite (typically identified as Xhosa) with the collusion of white business capital, to the detriment of the interests of the working class labourers (largely identified as Zulu) that form the core of the unionised labour voting bloc consistently delivered by unionists in support of Zuma’s presidential nomination. Although expressed in far fewer words, the sentiments of the Jacob Zuma supporter quoted in the Mail&Guardian citation above speak to this very perception.

It is also interesting here to note the centrality of the body and performance in this debate: the violation of the alleged victim’s body as a culturally sanctioned act, coded in the traditional performances expected of men and women within Zulu culture; the “culturally-specific” reading of bodily disposition suggested by codes of costuming and their signalling of sexual availability or otherwise; and the notion that the rape trial was anything other than the adjudication of culpability in the violation of an individual’s sexual autonomy, i.e. that the complaint was in fact only a “performance” by the complainant, geared at scuppering Zuma’s political ambitions. What was being contested, it seems, was neither the juridico-legal question of rape nor fitness for presidency per se, but the limits that constitute an acceptable norm for behaviour that expresses the national character. Inscribed through specific productions of the protagonists’ bodies, the populist rhetoric of class, race, ethnicity, and gender imbricated in this context to produce two distinct and antagonistic bodies: at one extreme, an effeminised non-Zulu body with apparent allegiances to neo-liberal white capital interests; and at the other, a hyper-masculinised Zulu body and its apparent claim to working-class political power and cultural autonomy. The former was literally performed

by the women who wore kangas as a sign of solidarity with the victim outside the courthouse, and who were dismissed as anti-Zulu (and anti-Zuma) even though many were themselves Zulus showing their refusal of the stereotype upheld by the “100% Zulu” t-shirt-wearing Zuma supporters. Conversely, the latter was performed by the body of Zuma himself, as he strutted and danced on the same courthouse steps: the now-iconic “Mshini Wami” dance at once invoked his history as leader of the ANC’s militant wing, Mkhonto weSizwe, and suggested, perhaps, the legitimacy of the new “struggle” he now faced. Zuma, in this sense, can be seen to be the very picture of the Gramscian “modern prince” to which I alluded earlier.

While Zuma’s ascent to the ANC presidency effectively mooted the question of Zulu ethnic tribalism at the level of party politics, the notion of tribal custom is one that would still need to be sold effectively to the general electorate if dissenting public opinion is any true indication. Granted that while the case above came some ten years after the moment of transformation (the point at which this assessment of Ngema’s post-liberation work takes off), the themes to which it speaks – far from being irrelevant to my discussion of Ngema’s political outlook in terms of nationhood and belonging – speak to the same fundamental issues that I will describe as being central to any understanding of the way in which Ngema’s work positions contemporary black identity (read “authentic South African-ness” in Ngema’s world as I shall argue) as rooted in a conspicuously Zulu tribal history of anti-colonial endeavour.

Of the practitioners whose work deals with South Africa both before and after the fall of apartheid, Ngema’s oeuvre perhaps most comprehensively spans these two descriptive points in the recent life of South Africa. It is also reasonable to speculate that he has possibly also received – if not the largest – certainly the most significant amount of arts funding from the South African government since 1994 of any practitioner to date. Commissioned by the new ANC-led government as an educational initiative to deal with the issue of HIV/AIDS, *Sarafina II* alone was funded to the tune of 14 million rand from the public purse (Pearson 1996).

More recently, Ngema made the history *1906: Bhambada*¹ as part of the centennial commemoration of the Bhambatha Rebellion of 1906, also known as the 1906 Poll Tax Uprising. This production came with a 7 million rand price tag, paid by the Office of the Premier in the KwaZulu-Natal legislature, who commissioned the project (Media Statement, Office of the Premier 2006). If public spending is any indication of the significance of a project in terms of national political objective, Ngema's work is on these terms arguably the most significant in South Africa's post-apartheid black theatre...as Brink (1997) suggests in the comment cited earlier in this chapter, it would seem that money has no small impact on Ngema's more recent production choices, and that it is the ANC government's money (which is, not to put too fine a point on it, the tax-paying public's money) that has been most "right" of late.

The Provincial government of Mpumalanga Province recently awarded Ngema a R22 million commission to produce and direct a musical entitled *Lion of the East: Gert Sibande and the Potato Boycott*. The musical commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the 1958 Potato Boycott led by ANC activist Gert Sibande (Niren Tolsi, M&G August 19th). Commentators were quick to point out that the Potato Boycott, as arguably important as it may have been in the history of South Africa's anticolonial endeavours, is certainly not sufficient motivation for such excessive expenditure on a single theatre project, given the inherently limited funding available to South African theatre practitioners in general. In an interview with the Mail&Guardian's Niren Tolsi, spokesperson (for the Mpumalanga Department of Culture, Sports and Recreation) Sammy Mpatlanyane stated that

government "was not apologetic" about the big budget production [...] because it would act as a "huge springboard" for local theatre talent while preserving and promoting local history and culture.

... "It is the department's mandate to protect, preserve and showcase the traditions of the province...Gert Sibande is not just a local hero, but also a national one who advanced our struggle. If we don't tell the story, who will?" (Tolsi. *Mail&Guardian*. August 19th 2008)

¹ The title of the play is itself a reclamation, correcting the anglicised 'Bhambatha' that is the popular version of Bhambada ka Mancinza's name (Ngema, in Von Klemperer, *The Natal Witness* December 13 2006). I will use the Anglophone spelling Bhambatha for the purposes of referential consistency (as this is the spelling still in use in the majority of texts cited), except where referring to the title of the play specifically.

Mpatlanyane's defence of the project is instructive: that it would not only promote and preserve local history and culture in line with the department's mandate to protect, preserve and showcase the traditions of the province, but that Sibande was a national hero "who advanced our struggle". Mpatlanyane's claim suggests two things. Firstly, that the stewardship for the history of "our struggle" should be, and is, a mandated official practice. The second suggestion is that to question such (arguably) profligate spending on the re-membering of "our struggle" is to deny history its due: if we – the owners, the people born of that history – do not witness this supposedly crucial moment in the history of our nation, no-one else will (or conversely, that the *wrong* people will). These two sentiments highlight a critical feature of what I am arguing: the centrality of history in the construction and maintenance of an official idea of the unified nation – the "we" in Mpatlanyane's statement – and the ways in which the revision of "official" history at once unsettles the prospect for easy recuperation from a past that is too often easily forgotten whilst at the same time attempting to ensure the continuity of the "new", liberated version of history that is supposed to supplant it. Note also how Mpatlanyane's sentiment echoes Mbeki's ambiguous description of the authentic measure of African-ness, and underlines simultaneously the reclamation *and regulation* of the authorship of the memories of resistance to colonialism and apartheid: the African Renaissance and its suggestion of a metaphysical national/regional rebirth is founded, it seems, on this complex notion. It is as much about the ideal of liberated expressions of national character as it is about the regulation – or limitation – of the power to so describe the nation.

In this context it is interesting, then, to think of the revisionist objectives of productions like *The Zulu, 1906: Bhambada* and *Lion of the East: Gert Sibande and the Potato Boycott* and the similarity of their language and discourse to the historical principles of Epic Theatre discussed earlier. If Brecht regarded the role of a political historical theatre as rooted in the purposeful alienation, reframing and repositioning of the historically familiar in order to provoke new ways of thinking about the present circumstances of a particular community (Oesmann 2005; Kruger 2005), then the objectives of theatrical

historicization in these terms are not dissimilar to those that underpin the commissioned objectives of these productions. However, in Ngema's oeuvre, histories tend to be unproblematic and unambiguous in their sentiment, whether in service to an anti-apartheid agenda, or the nascent Zulu tribalism that especially pervades his later work.

In the case of *1906: Bhambada*, the government-funded commemoration of the Bhambatha Rebellion, the intention was to restore and commemorate Bhambatha ka Mancinza's contribution to South Africa's anti-colonial/anti-apartheid struggle as a validation of the history and ideals of a liberated South Africa (Media Statement, Office of the Premier 2006), and is similarly reliant on the re-inscription of the historical from a new perspective (i.e. that of a liberated South Africa). In both cases, history is proffered as a lens through which a truthful idea of the present might be glimpsed. The critical difference is that while Brecht's methodology insists and is dependent upon a critical and reflexive stance to the historical – the surfacing of ambiguities and contradictions that underlie the meaning made through the strategy of historicization – the latter form is necessarily concerned with a less critical new “official” notion of national history.

Take for example *The Zulu*, whose entire premise is built upon the restoration of Zulu oral history - a communal memory “archive” constructed through the repetition of heritage narratives that “define” Zulu nationhood and which invokes a vision of the continuity of its traditions and values - to contemporary public memory through an invocation of ancestral memory. It is the “sangoma” narrator's incantations which bring forth the ancestors through whom the story is told. The suggestion is that the play is in its own right a “divination”, a reading of “signs” in order to find counsel and guidance for action. Significantly, the story that then issues forth – the guiding message from the spirit realm – is framed from within the context of the Zulu struggle against both colonial and apartheid oppression. From the energetic “township” dance arrangements to the aggressive but dignified militant precision of the traditional war dance performed by loincloth-clad traditional Zulu “warriors”, the uncompromising elegance and pride of the Zulu bodies that are displayed in the making of this story suggest a vibrant and indomitable living community. The only white character in this play is a clear parody of

“the colonial explorer”: played by a black actor dressed in ill-fitting khakis and Panama hat, the comical delivery of the orotund nasalised vowel sounds of his speech emphasises this effect. In comparison to the feisty, “happy natives”, the clumsiness and vulgarity of this character underscores the absurd destruction wreaked upon this community by *others like him*.

Similarly (besides the sangoma who narrates the story) the women in the play are little more than staging and musical decor: while they dance and sing enthusiastically, this story is about men and their conquests, and the women celebrate that story without playing any significant part in shaping the “history made real” on stage. Bearing in mind the problematic marginalisation of women within Zulu cultural history and its gendering of the right to autonomy and agency as problematically rehearsed in the rape trial I described earlier, this is potentially reinforced by the marginalisation of the women within the bounds of this play. Women are offered only as titillation for the hyper-masculinised legions of nation-making warriors whose stories and bodies drive the narrative forward.

As with all of Ngema’s other work, the “township theatre” aesthetic is the primary stylistic convention within this production as well. Even though the venues in which his productions are now performed are largely all professional, “proper” theatres, the vocal production developed to combat noise in informal, packed township venues still persists. The actors’ performances never slip into nuanced vocality, nor, it appears, is there any attempt to produce character interiority through the juxtaposition of physicality and text: all his characters are painted in broad physical strokes, and supported by a brassy vocality that rarely dips in energy and volume from one end of the production to the other.

If we recall that *gestus* is fundamentally a way of knowing through the body’s unconscious significations *in relation to* their disruption or reinforcement of intended meaning, the physical production of meaning within this play resists modulations that could offer contradictory readings, for example, of the Zulu’s own empire-building conquests. The glistening, proud bodies of the militant Zulu warriors unproblematically

ennobles and validates Zulu military culture, but does not offer any means to ironically reflect upon the fact that the Zulu were themselves colonisers and conquerors of other nations prior to the arrival of the British in Southern Africa.

While the play is certainly an attempt at producing an alternative account of history, its production of knowledge rests on an uncritical spectacle of historical events – overdetermined by the deliberate depiction of acts in a sensational manner that arouses a quick, intense emotional reaction – and reduces the play to little more than an ethno-pornography. It is not dialectical (as Brecht would have had any meddling with the historical frame), but didactic, because it encourages reception that, although enthusiastic, offers no inroads towards critical reflection on the historical moments presented.

I reprise a sentiment expressed earlier – in light of the ANC’s internecine battles pre- and post-Polokwane described earlier and Jacob Zuma’s ascendancy to the ANC (and now, the national) presidency – the “official” nation, it appears, has become one that can only conceivably derive from a history that reflects the traditions and practices of the Zulu tribal power bloc that now holds sway within the ANC. That the uncritical commemoration of Zulu history could be seen to be in service to this agenda is not an unreasonable speculation. Further, irrespective of whether deliberate, opportunistic, or entirely unconscious, the endorsement of this new Zulu ethnic nationalism certainly makes this kind of work an attractive target for strategic public funding because of its reinforcement of the status quo developing within ANC party politics.

Whilst it is possible to read the ruptures in the ANC as indicative of the communist-allied labour movements’ dissatisfaction with the neoliberal economic policies of Mbeki’s government, or similarly, increasing dissatisfaction with the aloof intellectualism that characterised Mbeki’s centralist approach to governance, both these readings reify the ethnic discourse I have noted. One of the principal effects of apartheid’s political economy – and the migrant labour system that was produced and maintained through its division of labour and territories – was the creation and maintenance of a working class significantly composed of uneducated labourers whose cultural background was rooted in

the rural homelands from which they came. In this sense, the larger “class” struggle that could be seen to have thus also characterised this factionalism within the ANC, reinforces a politics of identity rooted in questions of belonging to tribe, community and land in order to mobilise opposition to the blind-siding (whether perceived or otherwise) of labour movement concerns in the pursuit of urbanised, bourgeois capitalist interests.

Recall that *Asinamali!* and *Sarafina!* were made at just the right time to take advantage of defining moments in the ongoing struggle against apartheid: the former, the rent boycotts in Lamontville (Balme 1996: 75); and the latter, the student uprisings in Soweto (Ngema 2008). Ngema’s capacity to seize on the mood of the moment meant two important things. Firstly, that his theatre was typically responsive to emergent trends in the thought and practices of the anti-apartheid struggle. Secondly, this meant that his brand of theatre was, ultimately, sacrificing its principles of artistic autonomy in favour of admittedly sexy but transient political moments to which it could never fully commit. It takes no magnificent stretch of the imagination, then, to find a plausible case for “opportunistic” politics in Ngema’s post-liberation work, given the ANC’s problematic insistence on Zuma’s fitness for the presidency, and the repositioning of public opinion on the matter that this has necessitated. If (as it has turned out after the Polokwane putsch and the recent, much-anticipated general elections) the ANC – and through its governance, South Africa – is currently being led by a Zulu man (with all the complicated questions his ascendancy has brought into play), there is a strong case to be made for viewing the funding that Ngema has received from the ANC-led government as motivated by this shift in the perception of Zulu culture within South African public politics.

It is my argument here that Ngema’s work, especially *The Zulu, 1906: Bhambada* and *Lion of the East: Gert Sibande and the Potato Boycott* (by design, coincidence or both), has become in part the veritable theatrical bearer of this new political mission. And lest we forget, *Lion of the East* is specifically framed by its validation of worker-class politics – the plight of “the common people” within the context of apartheid South Africa’s agrarian economy. This is not dissimilar to the rhetoric that defined Zuma’s meteoric rise to the presidency, which proffered Zuma – with his lack of formal education, and

grounding within the “grass-roots” politics of the liberation struggle – as the saviour of working-class interests that (arguably) had been abrogated by the neoliberal, capitalist-class interests mandated by Mbeki’s presidency. On these terms, the historical moment on which the narrative of *Lion of the East* hinges is advantageously positioned within an emergent centre of populist South African politics.

In a theatre premised on the objectives of uncritical commemoration, what implications does this have on its usefulness as a form of historical-social intervention or critique? This is a key question of this chapter. If ideas of nationhood, community, belonging and identity can indeed be constructed through the mediation of history as a meaning-making act in and through the present, in what ways do the strategies employed in a “national” theatre like that of the Bhambatha commemoration make meaning of contemporary South African nationhood? And if we return to the body as the place in and through which such significations are made, what bodies – and by inference, identity or idea of the South African community – does such a theatre suggest are constitutive of “authentic” post-liberation South African-ness? The Brechtian model – as an exemplary model of dialectical theatre-making – provides here a critical comparative alternative through which we might analyse this specific question in relation to the body as both product and producer of significations of meaning over time within such a context. In this way, I hope to recapture (without glossing over the critical differences) some of the fundamental insights that the methodology rehearsed in Ngema’s work shares with the dialectical methodology I argue should lie at the heart of a progressive theatre that deals with the archive of colonial and apartheid history. The assertions made here in relation to Epic Theatre as an effective model for counter-narrativising history through both conscious and unconscious operations of the body will be tested in relation to other work in subsequent chapters.

But why the concern with history and memory? How does the historical figure into the production of postliberation nationhood? Filip De Boeck (1998) suggests that the enduring concern with ‘memory and processes of remembering (and forgetting)’ in the context of post-imperial, post-colonial and post-apartheid literatures has been ‘aimed at

producing alternative ways of taking the historical into account: *memory as moral knowledge*...or memory as local forms of historical interpretation' (De Boeck 199: 39, emphasis in original). Following these assertions, I focus here specifically on Brecht's concept of *gestus* – 'the corporeal signifier of relations among people' (Oesmann 2005: 192) – and *historicity* as alternatives to Ngema's production of the 'moral knowledge' and historical interpretations that underpin a new, collectivised democratic nationhood (De Boeck 1998). It is also in this sense – in the subsequent chapter – that I will pursue a progressive counter-ideological strategy of embodied re-membering as a critical epistemic break with the assumptions upon which re-inscribing Blackness in/as the post-apartheid nation has typically relied. Where Ngema's work produces uncritically "historicized" narratives of black suffering and anticolonial endeavour as the locus of postliberation democratic nationhood, the methodology at work within the productions discussed in subsequent chapters disrupts "nationalist" assumptions (in terms of the mediated bodies through which communal history is signified, and the imagined nationhood of which this communal history is constitutive) that underpin the production of meaning within the post-democratic context. Simultaneously, it calls attention to the contradictory processes and products of such meaning-making through a deliberate repositioning of body as the primary location of the "knowing" that is produced through its repetition of meaningful acts.

My argument here is that, insofar as *1906: Bhambada* is framed specifically by its concern with history from the perspective of formerly marginalised black subjectivity – the depiction of Bhambatha kaMancinza's quest for black liberation from colonial oppression, captured in the narrative of the historic Poll Tax Uprising that he led – it is a study of some of the problematic ways in which post-apartheid theatre has attempted to take the historical into account as a meaning-making strategy. In the same way that this chapter's introduction thematised a notion of the black body as trope, I argue that Ngema's theatrical choices have done little to advance the ideals of the South African liberal democratic imaginary qua constitutional principle. The unproblematic construction of black identity that drove the anti-apartheid discourse of his earlier work is problematic in the post-liberation context for reasons that I have already touched on.

That is, in his attempt to account for the history of a “Black” subjecthood – and through it to assert a new notion of authentic nationhood – he merely replicates the same ‘racist power at work in colonial and apartheid taxonomies’ (Chipkin 2007: 102). The production of an official body national that locates authenticity in a racialised notion of anticolonial endeavour reinforces, in Chipkin’s terms, the distribution of authentic belonging along hierarchic lines (2007). In this sense, the immigrant, homosexual, female, non-Black, non-Zulu citizen may be seen to belong, but always less so than the native, heterosexual male Black Zulu citizen on whose terms post-liberation authenticity is constructed. In both cases, note again the distinction of “Blackness” as a tropic imaginary of resistance and post-liberation non-white identity, and its obliteration of the specificity of other marginal identities both during and after apartheid.

There is, however, limited scholarly research on Ngema’s work – especially after 1994 – for various reasons. I have tried, here, to give an impression of the work under discussion by referring to what limited material there is available – in media reviews and journal or newspaper articles – about the staging of the productions, especially the ways in which the bodies deployed therein signify an idea of South African-ness rooted in the history of black anti-colonial struggle, i.e.- the “new” nation as essentially “Black”. What extrapolations I do make are premised on the clearly identifiable style in which he typically works – the problematic township musical form and its anachronistic allegiance to the tropic imaginary of the liberation struggle – and which it is evident from the readings that are available, is the same at work within the most recent examples of his more popular work, *1906: Bhambada* and *The Lion of the East*.

Having said that, I am also less concerned with a deliberate report of the production’s narrative than I am with the fact that the work was produced under government commission in celebratory validation of a history of anti-colonial struggle (Media Statement, Office of the Premier 2006). It is the agenda of nation-building, and the way in which a specific form of nationhood can be inferred in the production’s subject matter and its treatment in light of Ngema’s convention that I am pursuing here. I would have excluded this lamentably brief analysis from the dissertation entirely, were *1906*:

Bhambada in particular not such a singular example of theatre deployed literally in service to a particular nationalist (and, as noted, ethnic tribalist) agenda. Note also that this commission's objective is not dissimilar to the brief given to Mark Fleishman and Magnet Theatre by the District Six Museum for what would eventually emerge as *Onnest'bo*, one of the subjects of discussion in the fourth chapter. The two treatments, though they operate within similar territory, could not be further apart had they been chalk and cheese.

...And That's Showbiz, Folks!

Ngema's *1906: Bhambada* was commissioned by the KwaZulu-Natal legislature in celebration of the 2006 centenary of the 1906 Poll Tax Uprising led by Inkosi Bhambatha ka Mancinza. Considered – alongside the emphatic defeat of the British at the Battle of Isandlwana – as one of the seminal moments of black resistance against colonialism, it was noted in then president Thabo Mbeki's 2006 State of the Nation Address as an historic moment that the country would celebrate as a part of its ongoing restoration (and re-interpretation) of the black history of South Africa (Media Statement, Office of the Premier 2006). Curiously, and apparently with no sense of personal irony whatsoever, the unnamed author makes a point of noting that among the historical achievements with which Bhambatha is credited, he and his generals 'invented' guerrilla warfare during this campaign. Why we would make this claim as a point of national pride is a topic that could fill another dissertation entirely, but it is interesting here for the way in which notions of violence and the "body national" are touched on later in this dissertation [see Chapter 4]. The claim is of course untrue as it turns out because (as Margaret Von Klemperer so archly points out) the Spaniards² apparently beat us to that one a good century prior to the Bhambatha uprising.

² The term *guerrilla* is in fact Spanish, meaning "small war". The term was coined during the Peninsular War of the Napoleonic Wars lasting from 1807/8 until Napoleon's final defeat in 1814, in reference to the style of combat adopted by the Spanish forces in resistance to occupation by the French (The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology).

It is edifying to put Von Klemperer's quibble in its fuller context, because it reveals several important aspects of the production's tensions at once. She writes:

The history of what happened in 1906 is currently under the spotlight with traditionally accepted colonial accounts being treated to a reassessment. It is fertile ground for new interpretations, and a theatrical telling of the story is a way of bringing the events to a wide public, particularly school audiences, who have been getting reduced ticket prices.

No-one would go to *The Sound of Music* for an account of the Anschluss, or to *South Pacific* to trace the history of the war against Japan. The theatre has needs of its own, but calling 1906 "edutainment" does put an onus of accuracy on the show. So I was a little startled to be informed that the events of 1906 saw the invention of guerrilla warfare, Bhambada "using it before Che Guevara". The northern European tribes who fought the Romans or the Spanish patriots who fought Napoleon's forces and gave their name to this kind of warfare might also be surprised.

...There is no doubt that on the night I saw the show, the large audience loved every minute of the three hours plus - this is a story that resonates. Ngema has used his trademark mix of song, dance, spectacle and burlesque action to tell his tale. It is a style that leaves almost no room for characterisation - 1906 *Bhambada* makes for an all-singing, all-dancing kind of history lesson. (Von Klemperer. *The Witness*. December 13, 2006)

In similar ways to the production of bodies I outlined above with reference to *The Zulu*, Von Klemperer's review notes the tension between the revisionist objective of the production, and the ways in which its staging has to attempt to balance the representation of factual information about the event itself with "the needs of the theatre". However, the scale of the production – burlesque, spectacular, over-the-top – makes for a particular kind of engagement that ultimately privileges and celebrates its "trademark form" at the expense of the "lesson" that it is supposed to impart. If the formula that brings this story to life does not depart from that which Ngema has established in previous works of his, then I would venture to suggest that it follows that the bodies in this play (already a war narrative) are also archetypically Black, their celebratory, militant display of Zulu ethnicity marking a heroic, hyper-masculine agency in the face of the British colonial onslaught.

According to the provincial legislature's press release announcing the project, and the publicity materials for the production, the play was intended to fulfil two critical roles: firstly, to commemorate and re-assess an important historic event as an educational and nation-building imperative; and secondly, to do so through the use of theatrical entertainment (Office of the Premier, KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Government 2006): "edutainment" in a word. The tension between the two is evident, even as Ngema attempts to bridge this gap. The narrative is a joining of a fictitious love story with the national events and context of the Poll Tax Uprising (Von Klemperer 2006). This is not a new strategy in Ngema's work, and echoes Brecht's concern with historical framing. However, unlike his earlier work, the focus appears to have shifted entirely from within the bounds of a restorative history, and appears to be geared purely at entertainment. This is an assertion that, although seemingly bold at its surface, is given credence by returning to Ngema's earlier, more "committed" work, and its seminal break with this thematic and stylistic treatment of the Bhambatha uprising.

Sarafina! (perhaps more honestly, given its context at the time), although essentially about the infamous Soweto student uprising of 1976, approaches this historic narrative from the perspective of fictitious high school pupils, in light of the central role that they took in that conflict. And in that production too, the style was popular "township musical", relying as much on its nod towards the events of June 16 1976, as it does on the infectious (but essentially peripheral) entertainment of its mbhaqanga and gospel-inspired libretto teamed with energetic dance routines (Ngema 2008; Smith 2008). When viewed in terms of its aesthetic treatment – the bodies that signify in the production – we can discern a very specific idea of blackness at work within the production. If, in Brecht's conception of the term, the mimetic activity at work within *Sarafina!* posits any idea of South African-ness at all within the context of anti-apartheid struggle, it certainly does not offer the critical counter-positioning that is such a central element of Brecht's dialectical theatre: there is no potential for critique or alternative truth-making in this production because the social recognition that it demands of its audience was specifically aimed at reinforcing black identity and social life as resistance to the status quo of apartheid South Africa.

According to Ngema, *Sarafina!* was always intended to be a political piece of theatre, amongst the primary objectives of which was ‘to protest the [state of] emergency and honour the contribution of the children of South Africa’ to the liberation struggle (Ngema 2008: 33). However, in reproducing such a notion of the social life of black people through energetic song and dance as a signifier of resilience in the face of oppression, Ngema unconsciously recapitulated the very misapprehensions that underpinned colonial and apartheid writing of the black subject. That is, the physical language – the kinesic codes (Balme 1996) – of the production’s significations represented an idea of black society that merely reinforced the notion of the black subject as eternally effervescent, the energetic “happy native”, irrespective of circumstance. Resilience as a validation of transcendental strength in the face of oppression (whether as dialogical truth or “objective” historical fact), in this sense could not be equated to meaningful resistance, because the “likeness” through which *Sarafina!* identified and was identified by the black public it sought to represent and address, was not counter-ideological or disruptive of the conditions under which such blackness was experienced under apartheid practice: it merely legitimised an apathetic acquiescence to such circumstances.

Ngema, in the words of Janet Smith, is

the Andrew Lloyd Weber of resistance...[who] brought spirit fingers to police violence and a rent strike in *Asinamali*. Gymslip gyrations livened up the second act of *Sarafina* considerably, as did the delirious foot-stomping in ... *House of Shaka* ... undoubtedly the most illuminated showcase of how to take politics, like a sad song, and make it better. Or not. (Smith. *The Saturday Star*. August 23, 2008)

In both *Sarafina!* and *1906: Bhambada* then, it seems that the central “message” in the productions stands at constant risk of being overwhelmed by the stylistic choices for its presentation, as the “edu-” becomes subordinate to the “-tainment”. The debate about the ability of popular forms of representation meaningfully convey distinctly political subject-matter has been a long-running debate in the arts, and one of such density that to presume there is a “correct” answer could only be a fantasy. Theatre clearly cannot stand alone in the case of such an educational imperative as the sole vehicle for transmitting

that information. This is perhaps the reason why the play was accompanied by an intensely researched educational support package for schools (Office of the Premier, KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Government). Mark Fleishman and Magnet Theatre's *Onnest'bo* was treated in the same way: it, too, was accompanied by educational support materials researched and designed for use in schools (in this case around the theme of forced removals during apartheid) (Fleishman & Davids 2007). This approach allows for the combined dissemination of both factual information, and its interpretation through the dialogical truth-making of theatre (Fleishman & Davids 2007; Hutchison 2005).

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, critically, recognised and defined four categories of truth that drove its processes of interpreting and in many cases, making judgements about, the cases brought before it. They provide a useful vocabulary for describing the vagaries of “truth” as a fixed concept in its own right. The first of these was *factual information*, whose ‘concern was directed to findings on particular incidents involving specific persons’ (Foster, Haupt & De Beer 2005: 22). The second form was *testimonial truth*, which granted that personal accounts of events as they happened were in their own right a form of truth aimed at ‘restor[ing] both memory and humanity’ (Foster, Haupt & De Beer 2005: 22) through the process of narrativising or storytelling. The third form of truth recognised by the TRC was chiefly reflective in nature: *social or dialogical truth* as an ‘experimental truth created through debate, interaction and discussion’ (Foster, Haupt & De Beer 2005: 22). The fourth kind of truth was *restorative or healing* in nature, and drove the TRC’s amnesty hearings. This form of truth was predicated on the power of the public acknowledgement of wrong-doing as a route towards healing both victim and perpetrator (Foster, Haupt & De Beer 2005: 22). These provide a useful contact-point for understanding the ways in which the theatre we discuss here is specifically engaged in the making of dialogical truth: a form of truth not necessarily bound by fact, but by the re-assessment of “fact” as perceived through the lens of the person who represents, or in a more loaded sense, as perceived by and through the *agent* of such a re-telling.

To frame truth in this way is intriguing, because while truth is about establishing “objective fact” as false or otherwise, we are at once confronted by the undeniably subjective position from which those “facts” emanate, and through the lens of which any such notion of truth is necessarily constructed. The performance of truth, then – verisimilitude read as an authentic arrangement of the postures, gestures, vocal intonations and dispositions that purportedly equate with honesty – is inextricably linked to the material body that narrates or performs the narrative from which “truth” might arise. Purportedly “objective” truth is framed always, in this sense, by private realities. Narrative, historicised subjectivity in the Brechtian idiom is exactly that: a dialogic truth-making that works by alienating its audience from the conventions – the “authoritative” context of the “authoritative” truth – in order to provoke a more nuanced interpretation or reassembly of the symbolic systems upon which these are founded (Oesmann 2005; Kruger 2004). Dialogical truth in this sense is congruent to (and manifests as a product of) the dialectical truth-making of Brecht’s theatre.

This is why Epic Theatre was such a potentially provocative medium for resistance, because it allowed discursive intervention in the apartheid master narrative’s assumptions of “objective truth”. In a context where “nuance” had largely given way to militant agit-prop (Hauptfleisch 2007; Kruger 2004; Sitas 1996), this was a critical way of retaining and emphasising the “humanity” behind liberation rhetoric: it does not allow for intellectual detachment (Oesmann 2005). And the political imperative also meant that it was alright if this criterion was not met: extraordinary circumstances necessitated and sometimes even demanded extraordinary generalization. But where to, then, in a postliberation context that demands nuance in order to retain the perceived legitimacy of its socio-political formations and “plural” identity? Ngema’s methodology in some cases clearly fails the test. The rigidity of its aesthetic systems, and the ossification of its “truth-mission” around a central, collectivised idea of “the people” does not suffice: it descends to platitude and stereotype, seemingly out of an inverted sense of noblesse oblige to the vulgarity of what its new patron demands.

What the theatre can offer here, then, is its very ability to move cold analytical reason through an embodied representation of the lived contexts of that history. But as I have argued, the embodied subjectivity of the historical figure being represented is fashioned in specific ways. In the previous chapter, this was discussed in the notion of trope, and the ever-imminent threat of the disappearance of the material body *as historical agent* in different performative praxes. In short, within a particular historical context, agency is just as critical a concern in performance as it is textually, and is one of the key concerns of Brecht's methodology (Oesmann 2005; Kruger 2004). For while history in the Brechtian idiom is about finding points of identification with the audience being asked to engage with a piece of Epic Theatre, it is as much about distancing that audience from the immediate (and potentially volatile, unreasoning emotional response) to the themes that are being explored through that lens.

For Brecht, attempting to create an illusion of reality on the stage was counterproductive to a theatre concerned with interrogating social truths because it encouraged the passive reception of meaning. Instead, he suggested that a more critical interrogation of notions of truth and meaning could be achieved by forcing the audience to engage with the very nature of performative re-presentation, allied with the critical distance afforded by hindsight. For Brecht, the principle of historicization demanded of the actor that s/he play incidents as historical ones, 'unique, transitory incidents associated with particular periods. The conduct of the persons involved in them is not fixed and 'universally human'; it includes elements that have been or may be overtaken by the course of history, and is subject to criticism from the immediately following period's point of view. The conduct of those born before us is alienated (*entfremdet*; made strange) from us by an incessant evolution' (Brecht 1964: 140). Rather than producing one fixed truth, this instead opened up history and its assertions to a variety of other possible – and often, antagonistic – interpretations and meanings, and located the audience as the agents of that meaning-making (Oesmann 2005; Kruger 2004).

To make meaning of the present in this sense arises not from the letter and word of a play's text then, but from the dialectical truth made through the audience's critical

relation of a particular play and its themes to their own individual or larger group contexts (Oesmann 2005; Kruger 2004). It could be argued, of course, that the memories of colonialism and apartheid are still too fresh in South Africa's collective psyche to allow any critical distance at all. In these terms, Ngema's work already appears at its surface to be antithetical to the kind of truth-making offered by the Epic form because its historical frame is not distant enough. However, this assertion is challenged by examples in the South African theatrical canon that have managed just that: Junction Avenue Theatre Company's *Love, Crime and Johannesburg* (1998) is a prime example of the Brechtian form in action as a tool for critically interrogating the post-apartheid South African nation (Kruger 2004). In this sense, the employment of the historical frame *as critical distance* is immaterial in arguing for a more nuanced approach to interrogating post-liberation South African-ness, and the measure becomes more one of aesthetic ... the way that the (re)production of that history reinforces or destabilizes the ideals of "authentic" post-apartheid nationhood. I argue instead, then, that the key difference between Ngema's style of theatre and the more critical Epic or dialectical form is not its historical distance, but the very way in which its re-presentation of history and historical agency is constitutive of a notion of "authentic" South African identity and belonging.

In the case of *1906: Bhambada*, the production's imperatives are as much celebration as they are about re-interpreting South African history (and thereby asserting the values and identity of post-liberation democracy). However, as an educational exercise that is simultaneously expressive of the democratic national imaginary, there is an onus of responsibility to the ideals upon which that notion of democracy is founded. This is an injunction to which we *can* hold this practice: the degree to which it produces a notion of South Africa that is both indicative of and responsive to the heterogeneous dynamics of its citizenry as an inclusive act of nation-building. Its measure can be found through an interrogation of what in Brecht's terms constitutes the *gestus* of its significations.

Von Klemperer's lamentation that Ngema's is 'a style that leaves almost no room for characterisation' (Von Klemperer 2006) is a particularly significant point in terms of my debate then. The play's particular stylisations preclude critical engagement of the

subjectivities that are being framed as the agents of its historical narrative: the exercise defeats its own purpose by becoming just another surface representation, without prompting the deeper interrogation of the educational material that is at the centre of the larger project (Von Klemperer 2006). In *Sarafina II*, this task failed entirely, and without the supporting documentation to at least account for the glaring gaps left in the knowledge being disseminated through the play's "educational" message on HIV/AIDS (Pearson, 1996), the exercise was, finally, only an education in governmental fiscal imprudence.

It is also interesting in the terms of this dissertation to explore the reasons for the choice of narrated subjectivity in light of the role played by women – and foreign nations that hosted South Africans in exile – in the liberation struggle. Where, for example, are the government commissions for the re-assessment of the role played by struggle stalwarts like Ruth First? The canon stretches rather thin in this regard. But look back to Ngema's earlier work. In spite of its obvious shortcomings, *Sarafina!* was at least conspicuously framed from the perspective of the young black woman from whom the play draws its title. However, Sarafina's character is a figment of Ngema's fictionalised account of events leading up to the Soweto uprising, and is not based on a specific historical female subject (Ngema 2008). Women, black or otherwise, do not feature significantly in Ngema's oeuvre both before and after the end of apartheid. Again, if the act of representation addresses or recognizes a particular public even as this community of like bodies is called into being, the national public with which Ngema's work is concerned is marked by specific absences.

Thus, while it is clear that Ngema's work is predominantly concerned with Blackness, it is even more specifically concerned with Black, Zulu *men*, and locates its historical narratives of liberation in a hyper-masculine black body. In *1906: Bhambada*, the female protagonist is deployed within the confines of the love story that runs parallel to the main events in the play. As an agent in the historical events of 1906, she is relegated to the most pervasive trope of femininity: a home-maker, who can be viewed only in light of the support she offers the men in her life. This is not to discount the significance of the home

and private lives in the making of South African history. Quite the contrary in fact. Given that apartheid was a practice felt as much at the public, national level as it was at the intimate level of domestic life, it is rather surprising that women are thus represented always in the context of their role in a larger, male-dominated rhetoric of socio-political change.

What I instead point to is the severe lack of material geared towards achieving just this goal at the level of national discourse, other than the lip-service paid to “empowering women” in the new democracy’s political rhetoric. If to reassess history is to empower those who identify with the “social actors” within that revised history, the reassessments funded and commissioned by the government in this regard are largely non-existent. In these terms, the struggle is still mainly seen as something driven by the actions of men, with women in the supporting roles, but never as the agents of change. The case is the same for the many white men and women who offered their lives in service to the same cause, but who are similarly signified as a “tolerable” incursion of white politics on a struggle that was essentially driven by and for black liberation. This latter position is perhaps more understandable though, for the obvious fact that white people were the focal point of official apartheid and colonial literatures. I reprise a question asked earlier in this dissertation: whose liberation struggle then, in light of the re-appropriation of its history in post-liberation South Africa? In the sense I have described it here, its agent has increasingly become officialised as typically not just Black, but typically male, and of the native groupings (especially the Zulu) endemic to the geopolitical terrain of South Africa the country.

This production does not appear to make the attempt in any way to problematise contemporary South Africa. Considering that the seeming integrity of the South African body national is regularly disturbed by the evidence of its own violence (whether gendered, racialised, ethnicised, distinctly politicised, territorialised, or appearing as it so often does at the intersection of these modalities), *1906: Bhambada* certainly offers itself up as a potentially subversive way of critiquing (by way of example) black masculinity, neo-tribalism, racism, xenophobia and any number of the other problematic circuits that

describe and instantiate power and agency in the new South Africa, as well as the colonial systems of power that it clearly does engage with. However, under Ngema's hand in the postliberation context, historicised narrative can amount to little more than a hagiography of the historical subjectivity with which it deals. At its worst, the black body at the heart of Ngema's reclamation of the originary narrative of the new South Africa becomes an agent in an ethnopornography (Muñoz 1999) that relies only on the immediate satisfactions that its representations offer. And further, the potent, signifying presence of the embodied narrative subjectivity it produces, "all jiggling bosom and heaving, chocolatey thigh", recedes even further beneath the weight of its own spectacle.

If we catch a glimpse of the identity of post-democratic South Africa through the discursive "historicization" of this production, it appears only as a chimera of its colonial antecedents. In spite of Ngema's injunction to historical truth-making described earlier in this chapter (and enshrined in the project's commissioned objectives), his work falls into the same stereotypical, deadly representations of subjectivity, and the agency of his characters is abrogated by a tendency to privilege surface characteristics: Bhambhata is delivered as an uncomplicated trope of the native hero, and the narrative's potential for activating alternative historical interpretations of the events in his life under colonialism are obliterated by this overarching imperative.

[four]

**PROGRESSIVE TRANSFORMATIONS:
RE-MEMBERING THE POST-APARTHEID BODY AND/AS SOCIAL CRITIQUE**

*The marked body is not only a physical “site”, a place, but also a visualized
“sight,” a space – a space of the discursive re-enactment of violence*

Rory Bester, *Trauma and Truth*: 168.

...

How, then, might one circumvent the pitfalls described in the previous chapter? Part of the solution lies, as I have already suggested, within the strategies rehearsed in the theory and practical methodologies of Brecht’s dialectical theatre. Another part of this solution lies, I believe, in the broader notions of performance introduced in the first chapter, and how the body functions within the paradigm set out there. I draw your attention now specifically to Harmansah’s arguments for performance and representation as a narrativising mode in which ‘social significations are unbound and fluid, while material bodies continuously come to presence as potent, inexorable, spatialized and spatializing entities’ (Harmansah 2006aI: source unpaginated), as a strategy for capturing similar ideas at work within representational practices that, although not Brechtian or even necessarily intentionally oppositional, nevertheless provide ways of theorising the implications of performance as counter-ideological practice rooted in the dispositional practices of the body within space and time.

Firstly, if we understand *place* as a fixed physical location in the public or private realm, which can be transformed into a liminal, signifying *thirdspace* when symbolic systems are set to operate within its bounds, then to *spatialize* is to engage in this process of discursive transformation. This is not dissimilar to Brecht’s notion of defamiliarization as a critical function of theatrical space within the dialectical model. And further, the body can itself become, through its discursive or non-discursive repetition of symbolic or

meaningful acts at any particular site, the agent in spatializing practices when it is used to transform or reinforce the functions and meanings that we normally attach to that place (Bhabha 1994; Harmansah 2006aII; Harmansah 2007; Soja 1996). Secondly, if the body is viewed in its own right as a location or place, then we can come to understand it as something that can similarly be spatialized. The body can be transformed from an objectively material site of merely somatic experiences into a signifier through its mediation by the space (and the various symbolic and functional systems which inhere therein) in which it operates. In all these senses, the body is never passive: it is always actively engaged in the making of meaning, an agent or “social actor” in the Brechtian sense as described in the previous chapter. Making meaning in this fashion is not a linear process, with “knowledge” progressing teleologically from where it is transmitted to a site where it is received and interpreted or vice versa, but is in Harmansah’s terms, “unbound” and “fluid”, a dynamic feedback loop in which neither meaning nor its transmission is ever stable or fixed, because both constantly change one another. It is the dynamism of *exchange* that becomes important.

I continue in this chapter by exploring other potentially disruptive techniques in terms of the postliberation theatre of South Africa. If we take it as given that theatre is a performance praxis in which its bodies are always discursively directed at an audience, with specific objectives in mind, this chapter will primarily explore the ways in which the theatre’s self-conscious representation of embodied significations in defamiliarized space – or alternatively, the mimetic activity central to Brecht’s concept of *gestus* – can be subversively deployed to generate critical discourse around the notions of authenticity and meaning in the context of a post-liberation national identity. In this sense, I will pursue – premised on a logic of embodiment – the postliberation theatre’s practices of (re)inscription of national identity through particular spatial, temporal and narrative modalities, and how this might be a more progressive strategy for indexing the mediation of bodies as co-extensive and imbricated with discourses of nationhood.

Space, Time and Narrative: A Brief Case Study

Staged as a revised account of the experience and memory of apartheid, the gruelling testimony presented in the forum of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) remains South Africa's most pervasive public memory of the nexus between social politics, bodies and violence. To the extent that such accounts potentially trouble the making of post-apartheid nationhood through a lens of struggle against conditions seemingly produced only by Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid, the ethics of representing trauma under the rubric of emergent postliberation nationhood critically informs the discussion I engage over the remainder of this dissertation. My analysis of *Tshepang – the Third Testament* serves as a critical entry-point to the subsequent chapter's discussion and analysis of Mark Fleishman and Magnet Theatre's productions, *Cargo* and *Onnest'bo*, as shouts from the other side of the monolith of official public history and its practices of inscription. Whilst *Tshepang...* illuminates here some of the ways in which recognising and exploiting the inherent tensions between text, production, and body is in and of itself a critical methodology that can address the problematic ossification of time, narrative and space that often services the ideological impulses of official public meaning-making missions, it also rehearses the techniques of Fleishman and Magnet Theatre's "post-nationalist" historical theatre.

Tshepang – The Third Testament is based on the true story of nine-month-old rape victim Siesie, who was nicknamed Tshepang by her nurses when the sensational story broke first in the local South African media in 2001, and international headlines shortly thereafter. As Adrienne Sichel laments, '[s]adly, this raped infant had become yet another horrifying statistic, yet another mind-numbing fact about a still traumatized country' (Foot-Newton 2001: xiv). Lara Foot-Newton's incisive and disturbing fictionalised portrayal of this event is thus not only an opportunity to reflect upon the event itself, but to theorise the implications of its particular performance of trauma in terms of a broader debate about the making of what, by some accounts, is an irremediably violent society.

Framed within the ethical questions of narrating or representing trauma as a locus of the post-liberation South African national imaginary, I set out with specific questions here:

how do the visual strategies employed in this play potentially instantiate (or alternatively, resist) an economy of erotic spectacle in its treatment of the rape and visualisations of landscape and body? Who or what is implicated through such a representational strategy as embodying, enabling or complicit in the systemic violence that affects this community and others like it? How might this be read as a comment upon the state of South Africa after the transition to democracy, especially in terms of an ethics of nation building? Are there any potential solutions offered?

In an unpublished manuscript, Gregory Homan (2007) suggests that the experience of violence can be located within the South African landscape: that land imagined both witnesses and perpetrates violent acts against the body, both in the world of this play, and the quotidian “real world” upon which it meditates. If, as Henri Lefebvre (1974) argued, the aggressive advance of late-capitalism at the site of the modern nation-state depended on a logic of visualization in which human spatiality bore an increasingly diminished relation to the human body – a signal effect of which was the de-corporealization of social space – then it is the complicity of national political and material economies in the production of local geographies of agency and power which is at stake here, and that a recovery of the body’s materiality at once places at considerable risk of exposure.

Homan’s proposition presents an opportunity to assess the play’s aesthetic negotiation of landscape, violence and the material body as critical interventions in this discourse. I thus intend to take seriously the claim that it is possible to consider landscape as an imaginary of violence, and will attempt to come to terms with the ways in which the symbolic representation of violence in the play confronts these issues through a strategic ordering of visual space that renders certain bodies invisible yet implacably present even as they are seemingly silenced by both the means of representation, and the physical terrain in which they are situated.

It is my argument, then, that the play offers a progressive critique in which public space – as an enactment of particular kinds of scriptural and actual violence upon the feminised black body and its agencies, mediated at the intersection of local and global scales of

political, sexual and material economy – both visualises and (re)secures a raced, gendered and classed frontier of postliberation nationhood. I will thus focus on the play’s staging of landscape, violent trauma and bodies as an allegorical encounter with this production and maintenance of an (in)visible subaltern geography of the post-apartheid South African state. As such, one of my primary tasks is to tease out – in the context of the play’s events – the implications of an economy of erotic spectacle and hypervisibility which problematically distorts and silences (even as it attempts to make visible) the neglected communities at the borders of the South African urban landscape.

Pierre Bourdieu coins the neologism, *habitus*, to connote the habitual state of being that results from a combination of disposition and generative classificatory schemes such as “home”, “language”, “gender”, “religion”, and “community” (Bourdieu 1991). *Habitus*, then, is subjectivity rooted in both physical and imagined spaces that mediate and produce the body’s materiality and interiority. While on one hand it is generative of “identity” (both personal and communal), ruptures with *habitus* – through violence, death of kin, forced migration, illness or any number of conditions that debilitate the body and/or the environment it inhabits – occasion a crisis that is experienced as a dislocation from what is “meaningful” in the world (Bourdieu 1991; Bhabha 1994).

If, as Kenneth Foote suggests, ‘[f]ew events produce such strong ambivalent feelings as acts of violence, and as societies grapple with these feelings...the struggle comes to imprint itself on landscape’ (cited in Bester 2002: 165), then the suggestive images of the home and community in the play’s *mise-en-scène* represent more than just the physical location in which the narrative’s events are located. Read under the rubric of Bourdieu’s *habitus* alongside Foote’s assertion, these images index a complex human geography whose gendered, raced and classed bodies are constructed by (and intrinsically rooted in) particular enactments of violence at the intersecting spatial scales of home, community and by inference, nation. The rupture with *habitus* in this case is not only rehearsed in the egregious crime of the violent rape of a baby then, but occasioned by the circumstances that produce this neglected community in the hinterland of the new South

Africa: in this place where ‘nothing ever happens’ (Foot-Newton 2005: 19), life is rendered meaningless; the rape of a baby can go unremarked, just as the rape of this community goes unremarked in the daily lives of the South Africa beyond its impoverished borders. The town and its homes, then, are more than just a location, but also signify and produce a particular way of being in the bodies that inhabit it.

It was clear to both Foot-Newton and Gerhard Marx (the play’s scenographer) from the beginning of the project that they wanted to explore the notion of the landscape itself as the transgressor in this and, by inference, other acts of violence and brutality. The play would not just be about the body traumatised, but about how the land itself bears witness to and is complicit in this violence (Foot-Newton 2001; Homan 2006). The project then, rather than attempting to recount the factual story of the rape of a nine month-old baby, was as concerned with locating the causes and effects of this trauma within the landscape in which it had occurred. Marx describes how, when exploring the conceptual framework on which they would found the play’s visual system,

Lara’s first incentive was that the landscape was the transgressor. The true rapist was the landscape. One of the earliest points we considered was to turn the landscape into a phallus. We lost that along the way but there was a sense that ownership of the landscape was a kind of phallic thing; the language of who owns the land and who is dispossessed. So the landscape as an active agent was central to the play. (cited in Homan 2006: 25-26)

This is a production that cannot be understood purely in terms of its text, then, but which must also be read through the visual schema of symbols that come to presence in front of an audience in the moment of performance, located within the physical bounds of the performance space, and what is suggested by the mediation of bodies performing within its *mise-en-scène*. Marx’s spatial treatment goes right to the heart of this issue, and the stage is populated with objects whose meanings transform over the course of the production as new associations are drawn, and inform the tensions at work within the narrative’s structure (Homan 2006: 11). Five critical examples stand out in this regard: the tiny bed that once contained the body of the violated and now-dead infant, the loaf of bread, the broom, the pile of rock salt, and the miniature houses (alluded to earlier) that bear mute testimony to all of these transformations as they happen over the course of the play.

Ruth, baby Tshepang's mother, wears a cot-bed strapped to her back throughout most of the play – 'the weight and burden of her sorrows' as Homan suggests (2006: 30) – in much the same way as she might have carried the baby itself. It is at once a symbol of what she has lost, and of the way in which she must bear the memory of that loss with her always. But further, the bed is also symbolic of the complexly interlocked maternal and sexual roles women are expected to play in the home particularly and their societies in general. The empty cot reminds us constantly of the home and the bedroom as the space in which women are pervasively inscribed in this way: it is not only the symbolic site of Ruth's failure of the maternal imperative, but of her continual subjection to the desires of men (which, ultimately, are also the grounds upon which the tragedy comes to unfold).

As Simon narrates the story to us, Ruth is eternally silent. She spends much of the play seated atop a pile of coarse salt which she rubs obsessively into an animal skin as one would to cure leather. The use of salt – a preservative agent – evokes particular associations with memory and remembering in this context: we are reminded of a mother's tears; of salt rubbed into the wound. Informed by the religious iconography that abounds throughout the play, we also cannot help but think of Lot's wife as she turns back to look upon the destruction of Sodom, transformed into a pillar of salt: a backwards glance that renders the onlooker immobile, mute in the very moment of witnessing. And indeed, Simon reveals to us that on the night of the rape, a neighbour, Sarah, hears the child crying and walks into the dark shack to investigate. She strikes a match; catches Ruth's boyfriend Alfred raping their nine-month-old daughter. She says nothing, leaves, and joins Ruth at the tavern, where they continue drinking. Simon reveals later that Ruth, at one point after the rape of her child, had tried to commit suicide, hacking off one of her breasts with the rough edge of a can. But denied this reprieve, she remains forever silent save for the one word she utters at the close of the play: 'Tshepang'.

Like the miniature houses over which the performers tower – but which nevertheless exude a sinister quality of power through their implacable silence – Ruth cannot voice what she has experienced. In this sense, there is a symmetry between the symbolism of

Ruth's muteness, and the symbolic silence of the quiet homes. In one sense, Ruth is an extension of this community: her private trauma is the trauma of the entire community (Homan 2006). And in another sense, it is the community's silence in light of such an egregious crime that allows – and perhaps even coerces – Ruth's own silence. This latter proposition seems bold at its surface. However, if we remember that when the Tshepang story broke in the news, it prompted the revelation of many other similar incidents in South Africa – in Foot-Newton's words, it was 'as if a scab had been torn off a festering wound' (Foot-Newton 2001: xiv) – the logic follows. It was for these reasons that the play was originally titled *Based on Twenty Thousand True Stories* (Homan 2006).

Further, the houses are visually reminiscent of the Reconstruction and Development Programme housing that has become synonymous with the South African landscape: impoverished settlements of identical matchbox houses found typically at the peripheries of more developed urban spaces. This a community on the fringes of the preferred face of new South Africa, neither included nor completely exiled, but always at the peripheries of its wealth, its geographic distributions, and its social identity. It is only through episodes like these – the shocking discovery of the tiny, violated corpse of Tshepang in this case – that catapults places like these into the public eye: recall that Louisvaleweg, where this seemingly unthinkable crime was committed in 2001, was a relatively unknown, barren Karoo town before these events brought the global media bearing down on its inhabitants (Foot-Newton 2001; Homan 2006). And even then, the opprobrium that is then heaped upon them demands that they remain silent, subject to the describing power of a meaning-making apparatus that claims the right to so describe based on its proximity to the urbanised, technocratic, privileged centres of social power.

In this sense, the play thematises the peri-urban landscape as the perpetrator of an altogether different, institutionalised violence on the bodies that inhabit it, in which to be impoverished is a function of, and functions through, the insistence on their invisibility in official public spatial practice. Reviewer Betsy Rudelich Tucker (2006) writes that for her,

The most violent moment in this production is not the stunning symbolic restaging of the rape, but the attack a drunken Simon wreaks on the reporters who have come to lay blame: “This town was fucking gang-raped a long, long, long, long time ago! Shame on us? Shame on you, shame on all of us!” (Tucker 2006: 302)

Simon’s rant implicates not just the reporters in the gang-rape of Louisvalebweg, but points squarely to the implied South African public hailed in the “all of us” to which he refers. Is it our silence as the South African public, or comfort as viewers in the theatre that Simon is critiquing? In either case, watching the play and witnessing the story it brings forth, we are also implicated in the circumstances under which the events portrayed took place: black, white, coloured or Indian, we are all culpable for maintaining the status quo which results in the actual rape.

Perhaps the most potent symbolic transformation in the play is the loaf of bread. It is first used as just that, as we see Simon eating and drinking from its scooped-out middle. Then, later, as the play progresses towards its depiction of the rape, the loaf is set up as an alternative receptacle for sexual penetration. Simon recounts how, as a young boy, he and other boys from the community would visit Sarah, a young girl prostitute, who would lie on her back behind the school toilets, reading comics while a long line of pubescent boys penetrated her one after the other (Homan 2006: 15):

If we didn’t finish in time [*acts out terrible disappointment*] her brother Petrus, for an extra two cents, would let us continue inside a half-loaf of white bread [*happily starts pumping away*] that he’d stuck carefully into an ant heap at exactly the right height [*he ejaculates*]. (Foot-Newton 2001: 26)

Thus, when the play reaches its climax, so to speak, and the rape itself is re-enacted, the symbolic meaning of the loaf of bread in this sense has already been established. It is also of the same approximate proportions as a nine-month old baby, a fact not lost on the audience as Simon uses the blunt handle of the broom to depict the rape, ramming it into the loaf over and over again. The loaf of bread disintegrates until the broom finally tears out the other side. The image has a potent effect on the play’s viewers. Marx describes how

Lara and [he] have often sat and watched the audience at that moment. Men cover their eyes, and that is fascinating because there isn’t any rape on stage. They are closing their

eyes off from an image that is inside their heads, an image that they are making. All we are doing is pushing a broken broom into a loaf of bread but completing that image is an act of the audience member. We are implicating the viewer. The viewer has to imagine the event happening. You hear of those things but part of what makes you numb is your inability to imagine what it actually is. How deep does a penis go into a baby? (cited in Homan 2006: 16)

This is the effect of the play's transformations of bodies into sign, objects into symbolic bodies, and the physical landscape into a metaphor for (and an agent implicated in) the violence of the embodied transactions of the society that operates within and through it: that the audience is always implicated in the making of the play's meaning (Homan 2006). In this sense, the meaning generated is never static, but rather fluid, dynamic, appearing in the relationship between the various contexts in which the production's two bodies (and the conspicuously invisible body of the rape victim) are deployed within the boundaries of the performance space.

The reassessment of space as a means of generating identification (or disidentification in Muñoz's terms, as the case may be) is precisely the kind of spatialised discourse that the historical subject offers as a way of disrupting the mastery of both space and place in hegemonic public-historical praxes. In *Tshepang...*, making sense of the harrowing rape of a nine-month old child is rooted in the relationship between the narrative agents, and the spaces in which they function. The land is an agent in this process of reflexive aggressions, both private and public/national, which both inscribe and are inscribed through the practices of the private body within its confines.

The narrative focus shifts constantly between the private body and the intimate spaces of its operations, and the larger public spaces with which those operations intersect. This is not distant from the national history "re-presented" in Ngema's work. However, the stylistic choices made here seem to offer ways of dealing with private narrative as a function of national politics in a way that does not limit the reading of such subjectivity as arising from and belonging only to one "authentic" public of the imagined community of South Africa. Instead, the very meaning-making process is consciously rendered as a reflexive engagement with narrative subjectivity and agency. In the case presented

above, the performative demands made on the audience implicate us as agents in the making of meaning as well as the events at the heart of the exercise.

Representation in these terms is as much about what is being represented as it is contingent on the audience in order to generate its meaning. The land and its community are implicated in the rape at the play's narrative level through the notions of silence that the play foregrounds; in performance, the representation of the rape is contingent on the audience member knowing the bodies it sees in symbolic form, and through a personal act of imagination that extends them into the act of violation. As Marx suggests, *we* make the rape happen.

The suturing of the private domestic drama (which enables and culminates in the rape), the *petit-récits* of the various characters from the community (narrated by Simon), and the global space into which both of these are drawn (when Tshepang's violated body is discovered) foregrounds the relationship between private and public spaces in both the play and the society that it mirrors. The public domain inevitably impinges upon the private, and is particularly implicated in the ruptured continuities of culture, community, family – and in many cases, in the literal and figurative dismemberment of bodies, whether enacted as personal violence, or the institutionalised violence that makes and marks the Louisvaleweg community.

As a strategy for dealing with the complexities of making meaning of the post-colonial/post-apartheid South African condition, the employment of complex public-private significations in performance generates a heterogeneous space of ambivalent, contradictory significations which on the one hand, implicate Ruth and the community in the rape, but on the other, provocatively frames their lives as a consequence of the inequitable distributions of agency and wealth that characterise the postliberation South African nation-state. Rather than recapitulating the vacant, disingenuous axioms of the “Rainbow Nation” imaginary of the national public, the evident self-consciousness of the aesthetic coding of performance in *Tshepang*... troubles both the terms and mode of address that hail such a public into being. The play attempts, after a fashion, to seize the

apparatus through which values are coded, and re-imagines them in a way that prompts a critical examination of the ways in which we make meaning of our imagined community, the history from which we have collectively come, and the history we are constantly in the process of making (Carklin 2002; De Boeck 1998; Taylor 1998; Homann 2006).

Two things become clear to me in this reading. The first of these is that the proposition from which I began – that landscape can be read as an imaginary of violence - certainly follows when one analyses the visual strategy at work in *Tshepang...* in terms of the forces that have shaped the particular spatial and human geographies over which the play traverses in its negotiation of the scars of a traumatic episode in recent South African memory. The second, which takes off from the first, is that the optic of space and landscape, when manipulated, crafted and staged with the kind of rigorous attention to detail and nuance that marks this particular production, can produce a startlingly compelling visual allegory for the world from which its symbolic systems are drawn. If the measure of an ethically sound staging of trauma as narrative relies on the provocation of critical enquiry as well as some measure of affective encounter that does not reduce the telling to a one-dimensional pornography of display, then *Tshepang...* is unequivocally successful in this regard.

However, even though *Tshepang...* works to significantly reposition the terms upon which we understand historical agency as rooted in the shifting dynamic between the intimate spaces of the private body and the larger public space that it mediates and is mediated by, its centralisation of textual authorship is an issue that still remains. The performative power of this work is attributable finally to the textual world of the play's narrative, to which the aesthetic treatment of its world is responsive. I saw an isiZulu version of *Tshepang...* – translated as *uThemba Lethu* – long after the original production, performed by different actors in a different language even, and very little changed about it: the content and form of its significations of meaning was the same. The material presence of the performers on the stage is not significant in and of its own right. In this sense, the play could potentially stand alone as a theatrical text, to be revisited and re-performed at different times by different companies under different circumstances

without losing what makes it such a singularly powerful rendering of the South African condition. And this is not a failure per se. But under the conditions in which I am pursuing embodied public practice in this dissertation, this particular point is critical.

If one of the critical sources of inscribing power is still rooted in notions of agency, and the agency in theatre is fundamentally dependent on the agencies described in the author-performer relationship, then in *Tshepang...* agency still resides primarily in the authors of the different works, and distributed to a lesser extent through the bodies of the actors who perform the characters, finally to the audience that must engage and make sense of the work. In Ngema's work, he is the mercurial auteur in the truest sense, with a definitive style that is imprinted in all his work, often to the detriment of the historical subjectivities with which he chooses to engage. In the style of work represented by *Tshepang...*, the other elements involved in making meaning through public performance practice are brought to the forefront. Marx's spatial and properties designs are as much a part of the critical strategy at work within the play as Foot-Newton's generation of the textual-visual world of the script for which he effected those designs and to which textual world all significations remain beholden. But if the performers in both these works are involved in the meaning-making process by way of their mediation of the script and its spatial world on the stage, it is only within the limits of what their "characters'" respective subject-positions conceivably allow.

[five]

**THE TRAFFIC OF SIGNS:
“CARGO” AT HOME IN A WORLD OF THINGS**

Initially, I had presumed when I began researching this dissertation that this was the conclusion to which I would be driving: that Fleishman’s work, in the context of historiography and inscribing nationhood as embodied praxis – was the apogee of contemporary South African theatre’s response to the thorny issue of nationhood and belonging. In my analysis of Fleishman’s work, then, I intended to describe what I have come to believe is closest to what we could possibly call an “authentic” construction of the national body. I reprise here again Mbeki’s notion of authentic nationhood described in the second chapter: ambivalent, polyvalent, and dynamic. Firstly, the work draws on the techniques I have already described above, and subverts dominant discourses and practice by deploying a complex register of public and private significations at both its textual and performative levels. However, unlike the foregoing, where the construction of the body still relies on the narrativised (and thus, predetermined) body of the author’s limited textual/visual world, the return to the performer as agent is the endpoint of this argument. That is, in Magnet Theatre and Fleishman’s collaborative historical works at any rate, the centrality of the material body of the performer to the respective productions’ meaning-making is the one strategy that sets it apart from the territory already described.

My argument is that as soon as performance is framed as a politically efficacious revision of historical subjectivity and narrative, it must always rely in some part on what is known through the evidence that is available. However, I continue here by adding that the critical break with the kind of methodology rehearsed in official historiographic praxes occurs at precisely this point: where what is known only becomes part of a larger discussion of *what is knowable* (Barthes 1977). We can safely agree that there is a limit

to this in terms of history: in other words, what the archival record (however problematic) will show. In this sense, there is also a limit placed on the author in historic work through what they can “safely” ascribe to the historical subjectivities with which they deal while still retaining some measure of accuracy. In the cases presented above, the performances are certainly self-referential, and rely as much on the audience’s awareness of the artifices of performance as they do on the material that they deploy within the performance’s own world.

But this is not merely an issue of whether self-reflexive performance is the way forward in this debate. Nor is the answer to be found in making “highbrow” performance art that dispenses with the pleasures of viewing entirely in its aim to intellectualise the processes of interpretation. I return to the central argument of the second chapter here in defence of my position: that, as Oesmann (2005) suggests, whilst we can ascribe a significant portion of performative meaning to the material circumstances described and rehearsed in the politicised world of the play, the meaning signified and read in the dispositional practices of the body within the space of the theatre is always relational, and contingent on the unconscious significations that underlie the process of social identification. This cannot be controlled, and is instructive of how a dialectical (in purer Brechtian terms) or contrapuntal strategy (as examined in the cases above) in the theatre ‘rehearses that which it actually attacks. It caresses ideology by adding history rather than using one ideology to demolish another or to shape history’ (Oesmann 2005: 45). This “caress” emanates from the unconscious behaviours of the body (its habitual practices in Connerton’s term) and it is the relational truth that arises from a reading of these embodied gestures that “adds” history – the embodied knowing that readily subverts the authority and transmission of whatever ideology such history purportedly represents.

Barthes’(1977) arguments on agency qua authorship are instructive to my attempt to come to terms with this obvious epistemic break between historiographic practice (which traditionally, has always been “readerly” and thus “fixed” in Barthes’ terms), and the kind of historicised performance that I am arguing towards as progressive national public practice. In the same way that Barthes’ arguments (at this point in his literature, largely

post-structuralist in bent) favour “the death of authorship” in the stricter sense in which he applies the term, my sense of the work that will be discussed here is that it immediately resonates with Barthes’ notion of a “scriptor” as the location of meaning-making in text. That is, an agent whose only real power is to combine pre-existing texts in new or different ways (Graham 2003). The audience or “reader” is in this way enabled to imagine multiple possibilities of meaning, because meaning no longer relies on the notion of an “author-God”, but in the multiple possibilities opened up by their active reading of the text outside of such a notion of scriptural authority in the first place (Graham 2003). In similar ways to the dialectic, “readerly” texts constitute, after Bhabha and Soja, the *thirdspace* introduced earlier in this dissertation – a heterogenous space of hybrid significations that produces oftentimes contradictory or ambivalent meanings, and provokes critical reflexivity by inaugurating particular crises that destabilise the very notion of authority (Bhabha 1994; Soja 1996). To return to Chartier, it is the agency that inheres in the act of reading that is crucial in making ‘connections among practices and representations’ (Harmansah 2006b: source unpaginated) in the context of history as a location of nationalist ideology instantiated through specific embodied meaning-making strategies.

Recall for a moment Taylor’s theorisation of *archive* and *repertoire*: if the model of knowledge-production that we are attempting to destabilise in the context of postliberation nation-building is the seemingly stable archive of apartheid history, and theatre as embodied performance praxis is necessarily always *repertoire*, it is interesting to conceive of staging *the archive itself* as a productive way of potentially countering its hegemonic authority. This is, after all, the claim that Ngema makes with respect to the political efficacy of *The Zulu, 1906: Bhambada*, and *Lion of the East*. However, as his work unfortunately shows, the repertoire is no panacea, and may in fact serve only to re-circulate problematic claims to the very same notion of authoritative truth that secures the archive as an enduring record of the official past. The significant difference between Ngema’s approach to history and the approach explored hereunder, then, is not the way in which archival memory is de-centered as authentic historical truth; rather, it is the claim that is made to a notion of “authentic” historical truth in the first instance, and the manner

in which the presencing of the historical in the bounds of the performance is mediated as merely an interpretation amongst many other possible interpretations – and thus always open to contestation and debate – or as an alternative authoritative claim.

It is my proposition that in the same way that Barthes's "scriptor" can only re-assemble what is already known, this too is the fundamental principle upon which the work of Fleishman and Jazzart Dance Theatre relies, and is less-than-accidentally congruent with the dialectical theory and practices of Brecht's theatre. In their specific mode of historicised meaning-making, meaning arises as much out of the assemblage of "fragments" that constitute the narrative itself, as it does out of the re-assembly and "reading" of these fragments by the audience. Unlike the work discussed prior, it is not the author and his/her *characters* that are responsible for assembling the archival fragments that typically comprise the threads of the narrative in the work described below. It is always, first and foremost, a performing body in the contingent moment of re-presenting, whose significations are read through the tension between what they cite, what they intend to convey, and what they may also unconsciously suggest. The resulting, collective assemblage of fragments and signs may produce an entertainment of sorts, but the methodology that produces it nevertheless troubles knowledge as well as the knowledge-making enterprise. In this sense, there is no definitive claim made to a location of historical truth: rather, multiple truths are held in productive tension with one another as multiple voices, bodies, histories, places and texts are cited, hailed and embodied in the thirdspace of the production.

"...You hear that? That's me. That's us. We are all here."

Placed dead centre of the cavernous stage on which the performance takes place is a giant cargo box of the sort one might find in an illustrated encyclopaedia of the history of colonial trade...or on the set of Jurassic Park. It is a wooden monstrosity of a thing crisscrossed by steel girders, with hawsers attached to each of its four top corners. Around it is a moat of water about two metres across, and around that

again, a border of muddy earth of approximately the same dimensions. There are no masking flats, and we can see technicians buzzing around the peripheries of the performance space. There are no attempts to hide the mechanics of the stage: the labours of production are as much a part of the staging of the play as the many narratives that are brought forth throughout the performance. The opening sequence of the play tracks three ships – miniature models suspended in the air above the crate – as they journey towards what we will later learn is the port of Cape Town, some time during the period of Britain’s settlement of the Cape Colony. The interior of the crate is revealed – the forecourt and facade of a Cape Dutch-style colonial home, in front of which the entire cast is arranged. As a manifest of items contained in the holds of various ships is read by the two narrators, each performer steps forward, and uttering his or her name and place of origin, relinquishes their shoes before exiting. Presented against the manifest of household goods brought to the colony by ship, they too, it is suggested, are a cargo – commodities for sale, owned and consumed. This is the theme upon which the entire production is premised.

Throughout *Cargo*, notions of home and the private are foregrounded. Home space – familiar and private – is transfigured through the act of performance to signify the larger social environment in which it exists. Note that the set itself is literally a colonial home built inside a box, “pre-packaged” as it were, for consumption. So too the bodies that are deployed within this context, for it is through their negotiation of this territory that the play makes the connections between public and private life apparent. It is in light of this specific theme that I approach *Cargo* below as a personal account of my interaction with the work and its themes. In order to frame the production in the specific terms of this debate, I will attempt as best I can to accurately describe and analyse my experience of the actual performance and the ways in which its treatment of history troubles the notion of “authenticity”, and thus suggests a progressive ethics of making post-apartheid South African nationhood and the notions of belonging that undergird it.

My description will focus on three distinct structural “movements” in the production as illustrative of the methodology, effects of this treatment. However, while the following is

an analysis of specific moments from within the play, it is also a contextual viewpoint from which I will consider a range of issues as similarly thematised in the company's other major collaborative historical work, *Onnest'bo* (2002). The structural and thematic continuities between these two works at one level demonstrate the ways in which performance can be used to interrogate the authority of "official" history through the deliberate subversion of its scriptural practices and ideological assumptions. At another level, tracking this methodology across different productions is instructive to my argument that embodied knowledge-making is the key theme of Fleishmann and Jazzart's specific approach to using theatre and performance as an efficacious social-historical intervention. I attempt in this way to catch a glimpse of the various ways in which we might consider this dialectical construction of historical truth as being constitutive of a more nuanced idea of the "authentic" South African nation. Further, I attempt to capture the ways in which such an idea is generated through an interrogation of the complex relationship between private and public social significations: the familiarity of the intimate spaces of the body and home as both condition and product of the larger public space(s) in which they necessarily exist.

This production is not based on any linear narrative, and it becomes clear that this is a critical point to consider in terms of the meaning that the performance generates as a whole: disparate fragments of story that do not offer a coherent "well-made" narrative, but which generate alternate forms of relational truth through their proximity to one another within the bounds of the production. Refracted constantly through shifting registers of temporality and spatial scale, *Cargo's* representations are at once always indeterminate, and offer at best an unstable notion of inferred meaning or truth. Jennie Reznick and Faniswa Yisa (the "narrators") largely operate within the same temporal frame as the audience. They are clearly "of our time", and move through the same world that we do – the same *place* as ours certainly – even while the *spaces* that are created within the production span an entire history of ideas, relationships and meanings that do not necessarily co-exist with (but critically inform) our own experience of contemporary South Africa. In this episodic compilation of different vignettes that we are presented with, we journey through several stories: a mother who commits

infanticide; male slaves who escape the colony and live as outlaws in the bush surrounding Cape Town; a community and its social rituals (enacted in a sequence that harkens back to the birth of *goema* and the Cape Minstrel tradition); and many others. There is no narrative cohesion between these stories, but as the narrators mine the seam that connects them, we begin to perceive the connections between these seemingly disparate episodes and our own time: these are the many places from which we as a people have come.

Cargo can be broken down into three movements distinguished by their introduction and development of specific seminal themes. The first movement generates the metaphor of home and body in relation to land and community that runs through the entire production's critique of the history of slavery. It is characterised by the attempted organisation of incongruous historical fragments into meaningful historical "truth", the fantasy of narrative coherence and stability that this presumes, and establishes the body as a meaning-making device within this context. The second "movement", recalling Bourdieu's notion of habitus, emphasises the disruption of meaningful social relations within space and time, and the gradual destruction of the physical body is both metaphor for and product of this destabilization of "natural" order – a metaphysical illness or death of the communal body that results in literal, physical death. Through transformations that fracture the seeming integrity of the body, time and space, a familiar world that we presume to know is made strange to us: we are encouraged to recognise embodied knowledge as the foundation for making "truth" and meaning of this alienation. The third movement suggests that a communal and personal healing can be summoned through the body's witnessing and mediation of such a "dis-membered" or incoherent history. "Cargo" – the leitmotif that links these themes within the play's world – is an overarching metaphor for the various transactions in land, goods, value-systems and people which characterised the exercise of power within a colonial context, and the similar transactions that continue to define our increasingly globalised world.

Item: 2 Porselijne Potten / 2 Porcelain Pots

As the chorus exits at the end of the opening sequence of the play, Reznec wanders onto the stage, describing a morning walk she once took down a beach in Cape Town. On this most mundane of excursions, she discovers a piece of porcelain buried in the rough sand. She tells us of her eager search for more pieces of the puzzle, hoping that she'll find them buried nearby; her disappointment when at first she does not; and then the unexpected joy and frustration as she finds a similar piece. Both are clearly fragments of one larger object from some time long past – each is literally *a piece of history* – but frustratingly, they simply refuse to fit neatly together. The fragments remain inscrutable, beyond her ability to comprehend, refusing to satisfy her need for a “whole” or “true” picture that can only be reconstructed as an ordered system of quantifiably perceivable constituent parts that fit neatly together.

The find Reznec makes is a central theme of the production at both its narrative and structural levels then, because while the play itself structured as a fragmented compilation of different “found” historical episodes, its many narrative strands explore the discontinuity of individual, family, community and national identity schema in both private and public contexts. During Reznec’s narration, two performers dance atop a table in the background. Built around a cyclical physical vocabulary of unstable relevées and barely-arrested falls, the two bodies suggest fragility, uncertain support, and finally – when the one dancer is not caught and falls heavily to the ground – the inevitable collapse and fracturing of even this most tenuous illusion of stability.

In an interview that accompanies the video recording of *Cargo*, Reznec remembers how it struck her at the time that the sand on this beach was not fine and sugary, but rough, full of little stones and debris, “as if this sand had been less broken down by time”. Two things are suggested by this statement. The first is that the fragment she found is perceivable only because of its proximity to our own present moment: time has had less opportunity in which to destroy the object as it presumably does with everything. The second suggestion follows from the first, and invokes a notion of earth/soil/land as

something that has the capacity to retain shards or fragments of the history of which it is literally composed, and that can thus in some sense remember its own past. These fragments must inevitably break down though: they lose their specific shape, texture and colour, eventually becoming so distant in the earth's physical memory as to be indiscernible from the grains of sand in which they remain buried.

We can further infer from the play's structure that making coherent meaning from these disparate parts – “filling in the gaps” where pieces do not fit or are entirely absent – is an act of imaginative interpretation. Given that no historical record could ever truthfully claim to have survived intact over time, piecing its remnant fragments together in order to generate meaning – “writing history” – is also just such an act, especially in the postliberation context where there is a need to reconcile often mutually exclusive versions of historical events in order to create a coherent and communal narrative of “the people”. The historical record is on these grounds by its very nature, entirely subjective: a manufactured story pieced together from disparate fragments in order to recreate what is essentially only an idea of what the past may truthfully have been. On what grounds do we assert it as valid “truth” then?

Reprising the arguments that I have set up thus far over the course of this dissertation, this is a significant critique vis-à-vis the production of an archive of memory under apartheid that gave credence to white colonial authority. Viewed in the context of Reznick's inscrutable fragment, the suggestion of these vignettes is that, on all counts, the historical record, as an assertion of truth, is tenuous at best, an outright fabrication at worst. If we consider this theme in terms of a larger debate on history and nation-making, the attempt to *supplant* one history with another is to engage in a similar process of fabrication, and can produce nothing but an alternative fantasy of history. The national public (signified and delimited in the body of the “authentic” national subject) that is addressed and called into being by the (re)performance of history under such circumstances serves only to reify and re-secure privileged circuits of agency that, at the end, are doomed to failure: individual bodies become the victims as an already unstable cycle breaks, and recuperation is reduced to fantasy.

A second duet echoing the first begins atop the table at the end of Reznick's narration. Its sequence of impulses is the same: the female dancer rises, helped or led by her partner, hovers uncertainly before her body collapses, sometimes from one isolated point, and sometimes all at once. And as she does he catches her, holding her securely before carefully putting her down again. Each time, the women's partners catch them just in time, carefully correct their posture, elevate them back en demi-pointe where they momentarily hover again before collapsing. At its surface, this vignette initially appears to be a simple series of dizzying drops and falls – the repeated momentary fright they invoke – counterpoised against the precision with which they are caught and carefully restored to a shaky semblance of balance before falling again. The physical language suggests a repetitive cycle of fragile breakpoints from which recovery is wholly dependent on the external actions of another – on gestures of compassion.

However, there is a subtle, but unmistakable edge of menace to the way in which the women's bodies are handled. They do not, for example, appear to “rise upwards” of their own accord, nor do their arms operate entirely independently of their beaux's. The moments when the women's balance tips – whether into a violent spin or supported aerial tumble – appears to be precipitated by some deliberate force exerted by their partners. I begin to think of marionettes, or music-box ballerinas...things for ownership or display.

Ina Wintericht – the production's choreographer – explains in an interview that the choreographic principle upon which she based the vocabulary for this vignette was one of fragility, ownership, and support. She wanted these duets to physically evoke the relationship between porcelain as a symbol of colonial domestic life (for example, functional crockery or table-ware as well as porcelain objects typically for display in colonial homes) and the slaves in whom colonisers transacted *as if they were such objects*. At the same time, she also wanted to explore the essential fragility of the body in contrast to its spiritual resilience (the slaves' survival of their appalling conditions, an idea that is itself tested in the play's second movement). These concepts came to light as a physical language of support, in which the suggestion of its cessation or absence might

invoke the constant threat of being dropped, being allowed to fall, of breaking or being broken.

The short text that “narrates” this sequence echoes what is already physically signified through the relationships set up between the bodies in the two duets. Yisa enters, reading an excerpt from a trader’s diary.

Diary of a trader.

Sunday, 29th August 1705.

Today we bought another thirty-two slaves: nine female slaves for cash, while one slave died on board. On our arrival in [Tulier?] Bay, one of our delegates left to inform the king of our presence. We fired three cannon shots in honour of his black majesty.

Tuesday, 30th January 1707.

The trading appeared to be going well. We erected a house to safeguard our merchandise.

Thursday, 10 October, 1707.

Today, one slave has died.

The first female dancer, again precariously balanced on one leg, suddenly collapses. But this time her partner fails to catch her in time, and she falls painfully to the ground. A brief silence. Leaving her there, he quietly exits. Yisa continues reading:

...Thursday, 15 February 1708.

On this day, we bartered one female slave and bought one cow.

Wednesday 12 November, 1708.

The king came to us with twelve robust slaves which we bought. Before my departure, another slave died.

Friday, 9th April 1709.

At daybreak our brave sailors weighed anchor, and soon we were at sail and in the open sea.

Thursday, 20th October, 1709.

In the early morning, we discover that two female slaves have died.

As with the first couple, the female dancer teeters briefly, is not caught in time, and she falls painfully to the ground. Her partner backs away from her still body, and exits. Yisa concludes:

...Sunday, 20th February 1715.

From today until the last day of the month, nothing peculiar has occurred, except that five slaves have died.

That these disparate entries narrate a larger story is possible only through an act of the imagination, through piecing the evidence together. When we imagine that “the one line might continue the line of the other” (as Jennie so desperately wishes of her found fragments) even if the pieces do not fit “coherently”, we are liberated to make an important alternative story in which logical continuity is not exclusively constitutive of the fundamental “truths” that the production attempts to deal with. Through this fractured account of some nameless colonial trader’s daily life, then, we can assemble an idea of the values that underpin this world in whose view the death of a slave is merely “peculiar”.

...In the kraal, eight beasts...oxen...cattle.

This episode is centred around a physically aggressive interaction between male dancers – colonial slaves. At first, two of them prowl, menace, posturing as the others watch. There is a feline quality to their movements, lissom, dangerous, sexy...sustained, circular waving of the arms, with tightly controlled energetic explosions of movement that just as quickly turn into a slow rocking of the body that appears to originate somewhere in the pelvis, radiating outwards with a sense of trapped energy. The rest of the gathered company of men join in: they leap athletically off one another, tumble, push away, grab, pull...

From the very beginning of this episode, the aggressive physical language is menacing, while at the same time generating a frisson of ambiguous sexual energy - exiled to the

peripheries of a world “civilized” by the empire, these men seem at once both dangerous and sexy. Their danced interaction is charged with an aggression born (one senses) out of both the natural territorial impulses that supposedly govern men’s relationships with one another, and the suggested complication of those relations by the disempowerment they suffer at the hands of a colonial social order. With athletic leaps, they rebound off one another’s bodies, run up the sides of the crate, and landing back on the mud, sink menacingly into poses reminiscent of knife-fighting. They circle one another, feint, then rush at one another again, each short sequence punctuated by this breathtaking flight of bodies across the crate’s vertical surface...A physicalization of the danger the fugitive slaves represent to the security of the colonial home?

The entire episode is performed with the cargo crate closed, and its contents (the very picture of colonial domesticity at its surface, but revealed even here in the play as literally just a facade) are sealed off, placed physically beyond their reach. The physical relationship between the performers and the space in which the performance happens that implies a connection between the configuration of space, and the suggested values that underpin its organization into communities of insiders and outsiders defined by the display of requisite behaviours. With each gravity-defying ascent of the crate, it seems that they may just make it over the top, break into the meticulous space contained within. But they never do. The crate remains secure: it is the threat of a breach that sustains this sense of danger, the mythology of its imminence.

The production of the masculine black body in relation to notions of space (the home, the community of the colony) and its pathologisation as a dangerous, hyper-sexualized threat to “civilized” bodies, is captured through a complicated doubling in this vignette. At one level, already referred to earlier in this dissertation, it takes on the proportions of sexual fetish, embodying colonial myths of its supposedly ungoverned/ungovernable virility. At another level, it is the site of an ever-imminent threat of violent penetration and contamination. As an embodiment of physical prowess and ungoverned sexual desire, black masculinity is invoked as a complex and dangerous vector of impurity: it is its very prowess that invites a desire for the physical penetration which threatens to contaminate

the virginal purity of the “master race”. And the thought of any such penetration is simultaneously underwritten, always, by the threat of its violence. And of course, the unspoken suggestion is also that such penetration could only ever be an unwelcome imposition, either because the unwilling (white, female) recipient is powerless to resist the aggressor’s dark charms, or because the charmer is dark, and therefore a natural aggressor who simply takes what he pleases. Two themes are revealed here: again we have a repetition of the values that define the role of women – black and white – within this society, and the values that define black masculinity.

The only time that we ever see the men within the confines of the colonial home-space in the production, is in the guise of the obedient slave: the same performers, only in different roles. I am compelled to question the difference between these different roles. Is there one? Are they not merely the same bodies engaged in different labours of performance in pursuit of specific objectives? The only difference is the proximity of each performance to the perceived locus of agency and power – the degree to which each performance demonstrates the requisite markers which designate its value within the society to which it supposedly belongs. So it is acceptable, in terms of the sacrosanct colonial home, to have black men in service because they demonstrate the requisite domestication expected of them. But once they step outside of that space in which they are accepted, they become anathema because of their supposedly natural impulse towards violence.

At first, this seems unconnected to both the text that precedes it, and the episodes we have witnessed so far. But again, as with the previous sequence, I realise that there is a deliberate repetition of a central image: beasts, cattle, traded cargo, private bodies...the line follows through, even when the story being told logically does not. The men’s dance is Jennie’s second fragment, sharing the same qualities and traits as the first, but which – through an act of our imagination in collusion with the significations made on the stage – emphasises the interconnectedness of the seemingly disparate experiences each describes. This is a strategy that the entire play relies upon, and while the production’s meaning is important, it is just as important that the company is seen to be doing exactly that: to be

reconstructing and making meaning from the multiple perspectives offered by the production's collaborators (the play's cast and production team, as well as us, its audience).

The men exit at the run, leaving one of their party on stage. As the soundtrack fades, Reznick re-enters, and mounts the remaining dancer, hanging from his belly like a baby monkey might from its mother's belly. I'm not certain that this connection is accidental: her partner lopes around the space on all fours in a manner reminiscent of the opening of the previous sequence, and is not dissimilar to the movements one might observe of a prowling animal. During this, Reznick narrates from another journal entry, an account of colonial sexual mores, and the perception of black/slave bodies within this web of behavioural injunctions. She describes how, with "...few settler women taking upon themselves the office of mother," the settlers' children were often placed with the women slaves. This, the writer opines, lays the first foundations for the steady decline of colonial morality because these children consequently become "infected" by the slaves' lack of morality. The possibility that these children might just as easily have been initiated into these dark "mysteries" by the very same "moral society" – from which definition they are excluded by virtue of their behaviour – is inadmissible in her one-dimensional, self-serving perception of the world. It is also the very suggestion made in the vignette that follows.

As this pair exits, Yisa enters on the run, scrambling through another pile of confused papers. Her agitation at not seeming to find what she's looking for has a comical quality...it has become clear to us that the "ordered" narrative we would traditionally expect will not be found, and possibly even that the attempt to do so under the circumstances (a fragmented, disorderly record of events and experiences of our national history) is itself farcical. While this is happening, a chorus member enters upstage, bearing a wooden rocking chair. Like the previous episode, this is another "porcelain fragment" that is revealed by the production's excavation of the memories of the history of slavery in the Cape. And like the vignette that precedes it, it defies our expectation, desire (or even need at this point) for sequential, ordered "narrative". It instead presents

us with another puzzle piece that does not “fit” neatly alongside the others, but which follows in the production’s trajectory of suggested meanings and enriches the various truths we are invited to make.

We learn from two female chorus members have appeared at either end of the closed crate that this is the story of one “Grietjie vannie Kaap” (Katie Jacobs), a twenty-six year old wet nurse. Grietjie rocks the chair backwards and forwards, and as if entertaining a small child in the “cradle”, sings a happy folk nursery rhyme while the two women recede unobtrusively into darkness. Suddenly, she stops in mid-rock and tips the baby out of the chair/cradle. There is a pause, and then an apparent change of mood: contrite, she picks the chair up and holding it to her chest gently coos to soothe the crying child.

There is yet another distinctive change in mood as she gently puts the chair down, and sits with her back facing the audience. Her body begins twisting, thrusting backwards and rolling sharply forwards, each impulse accompanied by a series of repeated gestures punctuated by percussive breaths: an arm scooping out and upwards as if lifting an infant off the floor; hands cupped over a breast and then extended in a gesture of giving; hands gripping the armrests tightly as her feet first shoot out sideways, then walk sharply back inwards to cross tightly over one another; her hands simultaneously sweeping backwards to clasp at the small of her back; an arm wiped across the face as the body sags tiredly to one side. The chair makes a sharp ninety-degree turn each time the sequence is repeated. At the end of the third cycle, she thrusts her body back with her legs spread wide and pants as if in labour, screams, and drops back forwards to sit quietly... as if nothing is amiss.

This entire sequence, with its sharp transitions between images, has a flash-back quality to it, as if jumping between a series of remembered moments. Katie’s story in this way becomes the theme for the similar stories of other women who were forced into this form of enslavement. Further, in similar fashion to the aggressive dance between the men earlier, this vignette thematises the production of black bodies – female this time – in relation to the spaces and labour economies of the colony. Conversely to the men, who

are dangerous and to be kept beyond the boundaries of the colonial home they supposedly threaten, the black female body is marked as domestic property. Nevertheless, as “Katie” begins ministering to what we imagine to be an invisible male figure seated in the chair, the marking of the black female body, objectified and owned like those of the male slaves, is also fore-grounded as sexualised.

While the author of the previous document bemoans the moral state of the colony and ascribes its decline to the infectious deviancy of the slave community, the invisible figure in the chair suggests the dissonance between this view of colonial morality and the reality of its exercise. The familiarity with which “Katie” handles the figure in the chair suggests more than just the “conventional” (if one can imagine such a thing in the first place) servant/master relationship. The form of powerlessness thematised in this scenario is complex. Firstly, Katie is a slave whose body (and its products, in this case, the milk she lactates) is the possession of a colonial master. In another sense, her story also represents the dynamics of power across the gender line both within, and between racial categories: we know that, in spite of the colonial proscription/fear of miscegenation, she is also the object of her master’s unwelcome sexual advances. As a woman of that time, her body is owned in altogether different, but not dissimilar ways: she is the performative embodiment of the power men had (and, it is suggested, all too often still have) over women. In both these senses, she is forced to surrender her physical body to those with the power to describe the limits of the agency she enjoys within the society in which she finds herself. It is not her child, but madam’s that she is rocking to sleep. It is not a consensual affair with a lover that she has chosen (and with whom she might find a reciprocal space of love), but one that is imposed upon her.

It is suggested in this sequence that even though the claim to moral authority seems to be the sole preserve of the colony’s masters, in the privacy of their homes they engage in behaviour that would publicly be considered deviant. We might also infer here that the supposedly wicked behaviour described in the previous vignette is enabled precisely by the ownership of slave bodies like Katie’s; that the appropriate “moral” behaviour to which the journal’s author refers is more myth than fact. Essentially, we are compelled

to witness a vicious double standard at work: to her colonial masters, she is good enough to wet nurse and have sex with, but not considered human enough to be deserving of the most basic freedoms.

As “Katie” picks up the chair and exits upstage, Reznick and Yisa fish pages out of the water, from which they quote:

Yisa: *...Slaves are not permitted to wear shoes or stockings...*

Reznick: *...A slave may not wear a cap unless conversant in Dutch...*

Yisa: *...Slaves out on errands must carry a pass...*

Reznick: *...Slaves may not sing, whistle, or make any other sound at night...*

These examples of some of the absurd and oppressive rules that were used to govern slaves similarly stand in stark contrast to the “moral society” described in the previous vignette. While female slaves may be pillaged in the secrecy of the home, the rules that govern slaves are unforgiving, and deviation from these is met with punishments that vary only in their brutality if the evidence presented later is any indication.

During this recitation, a dancer enters, arms swinging loosely as she turns her hips from side to side like a child involved in some private game. There is a seemingly carefree, girlish quality to the way she moves. The effect of this is that she appears, physically, in stark contrast to the preceding images with which we have just been presented. What follows is perhaps one of the most compelling and poignant moments in the entire production, and leads us into *Cargo*’s second movement.

Item: 2 Emmers Vol Water / 2 Buckets of Water

As the narrators disclose this title, the dancer suddenly launches into a fluid sequence of staggered actions. She recites what sounds like a nursery rhyme as she “plays”, marking each numbered item with a specific action or gesture.

...One for joy. Two for sorrow. Three for a letter, and four for a boy...five for a wish, and six for a kiss...

Yisa and Reznec pick up the rhyme as she walks slowly backwards, the items on this list now denoted with simple gestures of the hand. She steps into the water.

As Reznec and Yisa read from a harbour-master's report which narrates the story of a young slave woman who attempted to drown herself and her four children, the dancer spins violently, clutching at her head, and then staggers across the upstage length of the moat, reaching and clasping as if at something that remains just beyond her grasp. Neo Muyanga sings in the background, 'be good of heart my children, for your liberty will be restored to you and your descendents.' The woman's crisp white dress hangs sodden from her body as she stops, panting, her hands at her waist.

Reznec: Four in number down to the sea, where she succeeded in drowning three of them, and was in the act of destroying herself and the remaining child when she was discovered.

Yisa: A slave woman first hurled her four children into the water, and also herself; and drowned together with her three children.

Reznec: An officer in the 93rd Regiment said he had seen no fewer than thirteen infants washed up by the tides on the Cape Town beach...

Yisa: ...the eldest of these, being a young girl, very luckily hung onto the reeds at the side of the river and thus saved herself.

The dancer repeats the aggressive first cycle, eventually collapsing in the water. With angular contortions of her body, as if being slapped down again and again, the woman attempts to rise from the water, as if fighting herself or an invisible hand that tries to push her under. At moments she stops, staring straight at the audience. A violent sweep of the leg sends water jetting into the auditorium, and she flings herself down, leaps from the water, rolls into the mud. A slow rocking of her body, arms crossed as if not quite holding something...as if *having just held*. She falls over, and in a rapid series of painful contortions on her knees hops sideways, spinning as if hit, then slowly sags to lie on her side. Each burst of movement is punctuated by gasps of breath that become increasingly ragged with the effort. Her eyes again search the audience, defiant, accusatory: we are complicit in this, and there is no fourth wall to provide us with the illusion of separate realities. *You*: that's us, the audience. And again, and again, this transition between

water and mud is repeated, her body at times seeming to will itself beneath the surface of the water (which it cannot do because the moat is too shallow); at others times exploding upwards to stagger with grim determination across the moat; and at others, broken – or breaking – in the mud.

The contrasts between seemingly voluntary and involuntary actions in this sequence make for an ambiguous reading of intention. We are compelled to question the circumstances that would lead someone to want to drown her own children: we imagine that they must be horrific indeed. Are we able, then, to apply the same ethical or moral standards when judging her actions? Given what must clearly be an extraordinarily horrific life, is this merely a brutal infanticide, or is it possible to argue that she was saving them from inevitable suffering? In these terms, what we would initially simply see as murder is also possibly the greatest gesture of love that she is able to make under the circumstances. Ina Wintericht elaborates on this theme in her discussion of this particular sequence:

I felt that this was the most painful story of all of them in a way, because if you would... kill [your own children] rather than have them live in slavery, and then kill yourself, I think...I don't know what can be more painful for a mother [...]. I don't think you can, or should even, try to illustrate that in a story.

[...] We developed this sequence together where she's sort of bouncing and doing something that repeats itself on this one for sorrow, joy, on this whole thing, because it also has marriage and all these other things...that weren't really possible for the women that were in slavery...they couldn't marry and they couldn't have a date really and all of those things [...] so there's an opposition. [...] It became a lot of other things physically, of longing and all there is there's nothing, of slapping yourself basically because, you know, you're looking for something...

I think the whole solo, if she really did it physically full out, she got so tired that you got yourself exhausted when you watched. [...] It was also more through the body that you want to tell the story than through her acting it.

This last point made by Wintericht highlights the way in which it is through the soloist's body *in performance* that the story returns to us as narrative loaded with its attendant meaning: the performer's body on the stage, inhabited by a “ghost” of one of the many nameless dead referred to in the report, resurrects this memory and *embodies* a physically resonant idea of pain and suffering in all its complexity without attempting to “act out” or literally represent the actual story. So while the text is very clear about the specific

nature of the incident, the broader associations that we make while watching the solo are suggested by the performer's bodily interpretation of the themes that run beneath the surface of this narrative fragment.

Whilst the slave woman's drowning of her children and suicide describes the painful choices that some slaves would have had to make with regards to their personal autonomy, it also introduces an idea of the body as a site of resistance to authority. Though the very epitome of pathos – seemingly unthinkable, *inhuman* even – her choice is also a validation of her ability to “take control” of this one aspect of her existence: she refuses to bend (admittedly, in the most extreme fashion) to the will of those that by law “own” her body and those of her children. But in the context of such intractable disempowerment, what other alternatives exist for slaves to exercise any personal autonomy – to resist their circumstances – whatsoever?

And in direct response to this question, enter “the runaways”: slaves that have escaped from their masters to live as outlaws in the wilds of Table Mountain. This sequence reprises the physical language used in the previous sequence involving the men. It too is charged with an energy that suggests entrapment, relying as much on its show of physical prowess as it does on the suggestion of its restriction. There is, however, an important inversion that takes place in this sequence. Where before, the men's impulses were directed at the inaccessible interior of the crate – the colonial home and the danger they posed to the sanctity of that space – in this episode it is the community of outlaws that is threatened. Given the inhuman treatment to which slaves were subjected by their owners, we have no doubt that capture would result in their brutal punishment at the least, and at worst, execution for this transgression.

It is important that in this sense the colony is a space from which they have not been expelled, but from which they have sought refuge – from which they have exiled themselves. The sense of energy that drives this episode – the very *livingness* of the performers and the people of whom their bodies speak – is undeniably human. In a complex arrangement of interconnected images, the rawness of base physical power is

underpinned always by the suggestion of that which lies beneath its surface. If the society from which these outlaws have escaped is one that would deny their very humanity along with the requisite rights and privileges that this should accord them, then the evidence we see of their very humanness – both in the immediately phenomenal sense, as well as that represented by the conscious layering of images over this most fundamental reality – is an indictment of the values by which humanness is judged within that society. So inasmuch as they are physically exiled from the colony and its community, their exile is also a resistance of the values represented by that community. The idea is that while they are beyond the immediate physical peripheries of colonial authority – ungoverned or ungovernable, and therefore dangerous – they are also outsiders to the values of civility supposedly given of such an authority. Just as they are beyond the colonial/master concept of home (and the insular community it represents), so too are they beyond the bounds of all that is conceivably – to their colonial masters at any rate – “civilized”.

Again, we are being invited here to draw comparisons between the history recorded in the play’s archival fragments and the possible experience of living within the context of those historical moments. While these records offer a glimpse into a world where slaves were considered common property, uncivilized and dangerous (in a word, inhuman), the performances that accompany them constantly subvert this world-view that we now know and accept to have been wrong-headed at best. We are called to question the disagreeable standard of proof used to limit the rights and privileges of those belonging to an idea of “civilized” community through a direct contrast with the typically inhumane means employed to protect this system of privilege from those that do not (and cannot perceivably) belong. While it is suggested as a consequence that these “outsiders” are in fact possibly “more” human precisely because of their exception to the rules that govern the colony, they also invoke a complex notion of resistance that cannot be defined along such simplistic lines. The mother who drowns her child: villainous or tragically heroic? The men living in the wilds of Table Mountain: dangerous outlaws or merely exercising a fundamental right to be free?

Reznek reads, at the end of this sequence, a letter penned by another inhabitant of the Town, who demands that something be done about the slaves' unruliness: apparently they have taken to gathering in large numbers at night to socialise. This in itself, the writer suggests, is dangerous. But more importantly, their gatherings – which involve drinking and carousing around fires – endanger the colonial town because the slaves, in their drunken unruliness, could lose control of their fires and cause the spread of wildfire. Emphatically, the writer declares, 'These people play the master as they please!'

In direct contrast, the entire chorus descends noisily on the stage at the beginning of the subsequent episode. This is a communal gathering of some sort it appears, and they sing and dance jubilantly through a medley of songs that most South Africans would probably recognise as stylistically similar to the *goema* music that forms the core of the Cape Minstrel (for a long time commonly called the "Cape Coon") tradition and its annual street carnival in Cape Town. Once again, we are given a clear contrast between one purported truth and another possible truth that stands in direct opposition to the first. Where the author of the archived text from which Reznek quotes in the episode prior to this one clearly views the communal gatherings of slaves in the public spaces of the Cape colony as a real and physical danger to its European settler community, these dancing "coons" appear anything but dangerous.

Instead, we are shown an "outsider" community whose traditions spring directly from the seemingly inescapable circumstances of forced servitude; whose accommodation of difference disturbs the insular world-view of the Cape's colonists; and whose celebration of living *in spite of* difficult circumstances is in and of itself a defiant refusal of those circumstances. Where the play has up until now largely described its position on slavery through the lens of individual, private experiences (albeit, mirroring the politics of an external world) we are now introduced to a more overtly communal form of resistance to colonialism. Representing the syncretic birth of a new cultural form from the forced collision of cultures in the Cape – the Malay, Madagascari, Rajputi, Afrikaanse and other cultures whose "unique" performance practices fused to create a new and exciting hybrid – is significant because of its suggestion of the heterogeneous society with which we

have become familiar in the “new” South Africa. If we identify anything at all in the play as being an “authentic” expression of the country we now know, this sequence is perhaps the most obvious.

Remembering the sequence with which the play opens – the catalogue of names and places from which the “slaves” have come – this sequence develops on that theme in specific ways. Firstly, the bodies that we recognise, and the performances that we see them engaged in during the *goema* sequence are unmistakably like those of a South Africa familiar to us. Yet, the genealogy of this community is located in the diverse, global locations from which they have all been brought, not the specific geography of South Africa. If these are the forebears who first bore the yoke of colonial oppression and whose histories the official apartheid archive marginalised, this episode recovers a notion of the black body as colonised subject that is in no way limited to any one specific geographic or ethnic imaginary: the carnivalesque celebration of a heterogeneous genealogy as resistance in this specific moment of the play also reflects critically upon the recovery of marginalised history in the broader sense that I have explored it in this dissertation. The postliberation body national produced as prime signifier of an “authentic” post-liberation national public – ethnically marked, raced, gendered and classed – stands in stark contrast to the heterogeneous spaces, traditions, languages and cultures cited by the enslaved body in this sequence. Insofar as a hegemonic ideology of postliberation nationhood is constituted on the grounds of suffering under colonial and apartheid oppression, this scene opens out the imagined horizons of that nationhood, and significantly destabilizes the emergent metanarrative of Black, Zulu, masculinised anticolonial struggle rehearsed in both Ngema’s work and the Jacob Zuma trial. Thus, when the next shift occurs, and we are presented with the first episode narrated from the perspective of a slave, the text’s optic of suffering comes to index *all* bodies marginalised and brutalised under colonialism and slavery.

We are once again within the intimate space of the home. It is night. Upstage, two sleeping dancers shift restlessly; toss, turn, and then spring up, alert as a loud knocking is heard. Their upper bodies heave and pulse rhythmically as they cover, hold or protect

various parts of their bodies in a short, unbroken sequence of gestures that mirror the physical language of the washer-women (in the opening sequence of the production) and “Katie Jacobs” earlier in the production. Reznick bursts suddenly through the doors, waking Yisa whom she joins on the mattress downstage. They huddle conspiratorially, like children who have secretly stayed up past their bedtime night, as Faniswa narrates the next segment.

Yisa: This is not my story. This did not happen to me. I was not whipped by my mistress when my tasks were not done properly. I was not punished by the sentry who herds the cattle into the thick bush of the foothills; I was not befriended by an ancient Khoi man who lived amongst the rocks; this...is not my story; this did not happen to me.

This did not happen to me. I was not seized with mad terror to leave my quarters after dark; I did not exclaim ‘Ag! the slave time was not good...’ ; I was not told to jump up lightly onto the table, stand up straight and hold my head up so that people could see that I’m worth buying, I am not that poor little bandage of living merchandise.

This segment represents a significant shift in the production’s tone. Although it has thus far been an insistence of the play that the seemingly incongruous fragments of story on which it is built *can* be assembled to reveal complex truths through performance – of which the play is itself testimony – this vignette suggests that even this claim might be suspicious. Whilst Yisa’s negation of her knowledge of all these things suggests that we too could never possibly know what it was like to be these people, it also suggests an ironic counter-proposition: that in witnessing these stories that are not hers, she makes them her own and in so doing gives them an alternate life that nevertheless speaks truthfully of the experiences she is trying to understand. As what is represented becomes more abstract, more fragmented, less visually coherent, this incoherence is itself meaningful.

This theme is captured in the deliberate symmetry between the physical dissolution of structure suggested in the composition of images that will define the second half of this movement, and the dissolution of the assumption upon which the play’s truth-mission has been based thus far. Thus, while the focus returns to intimate stories lived privately within the world of the home, the way in which these are represented becomes increasingly fragmented: the *mise-en-scène* is denser, and images constantly intersect,

bleeding through one another. In contrast to the almost lyrical physicality of the first half of the play, by the end of the second movement these images – though requiring no less virtuosity to perform than their forbears – appear more fractured. They deliberately call attention to the fragmented “pieces” of which they are composed, and the possible truths that remain obscured by what we cannot possibly know. The physical vocabulary used to create the images in this movement of the play is not new, but is instead a repetition of the different motifs that have been introduced over its course. Although the language is the same, the way in which it is put together places emphasis on the reassembly of the same things, and the changing contexts that shift the meaning we can make of them. The sense is that we are watching an increasingly disturbed world starting to fray at the edges.

The transition into the darker world that will occupy the second half of this movement is one of the most elegant visual sequences in the entire production. Far upstage, a procession of washerwomen who again bear bundles of white cloth that are simultaneously snapped open, shut, bundled up atop the head, and clutched about the waist in the same fashion as in their initial sequence. But as they move in single-file across the stage behind the crate, the three apertures in the facade of the house (both windows and the door) break the image up into three distinct frames. The effect is of a seemingly endless procession of repeated, identical images. In the space immediately downstage of the doors, a trio of women (Yisa, Rezneke, and “Katie Jacobs”) repeat a long cycle of sustained actions, punctuated by body percussions that match widely-spaced emphases in the rhythm set up by the tablas which play over.

In the foreground downstage, one male dances in solo. He leaps and tumbles, rarely ever still: the quality of his dance is suggestive of the tight, aggressive physical posturing we have come to associate with the male chorus. At the same time, there is an increased urgency to the way he moves. As if in a trance or possessed, he throws himself upwards while straining towards the floor, turning in midair before falling from this leap, arching his body away from the floor towards which he inevitably returns; fast, low turns with arms akimbo, head raised skywards; arms reaching outwards only to shoot back and clutch the body, empty... a flurry of contradictory impulses and confused limbs that

repeatedly intertwine, his body seems to be at the mercy of an unseen force that pulls him in several directions at once.

Over this, Reznick narrates a story about a plague that hits the colony. Things have moved so far from what is natural that the very land itself has become unwell, sick, infected. And at another level of this metaphor, the body becomes ill and dies as a result of a spiritual sickness; so too the community of bodies similarly infected. The actual event of the plague is presented, then, as a metaphor for a spiritual malaise that infects this community, a metaphysical death that foreshadows what will become the dominant theme of the remainder of the second movement: a world in which the actions of its inhabitants – the suggested destruction of whatever fundamental ethics or moral order (real or imagined) we may have been able to ascribe to it – have resulted in literal, physical death.

The procession behind the house has ended. With the windows and door open to reveal a dark and empty space behind the facade, the stage feels unnaturally bare, stripped clean – dead. As if in a dream, Reznick turns as Yisa winds a sheet around her, and reprises the lyrics that accompanied the harrowing drowned slave woman's solo,

*Reznick: Be of good heart my children, for one day your liberty will be restored to you,
and your descendents will live in a circle of brothers, safe from fire, famine, earthquake
and tidal waves.*

Yisa lays her down gently as the last, dreamlike strains of music fade into silence – a shrouded corpse in an empty house.

The body too must eventually die as this semblance of meaningful structure that has sustained it as an allegory for healthy communal life breaks apart, disintegrates. However, recognising this death is also the precondition for healing this rupture with a past from which we continually attempt to make meaning of our own world. In recognising that the destruction of meaningful personal, communal, temporal, and spatial relations is a function of a world turned unnaturally against itself, we can reveal the ways

in which we might begin to recuperate from just such an experience, and create this new world “safe from fire, famine, earthquake and tidal waves...”.

A sharp transition: Yisa pulls the sheet so that Reznec rolls out, and then screaming “Item: Murdeer!” runs off stage. We are unceremoniously dumped in the midst of the first story of this half: a plot to poison the mistress of the house, in which the slaves are the obvious prime suspects. We watch the conspiracy unfold as the two suspects perform a tightly controlled series of “moving tableaux” that clearly suggest that they are not entirely innocent of the plotting of which they (or others like them) are being accused. The pair move quickly and quietly through the space, crouched low, their bodies constantly interlocking in an urgent, whispered argument; a turning spiral of movements in which the one inevitably has to lift or throw or jump over the other in order to hide as Reznec suddenly whirls around. Each of these moments occurs in the middle of some particularly amazing contortion, hands pressed over one another’s mouths: variation on the theme of deliberate silence, overlaid by the sense of real terror that the two dancers simultaneously manage to evoke. Although no precise reason is given for their secretiveness, the complicity of the two is never left in doubt: there is something that they do not want known. The physical images used to suggest this relationship have a staggered, “stop-frame” quality that suggests the truth is hidden in the moments between the frames actually captured – that we never have the complete picture, nor the supposed “truth” it reveals.

Between this, and “13 spades”, the images that are created in the play, as well as the “stories” that accompany them, all have this quality about them. In addition to the poison plot described above, we are shown: a slave who destroys his master’s house in a mad rage; a slave-owner that suspects her husband of having an affair with their domestic slave, who then brutally kills the ‘unfortunate wretch’ by cramming oven-hot bread into her mouth until she chokes (after which she *still* cuts her open); a slave savagely flogged with an iron ring used to tie up horses as punishment for a crime of which he is innocent; a council of lawmakers who sentence four slaves to unusually cruel executions by torture. Even as we are asked to take these stories on board suspecting that we will not arrive at

some grand notion of “a final truth”, the play suggests that to even speak them – to represent – is to make an idea of truth from them. The spiritual affliction is thus driven out, and the body restored back to a semblance of life when its broken pieces are put back together again. To re-member then, is not to recreate these “lost” lives, but is to create something new that can never presume to *actually have been*. Instead, the very notion of a monumental historical truth that can give expression to the perceived continuity of the values, beliefs and aspirations of the community of which it speaks must give way, finally, to the only “honest” meaning that we can make of the past: a personal truth that at best can only reflect upon that which it attempts to resurrect.

In the dying moments of the sequence that transports us into the final movement of the play, a small trunk is brought forward and opened. It is filled with letters.

Item: 13 Graaven / 13 Spades

R EZNEK: *Cape Town, November 14th 2005.*
Three thousand human skeletons unearthed during construction works at Prestwich Place in Green Point. Capetonians braved cold and wet weather to carry the remains from the city hall. They are all in boxes now...

A roll of thunder, and a woman’s body erupts from the midst of the letters that fill the trunk. Sounds of heavy rain falling...she walks her fingers down the side of her ribcage, as if counting the number of bones beneath the skin. Then cautiously, she raps her knuckles against her ribs, producing a flat thumping sound that is clearly audible. It’s rhythm sounds like a heart beating erratically over Reznick’s narration: the official British parliamentary declaration which saw the abolition of slavery throughout the British colonies.

She quickly turns her head, listening intently as if she expects to hear echoes of the sound she has just produced: nothing. She strikes another part of her body, and again pauses attentively, her ear pressed to its surface, listening. She continues this over the dialogue,

tapping different parts of her body, cautiously at first, and then more frantically as the thing she appears to be searching for within her own body – what it betokens – refuses to make itself apparent. It is as if with each rapping of knuckles against her body, she is testing the density of its flesh, attempting to chart the territory that lies just beneath the surface of her skin. And at the same time, I sense, we are being asked to recognize her as solid, as real, and there. The sound of her knuckles striking bone beneath her skin reverberates around the theatre: a neat trick, I think...perhaps it's a trigger mic hidden in her hand? As Reznick exits, she slumps over the side of the box. With her ribs thus exposed, she again walks her fingers over each one, and counts out aloud, 'eleven; twelve; thirteen', but before finishing, she simply collapses.

We have heard something like this before. In the vignette with the drowning woman, the number sequence of her rhyme had ended at ten, after which she told us that 'anything thereafter is forever'. The musical theme that supported that physical sequence is reprised here, and helps us to make the vital link between these two separate episodes. But if this continuation of the same number sequence in this vignette invokes the notion of "forever" that was suggested in the first, what is intimated by this particular representation?

The possible answers to this question are profoundly ambivalent. Is it that the bones of the body whose constituent parts she is enumerating in fact do not last forever, but inevitably die (and with them, the "truths" that have been revealed to us through that body) in the very moment at which we attempt to prolong their attempt at life? Or is it a suggestion that though the physical body may literally die (as she appears to), the evidence of its parts can still sustain a notion of truth – that in death, the body retains some form of life outside of itself? Can the transience of the body sustain intransient, fundamental truths, or is this belief revealed at the end to be a fantasy born out of a desire to understand, to catalogue and order information in our futile search for enduring meaning?

1 Party Oude Skoene / 1 Pair of Old Shoes

This final sequence of the play begins with a playful dance performed in canon by two female dancers. They reprise here much of the vocabulary that we have seen throughout the production. Each proclaims her name and place of origin in turn. But, in an inversion of the opening sequence, these names and places are not those of imagined slaves from different parts of the world, but those of the actual people standing on stage in front of us: people like us. The rest of the chorus enters, and each member performs the same ritual before falling in behind the two women, where they wait with their arms hugging their bodies. The dancing pair simultaneously stops in the same position with arms hugging the body tightly, their heads thrown back by the arrested impulse of the movement that brings them to this point. As one, the entire chorus repeats the same sequence – a shuffling, slow arrangement of simple steps – while still holding themselves...then turning, their arms sweep up and point first in one direction upstage, then the other, and finally, turning back with another flourish of the arm, to point directly at us. While there certainly appears to be no malice in the “*You*” that is implied, the discomfort caused by the directness of this physical accusation is deliberate. And slowly, their hands turn back as they then indicate themselves, “*Me*.” A moment of reflection captured in an uncomplicated statement composed of two gestures: “This is you, me, us...the same people we have always been, and perhaps always will be.”

The silent crowd on stage disperses again, and the two dancers emerge from its midst. Walking behind one another, they repeat a motif that is now familiar, their arms creating angular pictures as they step forward with sharp intakes of breath. The images that are caught in the moments of stillness between each pulsing breath give the illusion of a single person with many arms, a Kali-like figure whose two pairs of arms move in canon: one pair pointing at us while the other spreads sideways as if questioning; one questioning, while the other pair rises upwards as if balancing a bundle carried atop the head; one pair of arms rising to the head, while the other pair of hands is rubbed together and interlocked quickly before being thrown sharply down and sideways as if to shake off water... Their bodies appear intertwined, inextricable from one another as the image of

pointing is repeated over and over again. Though it feels as if it is, this is not the end of the production.

An excited shout breaks the sombre mood. Yisa now speaks in what is sometimes jokingly referred to as “Zunglish”, a colloquial English peppered with Afrikaans, isiZulu and isiXhosa words and turns of phrase. We instantly recognise it as specifically and “uniquely” South African. Showing off her new Chuck Taylors³ to the gathered chorus – a familiar gathering of friends now, in a “real” world completely independent of the play – she tells an animated tale about their celebrated provenance in the USA, and her disgust upon discovering that the label on the shoes indicates that they were, in fact, made in China. This occasions the ethical questions that she then sketches out, deceptively hidden behind burlesque humour: the dodgy labour practices of sweat shops that produce knock-offs, the undeniable attraction of “cheap goods”, and the global circuits through which they travel. At her behest, the chorus gathers conspiratorially around her as she reveals

Yisa: My friend tells me that... there is another cargo coming to eCape Town with amacheap goods! Amatee-shirts; amajeans; amaChucks!

At which the crowd erupts into cheers and whistles of excitement. She has jumped onto the tea-box to indicate on her own body the “cheap goods” of which this cargo will be composed, but as she steps down now, there is a change in her manner. The company turns to look directly at the audience, and with quiet revulsion, Yisa concludes

...amad rugs ... amawomen.

An uncomfortable silence as the audience and company once again stare back at one another. This is the same accusation as before, but this time from a very specific ethical position: *our* times, *our* place, *our* communities. In our modernised society with its “progressive” values, it is our unthinking consumption of “amacheap goods” – and the unethical labour practices that support their manufacture – that is the modern-day equivalent of slavery. We are all clearly implicated in the very act of which we presume ourselves to be innocent, and if there is a moral lesson at all in the play then it lies within

³ a popular “street-savvy” brand of sneaker

this repositioning of its major themes within our specific national context *today*. Our “spiritual affliction” does not reside in the past we so smugly hold up as a reflection of the “better” world we so easily presume to have since created. Instead, we can find its seeds in our very own homes and public spaces: we are only playing at being something different, something new...but we always go back to wearing the same “pair of old shoes”.

Afterwards, I speak at length to the Swedish companion who accompanied me to the show. He is someone that I have come to know as a cynic at best, immovable and cold at his worst. I was therefore surprised to find him crying openly and profusely during the “13 Spades” vignette, and am compelled to ask him what it was that moved him so, particularly considering the national context from which he comes. Walking from the theatre, he admits, ‘I still don’t understand, but I felt it. I’ve been in this country for almost a year, and I think I’m only now coming to know what it is that happened here...what it is to start to know a place. That moment was so-’ ...and he searches for the word... “-*real*.” As we walk, I probe, convinced that he must be having me on now: “Real? Seated in a theatre, with all the tricks of the stage so obviously there in front of you, and *you*, Kalle Johnson, found that real?” He thinks about this for a while. He appears genuinely perplexed as he does so, but nevertheless offers a surprisingly erudite response

Look, I could see that actress on stage. There she is, right? I can see her sweat, hear her breathing. But at the same time, she’s every one of those people we’ve just seen, and none of them at all. She is alone, and yet stuck in this long history, these ghosts that she brings with her onto stage ... It was as if she was saying, ‘I am human. I’m fucking human you bastards! You hear that? That’s me. That’s *us*. We are all here. (Personal Communication)

I have included this response for the singular reason that he was able to articulate, from the perspective of the “layman” viewer, the very things I was grasping at when I spoke of political efficacy, affect and the body in relation to this particular performance and the particular encounter it stages with its audience.

Later, driving back into town, a hoarding announces that *This Is Frontier Country*. What I had before dismissed as a gimmicky tagline designed to sell the province to tourists, suddenly changed shape and took on a meaning that I had wholly failed to grasp in light of South Africa's past...an unintended theme of territorial lines drawn in the sand to proclaim the limits of what is known, governed, civilized, even as the sand in which they are scrawled shifts and the boundaries change, become porous, insubstantial. And simultaneously, an invocation of that which lies beyond – *unknown, ungoverned, uncivilized* – that threatens to erase completely this most tenuous of divides.

...

Complex notions of the “native body” arise out of the spatial mediation of the performers’ bodies within specific narrative contexts. But simultaneously, a complex reading of notions of home, colony and land is effected through those performances. It is the continual re-emergence of the material body of the performer from beneath the layered meanings it assembles before the audience that is central in this transaction of values and codes. And crucially, it is this very transaction with the audience that generates a critical discourse within the context of the work: the ownership of the means to describe, and the inherently subjective nature of such description. In this way, the body is neither author nor subject, but is in Barthes’ terms, a scriptor that reassembles what is already known, with the active collusion of the audience as both witness and agent in the meaning that can be made of what the bodies re-present.

Further, it is in this mode that private narratives take on the proportions of a larger story: their re-presentation in the context of the relationships set up in the performance provides a point of entry for these personal lives into the larger communal or national story that frames them. Firstly, the divide between public and private is disrupted by the self-conscious joining of the two worlds, in which private experience mirrors the society around it; and conversely, in which public (or official) values permeate and describe the private lives of individuals and the personal freedoms they enjoy. Secondly, the integrity of the physical body is reproduced as a metaphor for and product of the space in which it

operates, and bears physical symptoms that are analogous to the continual deterioration and destruction of land. Death, while it betokens the end of physical life, also represents a metaphysical demise of values and meaning. At all these levels of signification in the performance, the performers are always exactly that: performers. We are made implicitly aware throughout the production of the fact that they are “people like us”, and even as we attempt to make sense of what we are watching, it is suggested that it is ourselves that we are making sense of through this process. As in Brecht’s dialectical theatre, this ‘reappropriation of mimesis in a defamiliarized theatrical setting’ (Oesmann 2005: 45) invites us to not only identify and interrogate the things that are signified at various points in the production through the bodies of the performers, but the role that we play in “completing” the picture: in making this a story *about us now*.

*O*nnest’bo deals with a similar collision between public and private lives, while at the same time generating an awareness of the tenuousness of this divide. Loosely based on the forced removal of non-whites from “unacceptably” cosmopolitan District Six, home in that production comes to represent not only a physical space in which individual families reside, but a psychological space in which values, beliefs and cultural practices central to notions of identity are rooted. With the destruction of their physical homes, an entire community is destroyed, its interpersonal relations and collective identity destroyed (Fleishman & Davids 2007). The marks of oppression are not only worn on the non-white skins of the inhabitants, but become physically inscribed on the land as an institutionalised practice of the Afrikaner Nationalist government’s racist policies (McEwan 2003; Hutchison 2005).

Onnest’bo, Fleishman and Davids write,

is made up of a series of scenes that enact a schematic narrative of forced removals loosely based on the story of District Six but with no direct reference to it. The scenes are performed against a background of music created for the performance from the sound archives at the D6 museum and consisting of a collage of musical styles prevalent in District Six prior to removals from the area. The spoken text always plays a secondary role to the physical text in the storytelling. In fact, what spoken text there is was originally entirely improvised in English, Afrikaans, isiXhosa and isiZulu, slowly

becoming set as the production continued to be performed over time. (Fleishman & Davids 2007: 149-150)

Already, at its structural level, *Onnest'bo* is similar to *Cargo*. Both take the archived historical fragment as their point of departure into the various themes that lie at the heart of the respective works. However, unlike *Cargo*, *Onnest'bo* was, in the same way as Ngema's *1906: Bhambada*, a work commissioned as part of an educational initiative that sought to 're-assess' the role of a specific historical event in shaping contemporary South African identity and culture.

When one compares *1906: Bhambada* as a treatment of the national history of the Bhambatha Rebellion to the District Six narrative that underpins *Onnest'bo*, the seminal differences between Ngema's and Fleishman's employment of the historical frame become quite apparent. Both productions are self-evidently concerned with locating a notion of contemporary South African nationhood that undermines colonial and apartheid ideologies whilst celebrating the democratic communal formations that have arisen as a result of resistance to colonialism and apartheid. However, the imagined communities that they invoke are antithetical to one another. Whilst Ngema's monolithic history is overdetermined by its rehearsal of a rigidly Black body that is the "authentic" reliquary of the nation's anti-colonial/anti-apartheid liberatory mission (and consequently, those that rightfully enjoy the benefits of belonging to the community that arose from that mission), *Onnest'bo* presents a dynamic, heterogeneous idea of the same community through the employment of the same techniques at work in *Cargo*.

Recall that in *Cargo*, it is with a small shard of crockery - buried in the sand on a public beach - that the journey begins. The fragment is a theme that runs through all of Fleishman's work. His works are episodic, linked by what seems to be the most tenuous of threads: a snatch of oral narrative, a fragment of song, an entry in a diary, an image glimpsed in passing that invokes a whole history of associations and themes. If read in the above terms of private/public collisions, the shard becomes in some ways yet another referent to domestic – or private – life in the context of larger public politics. And

following Barthes again, it is these fragments of what is known that are re-assembled in order to generate meaning with the audience's collusion. In this work, seminal images interlock, bleeding into one another, defying simplistic or one-dimensional readings of their content. Submersion, permeable surfaces, things pushed under, the detritus that floats on the surface, that which is excavated – this is the larger structural theme that *Cargo* deals with, and which underpins the narrative themes embodied in the work.

As Fleishman explains,

Cargo is a performative engagement with the *archive* of slavery at the Cape...The work is an attempt to use performance to get at what has been left out, the voices and their bodies “exiled on the borders of discourse ... the murmur and the noises from which the process of scriptural reproduction distinguishes itself” (De Certeau). It is a difficult task because the bodies are not immediately or easily available. They have been rendered incoherent[,] shattered as they are into a million hidden pieces. One needs to be open to listening in the silences. One needs to be crafty, to know where to look for the shards. How to provoke the body to express itself from under the mass of the official, the academic and the documentary? How to remember? (Fleishman 2007: 2)

Re-membering, he avers, is neither a simple affair, nor an easy one. Reconstituting memory is a difficult and traumatic process, and even as we attempt to find order and meaningful patterns in the world thus dis-membered, what emerges tends towards ‘disruption, discontinuity, irony and endless repetition, denying the potential for recuperation and easy reconstruction’ (Fleishman 2007:2). Given the impossibility of ever accessing the past as an integrated “whole” picture, ‘if we can 'know' the past at all,’ he concludes, ‘it is only through an act of translation and interpretation[,] and all translations are manipulations. They change the past; perhaps they can change us’ (Fleishman 2007: 2).

Note again the closeness of Fleishman's theorisation of the production's content to the theory that underpins Brecht's dialectical theatre: it is with the bodies displayed in the production that we primarily engage, and from which engagement we identify and make meaning of ourselves in both the individual and communal contexts. This, too, echoes Diana Taylor's explication of the inherent tension between the archive and embodied repertoire of historical memory. This is the source of the production's truth-making, and

from which any notion of “authenticity” must finally arise. To the extent that any public might be considered “authentic” because the body through which it is both signified and interpellated is produced through the “evidence” recorded as an “authoritative” history, the claim to authenticity is rendered considerably more precarious when the “record” itself can be shown to be inherently unstable and open to contestation, and its authority thus to be suspect at best. As Fleishman observes, it is the openness of the past to multiple, divergent translations which has the potential to change us, because in the act of translation inheres an agency to remake the past itself, and thus the conditions upon which we imagine potential futures.

[six]

CONCLUSION

If we can discern any idea at all of the South African community as it is inscribed through the discursive practices of its post-liberation theatre, it is that the very grounds upon which such an idea is founded are highly contestable. Nowhere is there a case to be made for an objectively quantifiable measure of population through which we might limit the character and content of an “authentic” form of this “imagined community”, if such belonging is predicated on the ideals of democratic plurality that are so often cited as being fundamentally constitutive of South Africa’s post-apartheid communal formations. And further, to belong to this community – as a precondition of the enjoyment of the designate rights and privileges of so belonging – is a determination that is, at best, precarious.

In attempting to come to terms with the diverse notions of the South African community signified in the post-apartheid theatre discussed in this dissertation, it has been necessary to establish, firstly, how such significations of nationhood could come to be seen as arising out of performance in the first instance. This was rehearsed in the first chapter’s exploration of the congruencies between different notions of performance *as self-conscious act*, and their relationship to the unconscious, everyday or habitual practices of the body that are posited as similarly “meaningful” and therefore within the potential scope of this dissertation’s examination of the grounds upon which embodied practice might be constitutive of public or national “official” ideologies.

Given the assumption of the aforementioned, the second task was to ascertain the ways in which such inscriptions – both conscious and unconscious – are reliant upon the mediation of the body within the context of the political imaginaries that underwrite such ideas of the nation and the “authentic” notion of itself that it attempts to locate within the “originary narrative” of its collective history. The interpretive framework that was

generated in the pursuit of these two goals became, then, the entry point for the dissertation's main task: to give an account of how the theatre has attempted to negotiate the question of what it is to belong to South Africa after apartheid, the ways in which such notions of belonging are constructed through the display of bodies within specific performance contexts, and the evident fault-line between the official "body national" and the multiple, heterogeneous private bodies that persistently undermine the former's attempted assertion of scriptural authority.

However, viewed through the prism of a dialectical political theatre – alongside the critical, broad theory of performance postulated in terms of Bourdieu, Harmansah and the other theorists that constitute the body of the introductory chapter – these antagonistic ideas of South African-ness were in themselves revealed as critical sites where these ideas could be contested. So even though an "official" nationalist theatre like that of Mbongeni Ngema may produce an idea of South African nationhood that is clearly at odds with the pluralist rhetoric of the "Rainbow Nation" mythology, it at once calls attention to itself as exactly that: a fiction that does not stand up to the ideals in service of which it is deployed. While such a theatre attempts to co-opt private bodies and narrative in pursuit of its aims, it is the very same private bodies and narratives that can be deployed to disrupt the assumptions upon which this practice is premised, as evinced in *Tshepang...*, *Cargo* and, though very briefly, *Onnest'bo*.

So while on the one hand, the post-apartheid theatre suggests a community that has historically been, and still continues to be defined along racial lines – its representations relying upon the same reductive representational practices experienced under colonialism, and which persist in the purported "truths" of this new, liberated theatre – at the other extreme of post-apartheid practice is a theatre that is by its very nature antithetical to such sweeping determinations of a collectivized public "truth". Insofar as we might claim that there is such a creature as the "authentic" national citizen of South Africa, such a claim lies considerably further from the world constructed in the methodology of Ngema than it does from that constructed in the work of the other practitioners examined within this thesis. While Ngema's nation – the "official" public –

is consistently produced as a function of the history of Black anticolonial struggle, the other methodologies explored in this thesis offer a more progressive idea of what it might be to belong “authentically” to the demos of South Africa’s post-liberation community as envisioned by Thabo Mbeki and endorsed in the politico-legal framework of the Constitution: one that, for better or worse, can be seen in all its complexity as the most fundamental expression of this terrible and beautiful place.

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