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The Barrydale Giant Puppet Parade: mobilising creative ecologies in the Klein Karoo, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the multifaceted process of creating the large-scale annual public puppetry event, The Barrydale Giant Puppet Parade, in the rural town of Barrydale, South Africa. It unpacks the complex layers of meaning and making arising through a co-creative puppetry project in a region of South Africa marked by poverty and the on-going everyday legacies of racial injustice and socio-economic disparity. It considers how developing puppetry arts within the Barrydale community has instigated a crucial mobilisation of individuals and the collective, as well as a trans-embodied praxis for generating new ecologies of self and community in the small town.

KEYWORDS

Puppetry; mobility; South Africa; Barrydale parade; performance

Introduction

The following article is inspired by my seven-year involvement as a researcher-practitioner in the process of creating a large-scale public puppetry parade and production in a rural town of South Africa, facilitated by various local and national academic, educational, non-profit and artistic stakeholders. The article seeks to offer a rich background for understanding the very complex historical and socio-economic contexts in which the parade takes place as well as the layered dynamics brought to the practice by the various practitioners involved in the process. The analysis also probes theoretical and practice-based aspects of puppetry that might support what Jane Taylor describes as a 'mutuality of ethics' (Taylor, 2018), instigating complex modes of creative relating, being and thinking between objects, bodies, and communities. I investigate the process of developing a mutuality of ethics through the lens of trans-embodiment as an aspect of puppetry that might support and hold the reciprocity as well as paradox that operates in the growing performance ecologies of the Barrydale Giant Puppet Parade.

I set out the rich historical, social and political context of the Barrydale Giant Puppet Parade and its adjoining performance processes as a framework to inform some of my more theoretical thinking around the kinaesthetic and embodied processes of puppetry performance. I explore the parade as a puppetry performance process deeply embedded within what I understand to be theatrical and performative ecologies that might instigate more reciprocal and complex ways of performing representation, relations, identity,

environment and community in South Africa today. Through the lens of trans-embodiment in puppetry performance as set out by Alyssa Mello, I articulate what I have observed as the art form's capacity to enter complex reciprocal exchanges in kinaesthetic form and performance. I explore Mello's designation of puppetry as a process of trans-embodied and kinaesthetic practices, which she describes as both direct and indirect trans-embodiments between actor-puppeteers, puppets, and materials.

These trans-embodied direct and indirect processes are activated, in Mello's understanding, by more than just external/outer forms and embodiments of matter. The dynamic, mobilising potential of puppetry is often felt in its *indirect* trans-embodiments which, as Mello describes, speak to its ability to convey the invisible exchanges between objects and puppeteers, of presence and memories, emotions and sentience. It is the direct as well as indirect trans-embodied aspects of puppetry that, as I explore, might open performers and audiences to new ways of perceiving and conceiving of Self and Other in imaginative and potentially symbiotically responsive ways. Through the lens of trans-embodiment, puppetry can be seen as an act of imaginative, kinaesthetic mobilisation, which drives both material and conceptual conductivity between puppets and performers as well the audiences who observe them and the spaces that hold them.

I utilise the term 'ecology' to describe what I see as the multifaceted and paradoxical as well as illuminating performative, aesthetic and educational collaborations that exist and continue to evolve and impact on the creation of the Barrydale Giant Puppet Parade. Baz Kershaw, in his book *Theatre Ecology* (2007), anecdotally imagines the relationship between theatre, performance and ecology as operating on the same principles as a lightning flash, which he deems to be one of the earth's most common and spectacular performances, not only in its brief theatrical appearance but in what it leaves behind, the residual charge that it leaves in the ground in the form of an instant lightning fossil (called a fulgurite) after it has struck (2007, 7). He describes the fulgurite as a hollow glass tube that may form in the sand under certain conditions, where lightning strikes the ground. It takes on the branching form of the lighting currents as they travel into the ground and becomes an instant fossilised form of these, a petrified container that indicates what Kershaw says can be seen as the negative space where the lightning once was but is also positive in its holding of past presences, trace and new forms (2007). Kershaw deems the fulgurite a paradoxical object, one that performs as both a negative and positive thing, illuminating as he says both the interdependent and mutually creative processes of the event that has taken place. Kershaw explores how transitory human events such as performances 'just like lightning-flashes... can have lasting effects because they always leave more or less durable traces that frequently are fundamentally paradoxical' (2007, 11). Kershaw refers to humans as the paradoxical primate themselves in this ecological historical era, as both subject and object, where the historical divides between nature and culture are being eroded, the threat of planetary erasure is imminent and the non-human has its own agency and significance (Kershaw 2007, 12).

Jess Allen and Bronwyn Preece in their 2013 publication analysing the eco-centric ethics of performance in the work of ecological theatre makers and theorists, write that to describe a performative work as environmental or ecological is paradoxical, in that it sets up and reinforces binaries, separation and hierarchies between human and non-human, man and nature or a 'sense of something we need to take care of... rather than something we inhabit and are' (Allen and Preece 2013, 91). Ecocentrism in

performance, they suggest, rather than reinforcing separation and cultural appropriation, is about a multidimensional system of ethics, an ecology which can

indicate reciprocal connection and coexistence: ecology as the interrelationships in which beings or indeed objects (biological, geological, meteorological) are embedded, and through which they also emerge as what they are. By this definition, ecology is also how we experience and make sense of the world, including how we perceive, process and participate in both 'nature' and culture. (Allen and Preece 2013, 91)

Preece and Allen declare that in this estimation, ecology can be seen as much as a cultural occurrence as it is biological or natural, and that performance itself can be seen as the cultural synergetics of ecology (Allen and Preece, 2013). They discuss Timothy Morton's thinking of 'interconnectedness' which he calls *the ecological thought*, the practice of which requires in this day and age a 'radical openness' to 'thinking big' or even 'thinking "totality"' (Allen and Preece 2013, 91). This way of thinking ecologically is an active and activating process of provocation, questioning and paradox and is something which Allen and Preece deem might be supported by artistic processes and art forms which 'may give us readier access, by providing the tools with which we can question un/reality and deal with intensity and loss' (2013, 91).

The complexity of the Barrydale project involves in many ways the paradoxes of form, meaning, politics and aesthetics that inevitably arise in a theatrical project of this scope, created by multiple systems of contributors, modalities, and forms. Over the years, Net vir Pret and its team of collaborators have sought to marry imaginative, ecological as well as culturally informed research and content in the creatively designed bodies of giant puppet characters (often depicting animals both metaphorically as well as ontologically), with sharp political and social commentary on the inequalities and problems that form part of the reality of life in the village for both its human and non-human communities. In the context of the history and creation of the Barrydale Giant Puppet Parade described below, we might begin to perceive of puppetry as a theatrical/performative ecology, that can potentially bring socio-political narratives into a burgeoning public imaginary of mutualistic and 'radically open' thinking, around our myriad relationships to ourselves, each other and the world.

The Barrydale Giant Puppet Parade is a journey through the unordered materialities and pressing realities of life in South Africa today, a landscape at once personal and political, where self and other might meet in strange, imaginative and co-creative ways in the multimodal surfaces of a large-scale public puppetry intervention. The fostering of co-creative, ecocentric practices, and spaces for engagement in South Africa today, may reveal a propensity towards puppetry processes that stimulate new ecologies of trans-embodiment through an imaginative political exchange and mobilisation of performers, stories, puppets, makers, and audiences.

Angels, elephants, and ancestors in the Tradau Valley: a brief overview

The Barrydale Giant Puppet Parade began in 2010 as a project of the Handspring Puppet Trust (founded by the Handspring Puppet company based in Cape Town South Africa), in partnership with Barrydale community-based organisation Net vir Pret (working primarily with young people and children from Barrydale and the surrounds), the Magpie Arts Collective (a Barrydale-based international sculptural art and design company), the University

of the Western Cape's (UWC) Centre for Humanities Research (CHR) and its developing research platform, the Laboratory of Kinetic Objects (LoKO). It was instigated to take place on 16th December, as a direct creative gesture towards the South African National Day of Reconciliation as an artistic response to the highly visible, constantly revealing traces of Apartheid and Colonialism still at work in the Barrydale area. Derek Joubert of Net vir Pret, describes how those Barrydale residents who were classified 'Coloured' by the Apartheid regime 'were dispossessed of their homes in the 1950's and moved to a dusty township over the hill and out of sight' (Joubert 2019). Erasmus writes how various Khoe and San¹ communities were affected by forced removals, 'so-called "black spot removals" – and were re-established in urban "locations" or "coloured reserves"' (Erasmus 2010, 82).

The evidently racially and economically divided layout of the town of Barrydale points to the composite way in which Khoe and San identity was subsumed into what Lee calls the 'deracinated and proletarianized' designation of 'Coloured' identity, one of the lasting effects of Apartheid on Barrydale culture. The 'Coloured' population still forms the majority of the working class of the village and most 'Coloured' families still inhabit the 'other' side of town. The township is haunted by the name 'Smitsville' given to it during Apartheid, or as the locals call it, *Steek my Weg* (literally translated as 'put me away' in Afrikaans language). Inhabitants of what was previously known as 'Smitsville' reject the name and insist that there is in fact only one Barrydale, but unfortunately it is characterised by the divide between upper and lower Barrydale, with upper Barrydale ironically indicating the poorer, 'Coloured' side of town.

This process of racial, social, economic and political othering within the village has left significant psychic, emotional and physical diffusions that play out in the everyday lives of the inhabitants of Barrydale. Basil Jones of the Handspring Puppet Company said

the parade takes place on the Day of Reconciliation ... and we are very aware of the fact that in South Africa, despite the fact that there's a lot of reconciliation happened, people are still living on opposites sides of every town because of Apartheid, the way we were separated during Apartheid. You cant just bring that together. (documentary film interview with Jonathan Jones 2014)

Khanyesile Mbongwa, director of the Handspring Puppet Trust in 2015, expresses that reconciliation is a complex process, that it is just as much about reconciling aspects of the self, of roots and identity, as it is about peace building and politics (Moodie 2015). A key aspect of the parade project she says is to create spaces where people can develop themselves and new understandings of themselves as creators of those spaces. Mbongwa elaborates, 'We are asking a broader question to ourselves, having to reconcile with yourself as an individual, your own history and also having to reconcile with the socio-political public narrative that has a relationship with your personal narrative' (Moodie 2015).

The Barrydale Giant Puppet Parade launched on 16 December 2010, with a 3-metre high papier mache African Angel (made in a workshop with children from the village and surrounding farms), presiding over a raucous, joyous procession of young people and community members from the village. Amongst them were members of various groups of South African puppetry thinkers, artists and community members (myself included) instigated by the Handspring Trust for Puppetry Arts, the University of the Western Cape, Net vir Pret (which in the South African language of Afrikaans means

Just For Fun), the Magpie Arts Collective in Barrydale and Unima SA (the International Union of Puppetry in South Africa). Net vir Pret run important community upliftment projects focused primarily on 'whole child development', in what the organisation describes on its website (<http://www.netvirpret.org/>) as the most impoverished, deprived communities in the Overberg Barrydale/Swellendam Municipal area in the Western Cape. The work that they do in the town of Barrydale extends to the surrounding farm schools and includes daily aftercare for the village children, teacher education and professional development initiatives, Matric and school support programmes, holiday schools, music, dance and art programmes (Joubert 2019).

In an early email shared with me between South African puppetry scholar and theatre director, Jane Taylor, one of the original directors of the Handspring Trust who initiated the project with Net vir Pret in Barrydale, and Ingrid Fiske at the University of Cape Town, Taylor describes the social paradoxes that raised themselves in first parade in 2010. She wrote that Barrydale on the surface 'is a very beautiful idyll, in some ways, but also captive to the endemic alcoholism, fetal alcohol syndrome and child neglect and abuse that is the legacy of Apartheid in the post-Apartheid era' (email correspondence, 25 December 2010).

What I recall, walking up the dusty streets of Barrydale, were children singing and animating puppets that they had created out of recycled junk and materials with puppet maker Jill Joubert, a founding member of the Handspring Puppet Company in the 1970s. Joubert's intention along with the Handspring Trust from the beginning of the project, was to establish a puppet-making and training system in which young leaders from Net vir Pret were taught how to construct their own puppets, as well as tutored on how to teach these same processes to children, so that each child involved in the parade could make their own puppets for the performance in years to come. It began as a small informal street festival preceding the already growing event of the lighting of the annual Christmas tree, a sculpture created from recycled materials by the Magpie Art Collective each year. The original commitment was for a 7-year cycle in partnership, with Net vir Pret as the primary organisation interfacing with the Barrydale community.

Every year the Barrydale Giant Puppet Parade culminates in what has become an established and highly anticipated public performance, a musical production approximately an hour in length and performed by more than 150 performers on the 1200 square metre asphalt field of the local primary school, nestled amongst the stunning backdrop of the village and surrounding mountains (Figure 1).

The parade and performance process has certainly grown in size, impact and operations since that first parade in 2010, taking significant strides towards the Handspring Trust's first intentions of developing a self-sustaining autonomy in the project. In 2013, a key aspect of the creation of the main giant puppets for the parade, was to build the skills and resources of a fledgling puppetry company, Ukwanda Puppets and Design, a group of four puppetry artists from the townships of Khayelitsha and Masiphumelele in Cape Town. Ncedile Daki, Luyanda Nogodlwana, Siphon Nxala and Siphokzai Mpofu had been employed in the process of making the Handspring Puppet Company's life size puppet horses, for the hugely successful international production of *Warhorse* created for the National Theatre London. Ukwanda were and continue to be supported by the University of the Western Cape and its Factory of the Arts at the Centre for Humanities Research, and mentored directly through the Handspring Puppet Company, to design and create giant puppets for the event.



Figure 1. Children hold up Cardboard Puppets based on San Rock Paintings, designed by Jill Joubert in 2014. Photo by Author.

Net vir Pret lead the annual creative development of the parade themes, script and storyline, developing original and relevant stories that the Net vir Pret constituents wish to explore as a group. Net vir Pret have told stories by creating, amongst a menagerie of other creatures designed and constructed by Ukwanda Puppets and Design, a mermaid who lives in a cave in the desert, a giant luminescent praying mantis on a bicycle (Figure 2), and an ancient 6-metre high tortoise and a winged slave girl from Madagascar who receives wings from a secretary bird and learns how to fly. In 2016, the Handspring Puppet Company proposed the wildlife conservation story of *Olifantland* based on the Anthony Lawrence novel *The Elephant Whisperer* (Lawrence 2009) and created a herd of life-size awe-inspiring elephants designed by Adrian Kohler and created in collaboration with the Handspring Puppet Company's building team and Ukwanda. The following year Ukwanda designed and created three life size rhinos for the 2017 parade and production *Renosterbos*, which addressed the scourge of rhino poaching in the country (Figure 3).

In 2018 the parade and production *River and Redfin* involved a 5-metre high River spirit puppet as well as a giant 3-metre long silver Redfin Minnow fish which emerged from the banks of the local Barrydale river, the Kleinhuis Rivier, to begin the parade up to the school performance area. The cast of over 200 local village and farm-school children (aged between 4 and 17 years) made their own puppets in the Net vir Pret December holiday school. There were also more than fifty school-going young leaders, full-time interns and paid adult performers who rehearsed and prepared for the project through the year and then entered an intensive workshop theatre-making rehearsal process of four



Figure 2. The puppet god Kagg'agn, designed by Luyanda Nogodlwana, parading through the streets of Barrydale in the 2014 parade. Photo by Author.

weeks in the build up to the final parade and performance. 2018 saw the Net vir Pret key staff members who have been training, performing and working on the project since 2010, stepping up to the challenge of operating most of the professional production requirements of the event.

Net vir Pret describe these shifts in operations in their latest reports, stating that while in the early years the professional and technical expertise for the show had to be 'imported from Cape Town, we are now increasingly taking over these roles ourselves' (Derek Joubert 2019). Derek Joubert of Net vir Pret describes how multiple aspects of the creative and production process, which involve high-end artistic or organisational input, were handled directly by Net vir Pret staff and interns, including script writing, set design and construction, mask design and creation, stage management and technical coordination, song-writing and musical composition.

The annual original production can be described as a theatrical symbiosis of genres, expressing its own unique ecology of style and cultural influences which combine traditional storytelling, physical theatre, pop music and hip hop, mask, clowning, puppet theatre, musical theatre and *Riel dans* (traditional dance and music) amongst others. Since that first parade in 2010, the performance has always ended with a climactic moment in which the audience step onto the stage to join in a joyous dancing and celebration in amongst the puppets and performers. This natural coalescing of spectators and participants might express a momentary reciprocity between bodies, communities and existing social and cultural differences, a response of mutuality between the audience and the performing



Figure 3. A life size rhinoceros made by Ukwanda Puppet and Design, walks next to children from the village, waving their self-made rain sticks and puppets for the production. Photo by author.

participants, generated through the course of a year of anticipation and preparation by the village children and then culminating in the few hours of the parade and performance. This repeated moment every year in the parade performance however is itself the paradoxical lightning flash and it's residual fulgurite as described by Kershaw in his theatre and ecology analogy (2007). The audience erupt on to stage to join the children and the performers, drawn by the electric charge of the performance and giant puppetry, the anticipation and its imminent ending, taking on the pathways and charged branches like a fulgurite, encapsulating the already dispersing presence of the lightning. A brilliant, natural and transient performative moment, generating another symbiotic and paradoxical part of the whole ecosystem of the parade, but which is both negative and positive in its trace and form. Even as it is happening, the performers and audience of Barrydale know that the moment is over, that life and relationships will most probably resume as usual on Monday and the processes and structures of 'real' life will begin again. Until next year.

Kinaesthetic mobility and imaginative mobilisations

Community and child activist, founding director of Net vir Pret, Peter Takeko says that the purpose of Net vir Pret is to provide a creative and safe space for children where they can enjoy themselves and develop to their full potential (<http://www.netvirpret.org/>). The creative development of children through programmes that address children's rights to artistic expression, the nurturing of local traditions of dance and music and fostering of local heritage and talents, has always been a key task in Net vir Pret's continuing outreach programmes.

While the emphasis on fun, celebration and creative play has been at the forefront of the exchange with the children, the project has also served some serious processes of exchange in a divided rural village community. These exchanges are most evident in their effects and intentions to encourage new mobility's for the youth in Barrydale (Figure 4).

Mobility in this sense is an increase in geographical as well as social movement within Barrydale's young people, increasing their access to differing levels within South African society, as well as mobilising new educational resources and opportunities for them in larger cities. It has also effected a mobilisation within Net vir Pret and its partners as well as members of the community, to bring resources together for a common purpose of creating an annual puppet parade, as well as taking action to tackle, mainly through artistic activity and process, pressing personal and collective issues of racial, economic, social and cultural separation that are so evident in the small town today. In his latest report, Joubert acknowledges the committed engagement of the organisation's *Project Hope* boys, who took on an unexpected role as the stagehands of the production for the first time in 2018. Net vir Pret's *Project Hope*, conceived in 2016, comprises a group of 17 local school drop-outs, boys who have mostly been in conflict with the law and are living at risk on the streets of Barrydale. Derek Joubert describes their participation, how

under staff member Herman Witbooi who is tasked with their care, these youngsters, widely regarded as useless no-goods, designed and built the set and the props for the show, trained as the stage hands, seamlessly changing the scene several times, and took part in the action, watched in admiration by everyone. (Joubert 2019)



Figure 4. River and Redfin puppets and young leaders performing on the concrete asphalt at the BF Oosthuizen primary school on the 16th December 2018. Photo by Anthony Strack.

It would seem that the boys of Project Hope, largely dismissed by their society, have come to represent the wave of mobilisation that characterises the evolving ecosystems of the parade, a mobilising of young people towards a common intention and goal, and the power that creative mobilisation has in changing individual and group perceptions of themselves and what is possible.

A grounding intention of the Handspring Trust was to assist the puppetry community of South Africa to work closely with Net vir Pret, supported by the educational and research systems of the University of the Western Cape, in order to build creative resources for young people in the local community, empowering them to ultimately produce the annual event independently. Herman Witbooi, a staff member of Net vir Pret, describes the transition and mobility that he has seen in himself since the start of the project,

Before I was just seen as a garden boy, but then Net vir Pret came and developed me into an actor ... Net vir Pret exposed me to things I had never done before like going to Cape Town, and in two years time I am the one who must build the puppets. (Interview with Moodie 2015)

In 2018 Witbooi created the impressive stage design of the parade and production *River and Redfin*, including its full construction, as well as co-facilitating the design and construction of over 150 children's puppets with fellow artist Clarisa Jonas.

Another major aim which Basil Jones, producer/co-director of the Handspring Puppet Company expressed in a documentary film on the parade process in 2015 (Moodie 2015), was to create a 'corridor of exchange' between Barrydale and the University of the Western Cape. Here Jones directly addresses the initial guiding desire of developing mobility for young people who had never even considered the possibilities of venturing from Barrydale, to travel to Cape Town and attend University there (2015). This task of mobilising and creating the potential for mobility both physically and mentally in the hopes and minds of the young people of Barrydale was a key instigator of the initial partnerships. Since the inception of the programme in Barrydale, and specifically through the partnership with the University of The Western Cape, there has been a significant increase in the number of students from Barrydale and the surrounding area entering University and Tertiary education in Cape Town (Joubert 2014, 2016, 2017, 2018).

Donna Kouter, who manages the Net vir Pret aftercare and young leader programmes has experienced the parade in many ways since 2010, as a performer, a coordinator, a lead puppeteer and now in the past year, the assistant director and lead script writer on the project. Her experience of her own shift in roles, activities and community perceptions reflects on a more subtle mobility happening within individuals. Donna describes this as a shift between ways and states of being both in the work she does and in the way her community views her and how she views herself. She said in an interview in 2015:

I'm always in the office, I do the admin and I work with the children and I'm serious. I'm also in charge of the youth leadership program so its relatively serious work. So for other people to see me act, I'm sure it's a surprise but I feel it's also an opportunity for me to explore another side of myself because it pushes your boundaries ... And when you look up you see so many people, people from your community, Barrydale ... It's another side of you that they see ... It was a very liberating feeling for me. (Moodie 2015)

The stimulation of mobility in Barrydale has worked not only in bringing Barrydale into the outside world, but by bringing the outside in, as Net vir Pret Chairperson and founding

artist of the Magpie Arts Collective Shane Petzer reminds us in a documentary film interview from 2015:

People from the outside are also starting to see the talent available here in Barrydale and we're beginning to look at small, rural communities in a different kind of way, as places where we find talent. It's not just people who need to escape to the city in order to find success, but perhaps there is a way of finding success ... from your place in a small community. (Moodie 2015)

In Moodie's 2015 film, Peter Takelo speaks about the task of the project as being much more than a simple performance, he describes it as a continuing and on-going process of learning, creative empowerment and attending to the growth of both individuals and a community of young people who have grown up around the event. He says,

you can see if you look at the youngsters who are now the actors, some are coming now 5 or 6 years together with Handspring and with Net vir Pret and you can see the difference between the new young leaders ... you can see the difference. (Moodie, 2015)

Puppetry, trans-embodiment and a laboratory of kinetic objects

As a creative and discursive discipline, puppetry posits the performative object and performing things at the forefront of artistic practices and critical discourses, where puppets can

serve both as important metaphors and tangible expressions of our continually changing understanding of what it means to be human. They emerge as vital artistic elements at times when we question and reconceive longstanding paradigms about human beings and our relationship to the inanimate world, offering concrete means of playing with new embodiments of humanity. (Posner, Orenstein and Bell 2014, 2)

This articulation by Posner, Orenstein and Bell of puppetry as a material tool for re-imagining new embodiments of humanity might also help us to explore what it is about the art form that lends itself to understanding new ecologies of performance practice and mutuality in such a large-scale community puppetry project creatively tackling legacies of separation in South Africa today.

In a less humanist and more ecocentric context, we might propose puppetry as a modality that can potentially bring socio-political narratives into a burgeoning public imaginary of thinking around the relationship between the human and non-human, animate and inanimate world. Jane Taylor describes, in an email to Ingrid Fiske in 2010, how the parade project was originally conceived as a Laboratory of Kinetic Objects (LoKO), a collective of arts, performance and intellectuals engaging in the enquiry around the Subject/Object continuum in the small rural town of Barrydale. She wrote of how the Handspring Trust was at the time exploring the ways in which 'the processes of projective identification necessary for the productive circuit of exchange that results mysteriously in personhood, is akin to the processes through which the puppet is animated via imaginative identification and projection' (Taylor 2010). Taylor explains in the email how the original intentions of LoKO (now an official research platform at the CHR@UWC) and the Barrydale puppetry initiative, was and continues to include some of the more ephemeral, critical and liminal aspects of the art form of puppetry. She describes these as 'the archaic psychic agencies of sympathetic imagining that allows the subject to arise, interactively, through a circuit of mimicry and individuation' (Taylor 2010) (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Three groups of puppeteers from Net vir Pret, Ukwanda and Mothertongue project McGregor team up for exercises to prepare them to perform three life size elephants puppets in 2016. Photo by author.

In a most recent article, puppetry practitioner-researcher Alissa Mello draws our attention to what she theorises as the direct and indirect techniques of trans-embodiment that she has observed in embodied puppetry practices (2016). Mello understands and explicates puppetry as a process of trans-embodied kinaesthetic praxis that is primarily concerned with direct and indirect trans-embodiment between actor-puppeteers, puppets, and materials. Mello discusses her research into puppetry and material performance, which reveals that for many puppetry performers and artists, performance techniques are grounded in a combination of external/outer approaches (form, direct mimesis, coded gestures and signs, the visible) and internal/inner practices (the indirect, the invisible, memories, emotions and sentience). She explicates that these techniques of embodiment which arise in puppetry performance may demonstrate the visible and the knowable which she terms 'direct' but also often require and elicit a performance of excess through that which is indirectly embodied (Mello 2016).

Mello addresses the more inscrutable practices, theories and performance techniques, 'hidden beneath the surface' and which, she proclaims, serve to activate puppet and material performance (Mello 2016, 49). Mello suggests that puppetry performance techniques evidenced by contemporary practitioners such as Philippe Genty, demonstrate visible, outer techniques, signifiers, and gestures of the knowable, but there is always that which is in excess to these visibilities (2016). The direct and indirect trans-embodied aspects of puppetry instigate excesses within performative processes that are always already relational, reciprocal, adaptive and changing. It is this inclination towards trans-embodiment, that which activates through both the outer and inner techniques of

puppetry, which suggests a layer to puppetry performance that might practice a more ecological thought which, as Morton says, 'requires a radical openness', which challenges known or established understandings of form and being in the world, a 'thinking interconnectedness' (Allen and Preece 2013, 91). Puppetry may be seen to facilitate meeting points of diverse elements, the purpose of which may or may not be to intentionally render sutures in dominant discourse, but which through their very intersections express complex systems of community and identity today.

The trans-embodiment of meaning and form in the puppet performances in Barrydale, generate potential creative paradigms that can challenge established systems of separation, perceptions and political hierarchies at play. It is this propensity within puppetry towards sentience, excess, visuality, embodied and political relationalities, juxtapositions and paradox that I believe hold great significance for expressing the more difficult, multiplicitous and entangled pathways of experience and identity. The significance of the direct and indirect trans-embodiments of puppetry in a collaborative community puppetry project such as the Barrydale Giant Puppet Parade, is the art form's potential to enter complex relationalities, lending itself to a mobilisation of new ways of perceiving and conceiving of Self and Other in imaginative and potentially socio-political and ecologically responsive ways.

Exploring ecologies through puppetry

Khanyisile Mbongwa describes some of the direct and indirect aspects of puppet performance as she experienced them in the 2016 Barrydale parade entitled *Olifantland*, which explored the necessity of reciprocal relationship and mutual awareness in the fight to conserve and defend the survival of Elephants in South Africa today. She said

I suppose that's also part of what reconciliation is, to believe that we can heal and that puppetry gives us that moment, even if it's an hour moment, where we have all transcended something about ourselves. And we are looking at this object and we believe that it is what it is ... When you experience puppetry there's something that happens to you as the audience where you believe you are seeing an elephant on stage, you believe it, you believe that you can communicate to the elephant because you can see it, but it's a puppet ... that moment of pure ability not to be afraid. (Khanyisile Mbongwa in an interview in the documentary *Olifantland*, Steenkamp and Fortuin 2017)

Performance scholar Anthony Kubiak wrote for the Routledge Performance Research Journal *On Ecology*, on how the impulse in humans to recognise personness, is neither limited to a subject or object positionality nor bound to what we think constitutes the human in humanist traditions (2012, 56). It emerges through a realisation that the boundaries between self and other are permeable, fluid and constructed, that a recognition of personness grows out of our ability to be concerned about others, of a recognition of dis-ease of the other as well as ones own, a recognition of compassion and awareness. He theorises an animistic worldview as one that is inherently performative at its core, expressing and embodying what he calls 'the relational personness' of all manner of entities in the world (2012, 56). Kubiak describes performance as an openness, an awareness and an emergence that requires us to put down categorical and ideological thinking in place of what he calls 'a conscious enactment, a performance of an inherent relationality infused with awareness' (2012, 58).

... A world actualized and realized as process through the performance of life. To live in such a world demands that one be constantly alive to the place of others and otherness, that one continually express one's respect and gratitude to Otherness itself, simply because this is what opens us out into the Other and empties the self ... (Kubiak 2012, 58)

This performance of life described by Kubiak, which supports a more interconnected thinking or trans-embodied perspective of being and otherness, extends itself through the Barrydale project through the use of puppetry to perform animals and non-human persons and communities that inhabited the region in both the past and present. Since 2014, Net vir Pret continue to tackle, through puppetry, pertinent themes around nature conservation and ecology within the Barrydale community. Indigenous South African animals and landscapes, natural mythologies and pressing ecological issues have featured in and inspired many of the lines of storytelling in the creative work. This is achieved in direct embodiment of characters and thematic concerns through the design and creation of giant anthropomorphic and zoomorphic puppets, as well as a body of children's puppets created each year, mostly out of recycled materials for the performance. The yearning for more a symbiotic and ecocentric world is portrayed through a highly imaginative framework of puppet creations and stories, whose interactions explore the relationships between wild animals and everyday people, magical human-animal connections and Afro-futurist thinking, mythological and indigenous landscapes, new technologies and contemporary rural experience.

Jane Taylor describes the process of performing the non-human, of opening the scope of what constitutes 'community' and other, as an 'ethics of mutuality' to develop relationship between performers, puppets and animals (2018). An important aspect of entering discourses of ecology and conservation in the Barrydale puppetry performances, she says has been instigated in part by the Handspring Puppet company's interest in circuits of mimicry in re-creating the zoomorphic, ontological presences of animals through the construct of life size animal puppets. Here the task for the puppeteers and designers is to enter in detail into a visual, aural, sensory and mental experience of animals in the wild:

An ethics of mutuality is established during periods of close investigation, as performers study the animals they will be staging. The puppeteer does not simply observe the animal, in order to create a compelling performance; rather the puppeteer must 'become' the animal through identification. A real projective regard is what is enabled here, as the manipulator learns how to think and feel 'as' the animal, to read the environment and its complex languages. (Taylor, Jane 2018 <http://www.chrflagship.uwc.ac.za/renosterbos-barrydale-festival-2017/>)

A big part of this exploration has been the process work of visiting and spending time in contemplation and observation of the natural world, and the inspiring act of experiencing wild animals in their natural habitat, a first time experience for many of the young people of Net vir Pret and the artists involved in the project. In 2016, in preparation for the puppeteering of life-size elephants in *Olifantland*, Net vir Pret undertook a significant journey to observe wild elephants in their natural habitat at the Addo Elephant National Park in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. The following year the young leaders and staff visited a neighbouring nature reserve to spend time with highly endangered African white and black rhinoceroses, which had once roamed freely in the Barrydale area, in preparation for their production on rhino poaching. In 2018, Cape Nature Conservation, a governmental conservation organisation, lead a number of experiential workshops with Net vir Pret to research and understand the indigenous Redfin fish in the Barrydale Huis River, and the

destruction of their ecosystems and habitats, as part of an inspiring campaign to 'Save the Redfin' that is happening between the two organisations.

These up-close scientific and conservational encounters, in the process of research for the parade through direct and indirect experiences, perhaps encourage an ecological awareness as well as more ecocentric focus within the culture of the parade, opening the performers to new understandings of the human and non-human communities that cohabit the spaces of the Parade and Barrydale. These ecological lenses have opened trajectories into deeper reflections for Net vir Pret on the correlating socio-political and personal stories of displacement, injustice, power and greed, violence, land loss and cultural decimation experienced in the valley of the Tradau. Issues of access to ancestral lands and graves, land and water rights, heritage, ownership and poverty in the Barrydale area have found symbolism and reflection in the broader stories of elephants, rhinos, endemic fish, dying rivers and insect colonies under threat. Kouter poignantly wrote about this realisation, of 'thinking interconnectedness' and mutuality whilst working on the 2018 parade

Our story is the kind of story where there's a story within a story. Yes we're telling the global story of climate, of conservation, but our story which is a story behind the story, is actually about people and places ... The extinction of Redvin, in my mere opinion, could be linked to the extinction of who we once were. My people were forced to pack up and leave and settle in another place. We never settled, we never adapt, we're still struggling. So No, we are not just telling the story of one small fish and a small river, we are telling a story of disconnect, a story of loss, a political story, a history story, because not so long ago we all went down to the river before the fences came up and it became private property. (Kouter 2018)

Conclusion

The proclivity of puppetry to facilitate dynamic direct and indirect trans-embodiments of memory, forms, persons, objects, and perceptions may offer a window into understanding its artistic and social potential in a task of reconciliation. If ecology, as Chamberlain suggests, is a 'mode of knowing about as wide a sphere of our surrounding world as possible ... like the play of successive forms of self, not static, but always of being and becoming', then the practice and experience of puppetry might seem to offer a tool for exploring this very task. Through the lens of trans-embodiment, puppetry becomes an act of mobility in imagination and metaphor, offering a material and conceptual conduit between people and places, persons and things, self and other, nature and culture. Here the meeting points of community and puppetry bring to the fore 'a politics enfolded that is being gently and powerfully crafted ... into the surfaces of new political languages, logics, and literacies' (Motta and Seppälä 2016, 6). The socio-political and trans-embodied approaches to puppetry in the Barrydale parade offer a process that is always-already concerned with dynamic mobilities, of our inter-relational personness, direct and indirect, self and object, past and present, human and non-human.

Note

1. The term KhoiSan, writes scholar Richard Lee, is a neologism, coined in the twentieth century and used to describe two related South African peoples: the pastoral Khoe or Khoi and the hunting and gathering San who share a series of complex historical, cultural and social links (Lee 2003, 81).

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Notes on contributor

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