

Flockemann, M. (2013). Repeating and disrupting embodied histories through performance:

Exhibit A, Mies Julie and Itsoseng. *Critical Arts: South-North Cultural and Media Studies*,

27(4): 403-417

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2013.828391>



Repeating and disrupting embodied histories through performance: *Exhibit A, Mies Julie and Itsoseng*

Miki Flockemann

Abstract

The concern about South African arts being – as Achille Mbembe claims – ‘stuck in repetition’ can be challenged by examining developments in the performance arts which deliberately employ repetition. In these cases repetition is played with not just as a process of voiding or emptying out, but also to reconceptualise and embody historical and lived experiences. This can involve re-enactments of images, texts and theatrical styles which are worked upon and productively problematised through performance as a live event. In looking at the performance aesthetics of repetition, Diana Taylor’s *The archive and the repertoire* (2003) provides a useful context, since Taylor’s work straddles the disciplinary intersections between performance studies, anthropology and history. As point of departure, this article focuses on three works produced at the 2012 National Arts Festival, since the accumulation of new and not-new works viewed in quick succession offers scope for identifying aesthetic trends and shifts. Brett Bailey’s *Exhibit A*, Yael Farber’s *Mies Julie*, and Omphile Molusi’s *Itsoseng*, for instance, demonstrate various aspects of an aesthetics of repetition. The embodied histories that are performed in these works throw up a number of paradoxes. However, the productions do not simply circulate performing bodies as empty aesthetic images, but as transmitters of cultural memory, as well as witnesses to states of profound transition that engage both performers and audiences alike.

We have to wonder whether art in general, and photography in particular, has lost its historical power to give form to life, and has, instead, become subservient to repetition.
– Achille Mbembe, ‘The dream of safety’ (2011)

In an address at the ‘Figures and Fictions’ conference held in Cape Town in July 2011, Achille Mbembe lamented the fact that instead of the expected ‘explosion of aesthetic boundaries’ after apartheid, ‘[c]ontemporary South African art seems content to use the techniques of quoting, re-appropriation, and recombination’. He makes a similar point in response to Brett Murray’s controversial portrait of President Jacob Zuma (*Hail to the Thief 11*), arguing that ‘we are stuck in repetition’, and that what is needed now are ‘concepts with which to hunt the real’. He adds: ‘We also need to disrupt and disorganise the archive’ (2012: 11). Mbembe distances himself from anxieties about what constitutes ‘the Real’¹ and draws attention to the way the work of art can act as a ‘mask’ for encountering lived historical realities and experiences. The function of the mask, as

sign, is 'to produce ambiguity so that interpretation becomes possible, because without ambiguity there can be no interpretation' (Mbembe 2011: n.p.).

The notion of repetition or a recycling of images, texts and aesthetic forms can be seen to operate on several levels. Apart from the type of aesthetic repetition Mbembe refers to, which is empty of new concepts and does nothing to engage with what he terms the 'surplus of toxic energy' generated by 'the re-balkanising of the South African social structure, and deep-seated, repressed or denied racial anger' (2012: 11), there are also other, more productive forms of aesthetic repetition. First, repetition can signify the imbrications of the past in the present – as a return or a recurrence that, as it were, leaks into or thrusts itself into the present. Second, by repeating (but dislocating) images and texts from familiar contexts, repetition can be used to disrupt and defamiliarise, thus inviting fresh interpretations. Third, repetition can be employed to offer a socio-political critique by forcing recognition of uncomfortable correspondences and parallels. Finally, repetition can also be a sign of aesthetic durability.

One should consider how Mbembe's caution about the danger of emptying out content in the process of recirculating images and texts, as well as his bleak generalisation about the state of art in South Africa, might apply to some current trends. However, this view can be challenged when one considers developments in local theatre and performance arts, even when these are also engaged in processes of repetition. By drawing on recent discussions in the local press, as well as reviews and interviews with artists, it will be shown that there are works which deliberately play with repetition in ways that go beyond mere 'empty' aesthetic style. This can involve re-enactments of images, texts and theatrical styles which are worked upon and productively problematised, or opened up to fresh interpretations, as performances.

However, it is first necessary to consider how the generic features of theatre and the performance arts more generally can offer an alternative take on aesthetic repetition (which is not to deny that there are, of course, many productions that would fall into the category Mbembe is concerned about). A good starting point for exploring how the archive which Mbembe refers to might be disorganised and disrupted, is the annual Grahamstown Festival,² since the accumulation of new and not-new works viewed in quick succession offers scope for attempting to read dominant aesthetic trends, and for considering what conversations are established when works are viewed in relation to one another.³ Three plays at the 2012 festival which demonstrate various aspects of an aesthetics of repetition are Brett Bailey's *Exhibit A*, Yael Farber's *Mies Julie*, and Omphile Molusi's *Itso seng*.

In *Exhibit A*, Bailey (whose work is synonymous with the very explosion of aesthetic boundaries to which Mbembe refers), re-enacts the ethnographic exhibitions and 'human zoos' of the 19th century in which colonial subjects from Africa were paraded before the European gaze. At the same time, the work also recalls more recent dioramas where indigenous peoples were depicted in their 'natural habitat' for school children to gawk at. However, the difference here is that Bailey's 'exhibits' are living individuals who gaze back, thereby subverting the power of who is looking at whom: in effect, it is the spectators who are on display, while it is the 'exhibits' who are looking at them. These exhibits, however, are not just living ghosts from the past, but include what Bailey calls provocatively 'Found

Objects' from the present, such as those fleeing the stranglehold of neocolonial legacies elsewhere in Africa, who have taken apparently unwelcome refuge in cities both here and in Europe. This suggests how the present thrusts itself into the recycled images from the past. Such a project is not without dangers, and Mary Corrigan (2012: 7) is sharply critical of what she reads as Bailey's repeated victimisation of the black body as the subject of the viewer's gaze (though this observation itself is problematised below).

On the other hand, Yael Farber's *Mies Julie* is a re-enactment of an iconic European text, August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (1888), revisioned (as indicated by the play's cumbersome subtitle, *Restitutions of Body and Soil Since the Bantu Land Act No. 27 of 1913 and the Immorality Act No. 5 of 1927*), to focus on the racialised legacy of paternalism and intimacy that thwarts the struggle over land and ownership in the rural backwaters of South Africa. Setting the play in a drought-plagued Karoo farm kitchen during one long, oppressive night, while the workers celebrate Freedom Day outside, is a deliberately polemical move: the events in the kitchen seem to be trapped in apartheid anachronisms, even while the ancestral past of the workers' families literally pushes through the kitchen flagstones into the present. Although the play has generally received very favourable reviews locally, and especially at the Edinburgh Festival where it won awards as the 'smash hit of the fringe',⁴ some local criticisms of the play stem from its heightened (some would say melodramatic) performance style, as well as the shock-tactic of setting it in the here and now; these concerns will be addressed here through a closer exploration of Farber's stage aesthetic.

While *Mies Julie* premiered at Grahamstown, and the festival hosted the first performances of *Exhibit A* in South Africa,⁵ Omphile Molusi's *Itsoseng* is not a new work, and was first performed in the Mmabana Theatre in 2006; it also had successful runs at the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town and the Edinburgh Festival in 2008. The play started out as an essay which Molusi (2008: 16) wrote in 2004, on 'how the state of my township made me feel'. This followed his return to Itsoseng after the town was devastated by service delivery protests in 2002. The play is thus partly biographical and takes the form of a narrative in which Molusi embodies various individuals, using a minimalist performance aesthetic associated with protest theatre of the 70s and 80s. Although Molusi claims that *Itsoseng* is not recycled protest theatre, the initial director, Tina Johnson, called it a 'cry for help' that speaks for a forgotten community. However, as has been argued elsewhere (Flockemann 2011: 160), apart from the obvious irony of using a style associated with the anti-apartheid struggle (where dramatised narratives of the everyday abuses of state surveillance served as a protest or a call to action, as well as an appeal for empathy), Molusi's play foregrounds social injustice in order to bear witness to the failures of the 'new' South African democracy. The play thus seems, if anything, to be looking forward rather than backward. There are, for instance, reciprocities between Molusi's play and some of the debates around the underlying causes of violence, both in public service delivery protests and in the domestic domain. While these debates are characterised by invocations of Fanon's warnings about the unfinished revolution (see Gibson 2011), this also points to the aporias of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process. For instance, it is significant that in the wake of the massacre of striking miners at Marikana in August 2012,⁶ there have been calls for a 'new TRC' by humanitarians such as Graça Machel (in Jones 2012: 1), who

claims: 'We are harming one another because we can't control our pain.' In a provocative piece that received a great deal of attention in 2006 and is still often quoted, 'We are the Third Force', S'bu Zikode (Durban-based chairperson of the Abahlali baseMjondolo [shack dwellers] Movement) warned of the potential violence engendered by everyday economic struggles for basic necessities, not just in forgotten townships like Itsoseng (in the former Bophuthatswana, now North West Province), but also in urban centres closer to home (in this case, Durban). Zikode (2006: n.p.) claims: 'Those in power are blind to our suffering. This is because they have not seen what we see; they have not felt what we are feeling every second, every day.' This is echoed in Molusi's play when the narrator Mawilla exclaims: 'I hate what this place has become. Nobody listens, nobody hears us, irrespective of how big we try to shout to them up there, our voices just bang on their walls, they fall and they bury them' (2008: 52). In the light of this, the 2012 Grahamstown production felt as fresh as ever, even prophetic, given that Itsoseng yet again experienced violent service delivery strikes in 2010. In a telling reversal, an incident that was reported in the press about this 2010 protest ironically 'repeats' the stage narrative of 2008: when the protesters attempted to hand over a memorandum to Nomvula Mokonyane, the Gauteng premier, she (despite promising to be there) 'did not pitch' (Makhofola 2010: n.p.). It would seem that 'nobody listens', still.

Before looking at the effects of the performance aesthetics of repetition in the works by Bailey and Farber in greater detail, it is necessary to consider what is entailed in responding to these performance texts (as distinguished from other genres such as photography, that Mbembe refers to). Diana Taylor's *The archive and the repertoire* (2003) provides a useful context here, since her work straddles the disciplinary intersections between performance studies, anthropology and history. For example, Taylor asks whether a performance can be both 'real' and 'constructed'. What about the 'staying power' of performance as an ephemeral event, bracketed off from everyday life? What about the processes of transculturalisation, when non-Western performances as objects of study are interpreted through Western paradigms? (Taylor 2003: 1–6). Taylor's focus is, she says, 'less on the future and ends of performance, than its historical practice' (ibid: 2–3), which she outlines in the applications listed below. While Taylor's applications embrace broad anthropological concepts of performance which extend beyond the highly mediated, scripted and rehearsed productions which are the topic of the present discussion, there is nevertheless some overlap. Moreover, her comments on embodiment point to a key feature of the way repetition works in the three plays under discussion.

The applications of the term 'performance' are summarised by Taylor as follows: first, as expressive behaviour that transmits cultural memory and identity through reiterated, or what Richard Schechner calls 'twice-behaved behaviour' (in Taylor 2003: 2). Second, it can signify embodied knowledge, an episteme or way of knowing. In other words, the performance is not just an object of analysis, because 'if performance did not transmit knowledge, only the literate and powerful could claim social memory and identity' (ibid: xvii). Third, '[p]art of what performance and performance studies allow us to *do*', Taylor argues, 'is to take seriously the repertoire of embodied practices as an important system of knowing and transmitting knowledge' (2003: 26, emphasis in the original). Fourth, Taylor (ibid: 20) claims it is vital to keep re-examining the relationship between

embodied performance and the production of knowledge: ‘people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by “being there”, thus being part of the transmission.’ Finally, Taylor (ibid: 5) asks: ‘Is performance that which disappears, or that which persists, transmitted through a non-archival system of transfer I call a repertoire’; or put another way, performance makes present or visible that which disappears (see also Taylor 1997). In addition, as Joan Dolan claims, ‘performance always exceeds its space and its image, since it lives only in its *doing*’ (2005: 13, emphasis added).⁷ It can thus imagine (and enact) that which has not yet happened, but also make present, again, that which has. One could argue that this paradox addresses Mbembe’s concern with South African arts being ‘stuck in repetition’, since, as the performance takes place before a live audience, it is never the same; it cannot be repeated, but lingers as part of an intangible repertoire. After all, as Taylor suggests, the performance only exists in real time in the moment of the performance, in the live interaction between the performers and the audiences. If one looks at Bailey’s *Exhibit A* in light of these comments, some fruitful insights emerge.

Exhibit A is part of a trilogy⁸ of works and was originally conceived for European audiences, ‘to confront them with a history they have hidden and forgotten’,⁹ and Bailey notes that the work will resonate differently with South African audiences. The work was featured as Performance Art – a new category at the festival. In conversation with Bailey, Theresa Smith (2012: n.p.) notes that performance art like Bailey’s *Exhibit A* ‘is not linked to narrative, character or plot, nor does it take place in a theatrical space, but it does push the boundaries of the conventional theatrical experience’. On arrival at the venue (GADRA House, usually used for educational purposes), audience members were each given a numbered card and led into a large classroom. Faced by an authority figure seated in front (firmly but politely instructing the audience to refrain from talking), it evoked a feeling of being back at school, or at Home Affairs, or applying for a visa. When your number came up (apparently randomly) you were escorted out to view the exhibits in the adjoining building. Once in the ‘Museum’, walking along dimly lit, apparently neglected and leaf-strewn corridors, you were guided from room to room, occasionally bumping into other spectators. This oddly familiar experience of going to see exhibits in a museum in an apparently controlled environment – yet in isolation – was vaguely unsettling, even before encountering the exhibits themselves.

The first exhibit was strongly reminiscent of the dioramas I remember from school trips to the Natural History Museum in Cape Town, except that in this case the figures were living individuals who looked directly back at you: a young woman and a man, dressed in skins, with bare torsos, immobile as living statues, *tableaux vivants*, frozen in time in their dead ‘natural habitat’, but looking at you. In front of them is a desk, with all the paraphernalia of scholarly research – measurements, graded skin-colour charts, Darwin’s *Origin of the species*, all neatly ordered. There is a curator’s sign identifying the title of the exhibit as ‘Trophies from Eden’, and the media used. You want to read it, but your eyes are locked by those of the people in the exhibit. If you look at the sign you are one of them, those Europeans. So you only glance furtively, perhaps, and try to return the gaze by looking back to acknowledge shared humanity – or so you think. In other rooms there are other displays focusing on the genocide of the Nama and Herero peoples in German South West Africa:

a woman seated amongst a pile of skulls of her compatriots; the skulls have been scoured with pieces of glass in preparation for ethnographic study. In another room a woman sits with her back to us; shackled to the bed of a German soldier she is naked from the waist up, her eyes hold yours in the mirror she is looking into: the title of this Exhibit is 'A Place in the Sun'.

Afterwards, outside, there is a fire and the spectators stand around it in the cold, waiting for the friends or partner they came with. No one speaks for a long time. I recognise Bailey amongst the group. After a while we do begin to talk. He mentions that to debrief after each show the performers discuss (and often laugh about) the reactions of the spectators, some of whom appear defiant, though most are shocked, compassionate or tearful. He tells the cast that they are in fact the spectators and we are the actors. The performers (as is common to Bailey's work) are locals, though in this case he says he had to make sure in the auditions that he chose performers who were not what he called 'crisis actors'. Participating in this production required a strong sense of self. I mention the display that I found particularly disturbing: a room with four white body-sized plinths, on top of which are four singing heads, smeared with clay to suggest burnished bronze sculptures. This exhibit is titled 'Dr Fischer's Cabinet of Curiosities'.¹⁰ Above them hang three large black-and-white framed photographs of decapitated heads. What is particularly unsettling here is the positioning of the photographs in relation to the white-painted sash windows, in perfect symmetry, at odds with the chaotic and unspeakable horror of what is depicted. In this room there is a *chaise longue*-style couch positioned at some distance from the singing heads, as if to acknowledge that spectators will linger in this room. The singing is unbearably beautiful (the choir is from Namibia and sang traditional lamentations in Nama, Ojherero, Oshiwambo, Tswana and isiXhosa),¹¹ and the visceral collision between beauty and disgust is shocking. Equally unsettling is the fact that this is the only display where the living exhibits do not look back at you; they are in profile, yet the dead eyes of the decapitated Nama heads do face you, though they do not see you. As long as you stay to look at the exhibit, the apparently disembodied choir sings, as if your presence makes them sing (which of course it does). If you stay longer, you hear how the lead singer (Marcellinus Swartbooi) has to clear a scratchy throat before beginning the next cycle of lamentations. When the effect of this exhibit is mentioned to Bailey he refuses to be drawn; he simply agrees, yes, it is disturbing, this combination of horror and beauty. At the same time, however, this is an example of how, as performance, the recycling of images in effect disrupts the embodied histories depicted here. The eerily singing heads, for instance, refuse to be defined by their 'real' photographic images as three decapitated Nama men.

This explains why I disagree with Mary Corrigan's (2012: 7) critique of Bailey's 'perverse museum', which she describes as a problematic work because of the way it 'reaffirms the stereotype of the Africans as victims'. According to Corrigan (*ibid.*):

Their agency is in the subversion; the fact that the victims are actors; it is the audience that are on display, proposes Bailey. Viewers are meant to confront their own guilt-complicity in the atrocities or even their ignorance of them should induce it. It's a farce from both sides; a game that exposes a desire to scrutinise others, the thrill of the

grotesque, which is masked, erased, and forgiven by the subsuming guilt that automatically ensues.

Obviously, if approaching a work by, as it were, 'looking for stereotypes', one will certainly find them. This is a quibble this author (Flockemann) has with much local theatre criticism that fails to be open to how stereotypes might be simultaneously invoked and destabilised *as* performance. In other words, there seems to be a tendency to read performance events as if they were textually 'fixed', thereby ignoring the acts of transfer made possible through a live performance event (as described by Taylor earlier). It seems a mistake to read these exhibits as 'affirming stereotypes'; instead, the way the exhibits look back at one says something different; it is not accusing, it is simply direct, as if to return to the very basics: 'I am here, a person, a human being like you.' The viewer is simply implicated in the look.

Another problem is that Corrigan equates 'subsuming guilt' with complicity. These are not the same things, and as is suggested earlier, the way the exhibit forces one (apparently passively) to experience and thus acknowledge complicity (through being witnesses to the exhibits on display), is in keeping with a recognition of complicity as a necessary first step to bringing about meaningful political change (as argued by Sanders 2002: 15); guilt on the other hand, leads nowhere. Corrigan also objects to anomalies in the historical timeline in the way Bailey includes present-day abuses of refugees in the 'Found Objects' section in the basement of the exhibition space. Corrigan's (2012: 7) objection is that by focusing on how Europeans treat Africans, Bailey ignores incidents such as the xenophobic attacks by black South Africans on fellow 'foreign' African refugees, arguing that 'he can't include this because it undermines the position of Africans as victims'. However, this only makes sense if one accepts her premise that this is about 'affirming victimhood', and that the audience is fairly homogenous (and shares feelings of guilt). According to Corrigan (*ibid.*), even though the inclusion of an apartheid-era scene 'might atone for his own complicity ... it's not an authentic platform for redress: he is flogging this theatre of victimhood to the guilty as part of their own false desire to seek temporary redemption through art'. (Corrigan is referring to the final exhibit which has a middle-aged coloured woman seated before three ever-flushing toilets labelled 'for Non-Whites only'). In effect, however, the spectators who encounter these embodied histories one by one will have very different subjective responses: some might feel manipulated, others will feel moved, disturbed, defensive or traumatised, and certainly all will feel unsettled. After all, 'I always like to disturb,' claims Bailey (2012). That is surely enough. I hardly think Bailey is expecting audiences to both feel guilty and then find forgiveness and redemption through art all in one go. The inclusion of the present-day 'found objects' that Corrigan objects to, felt more like the present intruding into the recycled tableaux of the past.

Both Bailey and Yael Farber speak about how they are drawn to recycling or revisioning stories from the past as a way of addressing present concerns. For instance, commenting on his most recent production, *MedEia*, Bailey (in Daniel 2012b: n.p.) notes that he likes to 'knit together several genres and influences' to explore 'the fractious relationship between Africa and Europe, immigration and ritual'. On the other hand, for Farber, Strindberg's play speaks about power. While the original focuses on class and

gender, she is concerned here with the ongoing failure in this country to address economic power. In her attempt to ‘capture this and the other subtle forms of complicated colonizing that occurred as a result of apartheid’, she explains that ‘*Mies Julie* allows me to explore what Greek Tragedy offers. The pallet to explore the national within the realm of the personal and domestic’ (in Daniel 2012a: n.p.). Farber claims that sexual relations across the colour line (which after all are now commonplace and legal – ‘hardly a shocker’) are not the focus of *Mies Julie*. Instead, she identifies ‘primal issues’ such as ‘land, ownership, power, sexuality, mothers, memories’ (ibid.). Despite these claims, however, it is because of how the complicated legacy of apartheid is staged in the visceral intimacies of the encounters between Julie and John that this relationship is central to how audiences respond to the play. For example, the farmhouse kitchen provides ‘a potent convergence point of domination, domestic practicality and untenable sadness’ (ibid.), and the stage chemistry between Julie (Hilda Cronjé) and John (Bongile Mantsai) is palpably embodied in their interactions with each other. By casting Christine (a maid who in Strindberg’s play is John’s fiancée) as his mother, Farber focuses attention on the fluidity of the power dynamics between John and Julie. Apart from the racially inflected class hierarchies there is the push–pull of the love–hate of siblings vying for a mother’s attention, since Christine (Thoko Ntshinga) becomes, in effect, Julie’s proxy mother (Julie’s own mother committed suicide). It has been noted that the doubleness characterising the paternalistic yet intimate relationships in racialised spaces such as the farmhouse (which in this case veer away from that of mother/ proxy child to brother/sister to master/farm labourer, but also man/woman and then, lovers), results in a form of hysteria, ‘a madness that comes from living in two worlds’ (Mbembe 2004: 402). Quoting Elissa Marder, Mbembe (2004: 403) notes that hysteria is a form of suffering resulting from ‘repressed memories that fail to be integrated into the psyche’, and in this way, ‘hysteria partakes of a backward movement through time’.

This pull of that backward movement accounts for the ‘mesmerising’ qualities that Farber achieves in her stage aesthetic (Daniel 2012a: n.p.). This is created partly by the physicality of the choreographed dance of desire and repulsion signifying the relationship between Julie and John, where what they say to one another is often countered by what their bodies *do* (both performers are also dancers, and this achieves yet another level of communication). All this against the backdrop of an oppressive stage imagery where the slowly churning fan overhead suggests the inevitability of the human tragedy unfolding: the fan only stops at the moment of Julie’s brutally self-inflicted death when she attempts to abort John’s prospective ‘seed’. In addition, there is a haunting soundscape created by Thandiwe Nofirst Lungisa who, as an ancestral spirit, circles the stage from time to time as the living embodiment of the past inserting itself into the present, her traditional instruments and guttural throat singing underscored by the electronic music created by two young Canadian musicians who, like her, are on stage throughout, providing a subtext to the events.¹² Some spectators have objected to the way familiar gender/race dichotomies are replicated in the play. One could cite the poster here, which shows the two in an embrace of sorts with a powerfully muscular John poised apparently menacingly over Julie; her upside-down face is lit from above while his is in shadow. The symmetry of their hands and faces, looking not at each other but at the viewer, suggests power and vulnerability caught in a vice, rather than the possibility of tenderness. As mentioned earlier, however, one should guard against reading ‘for’ stereotype, and

consider how these images are re- and de-contextualised, since this ‘frozen’ moment captured in the poster is contradicted by the ever-shifting dynamics of their relationship in performance.

The embodied histories performed in these works throw up a number of paradoxes. For instance, Bailey (in Smith 2012: n.p.) notes: ‘My work may be provocative and challenging European audiences to think about certain things but it’s still a white guy taking black artists across to entertain people.’ Nevertheless, he embraces these contradictions, and by repeating the images from the infamous ‘human zoos’ of the 1900s, he is also exploring his own relation to Africa as well as the complicity of his colonial ancestry. Mischievously drawing a parallel between his exhibit and Brett Murray’s controversial painting of Zuma, he says about local audience responses: ‘Some people feel ashamed, disturbed, some feel immense empathy. I don’t know what I expected. I was kind of hoping we’d have chanting masses saying “another white Brett fxxing with our stuff”’ (ibid.). Ironically, while this was not how the work was received in Grahamstown, shortly afterwards the exhibit was indeed greeted with ‘fury’ during its showing in Berlin, when security officers had to remove protesters following a debate on the show (held in the room with Dr Fischer’s Cabinet of Curiosities). Bailey was challenged by South African-born spoken-word artist, Philipp Khabo Koepsell, who argued: ‘If you have a white South African director giving orders to black performers to tell their story voicelessly, you’re not breaking the legacy ... [y]ou are enforcing and reproducing it. You can call it whatever you like, but the fact is that you as a white, privileged person are sitting there and ordering black people around’ (in Apthorp 2012: n.p.). Bailey countered by saying: ‘It’s performance theatre. In every city where we show this work, we work with local performers who take control of it’ (ibid.). The performers who participated in the production seem to corroborate this: an actor from the Asylum Seeker’s (Found Objects) display claimed:

This is my story... I am a Cameroonian and I have been in Germany since 2002. I should have been deported in 2006. I hate talking about it. It’s so painful. I don’t want sympathy: this is how we live every day. There is this silence, but we need to talk about these things. (ibid.)

This suggests that the very voicelessness of the living exhibits Koepsell objects to may be a different way of speaking through the performance (‘I hate talking about it’, yet ‘we need to talk about these things’). Similarly, for the leader of the Namibian choir, Marcellinus Swartbooi, ‘[t]hese are my ancestors. These skulls come from my country. This project was for me a mission, a healing process. It’s an educational tool for an audience’ (ibid.). As indicated by these divergent responses, Bailey’s aesthetic evokes intense reactions, and one should not underestimate the complex and apparently paradoxical dynamic generated by the way the director’s stage images, the performers, as well as the audiences (as witnesses) participate in the process of meaning-making.

As noted earlier, Farber’s play looks at restitution and ‘what can and cannot ever be recovered’ (Farber in Daniel 2012a: n.p.). Certainly it is a bleak story, and staged as a tragedy of thwarted desires and futures playing out in an apparently blighted corner of what Farber calls a post-traumatic South Africa (ibid.), where freedom has still not arrived. This might create the impression that Farber’s is a pessimistic view. She

disagrees, however, saying she wanted to capture that ‘it’s a very “hot” country. There’s intensity to all our encounters in South Africa ... there is a visceral honesty to being inside a society that’s in a state of such profound transition’ (Farber in Cavendish 2012: n.p.). Farber’s comment suggests that the pull of the ‘backward movement’ of the play is a product of being caught up in the ‘profound transition’ into an uncertain future, while the heightened or ‘hot’ stage aesthetic (at times somewhat reminiscent of Tennessee Williams) aims to capture the ‘visceral honesty’ of being caught in this transitional moment. Paradoxically, however, John and Julie feel they have no future, trapped as they are by their shared ancestral histories. Despite this paradox, the ending of the play is ambivalent:⁵ the lights come up on a series of vignettes featuring the characters in isolation, trapped in a spotlight, one by one. John, now literally in the Master’s shoes, has a gun in one hand and the sickle (that Julie used in her fatal abortion) in the other, poised to act or to run (where, to do what?). After a blackout the light shifts to his mother, unable to vote since she has literally scrubbed off her fingerprints, yet still perpetually washing the Master’s floor which overlays her ancestral remains. In a subsequent production at the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town, the vignette that dominated was that of the ancestral spirit seated on the tree stump, facing sideways and playing the bow-harp. Her music was gradually joined by a soaring saxophone riff. It was as if the musicians at opposite ends of the stage were finding each other’s voices through the soundscape produced by the musical exchange, even though the bodies of the actors were captured and apparently constrained in the series of freeze-frames. You were thus watching not one, but many embodied stories. For instance, the cycle of apparently inescapable suffering evoked when a delirious Julie recounts ancestral memories of children in Boer War concentration camps just before her death, is juxtaposed against the transcendence of the musical communication across time and space and into the future through the ‘conversation’ produced by the interactions between Lungisa’s traditional instruments and the improvisations of the young Canadian musicians.

Despite the contradictions in the recycled images in *Exhibit A*, or in the retold stories that seem trapped in unresolved pasts in *Mies Julie*, as well as in a return to the ‘cries for help’ in *Itso seng*, these works do not fall into the category Mbembe identifies as ‘empty of concept’. As Farber (in Daniel, 2012a: n.p.) points out, in the process of repetition or adaptation one has to be wary of employing inversions and subversions simply for effect: ‘These choices have to come from a place of integrity, aligned to what you are trying to say with the work.’ This ‘place of integrity’ accounts for the durability of these works in which the performed embodiment of personal histories can be seen to provide an alternative (if intangible) archive of sorts, though not necessarily organised along a grid as suggested by Mbembe. As argued here, works like *Exhibit A*, *Mies Julie* and *Itso seng* offer evidence not of entropy, but engagement aimed at ‘giving form to life’ (Mbembe 2011: n.p.). Considering how these works speak to some of the familiar paradoxes of art could throw some light on how this is achieved.

The greatest challenge facing artists today (not only in South Africa, but worldwide), claims Bert Olivier (2012: 12), is ‘to find inventive ways to represent the unrepresentable’. Two of the paradoxes of art identified by Olivier that need to be taken into account are worth mentioning, since they speak to Diana Taylor’s (2003: 20) comments about performance as transmitting cultural memory and identity, and her claim that by

'being there' audiences become 'part of the transmission'. First, from Gadamer, Olivier (2012: 12) notes that art is *ergon* (work) and *energeia* (energy) simultaneously, in that 'the art work's structure (for as long as it lasts) has a certain durability that comprises the basis for its "repeatability"'. Each time one views the performance the 'work' is repeated, and energy is produced 'when the interpretable meaning embodied in the work is transmuted into praxis and action' (in this case as live performance). Second, art is 'both image as well as thing': 'Unlike the concepts of philosophy or science, art's inalienable medium is the image, which is inseparable from imagination on the part of the artist and audience/viewer alike' (ibid.). Olivier notes that unlike, for instance, a (sur)realist painting, these images do not have to represent something. Moreover, as Mbembe notes, as with the mask, the image produces ambiguity, because otherwise it would not be interpretable.

By way of conclusion, a return to Mbembe's concerns about trends in South African photographic culture at the 'Figures and Fictions' exhibition, and his comment that this discussion should be opened up to discourses on other art forms. While Mbembe (2011: n.p.) claims that '[h]istory has been replaced by an endless procession of bodies, a permanent compiling of weak images and objects devoid of any concept', the embodied performances discussed here are not devoid of concept, nor do they simply recycle images or merely regenerate toxic energies from the past, voided of content, mainly for sensational (rather than sensorial) effects. Instead, these embodied stories and performed images signify how the past leaks into or thrusts itself into the present and future through the 'liveness' of performance. Furthermore, by repeating and dislocating images they become defamiliarised and invite uncomfortable parallels or fresh interpretations. In *Mies Julie*, for example, the sound images of the musical conversation between the ancestral spirit and the young Canadian musicians seem to transcend the freeze-frames of entrapment that end the play, while the singing heads in Bailey's *Exhibit A* simultaneously underscore and transcend the horrors of genocide captured by the photographs in 'Dr Fischer's Cabinet of Curiosities'.

Notes

1. Here the 'real' as Badiou (2010: 100) puts it, is 'the real of peoples, with the lives of people and the movement of ideas'. Referring to the deep unease articulated by Lacan, Baudelaire, Barthes, et al. about the 'constitutive elements of the Real', Mbembe notes that this anxiety is absent in precolonial African art, where the mask (and here he draws on Rotimi Fani-Kayode) 'is both a sign of human presence and of his or her absence'.
2. Grahamstown is a former frontier town, located in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. It is an educational centre and the home of Rhodes University. It has hosted the National Arts Festival (formerly the Grahamstown Festival) for almost 40 years.
3. See Flockemann, Cornelius and Phillips 2012 (in press).
4. Dominic Cavendish (2012), for example, claims that the production 'has set a benchmark of excellence – and visceral relevance – that productions elsewhere, even at the Traverse, have struggled to match'.
5. The first performances of *Exhibit A* (produced by the Wiener Festwochen) were in Vienna in 2010.
6. What has been termed the 'Marikana massacre' took place on 16 August 2012 when police opened fire on striking miners from the Lonmin-owned mine at Marikana, near Rustenburg. The official death toll during this period was 44. At the time of writing, the commission of enquiry is ongoing.
7. Dolan (2005: 13) notes that it is the 'liveness', the 'present-tenseness' of performance that allows for imaginings to be enacted 'in the good no-place that is theatre'.
8. *Exhibit A* focuses mainly on the history of German South West Africa, while *Exhibit B* deals with the Belgian Congo and *Exhibit C* will tour to London and Edinburgh.
9. Programme Note, Grahamstown Festival, 2012. (It is interesting that as a preface to the programme note Bailey uses a quote by Mbembe about the painting of Zuma, referred to at the beginning of this piece.)
10. This refers to 'Professor Eugene Fischer (1874–1967) who developed some of the racial hygiene theories on which the holocaust was based, especially at the South West African concentration camps' (see Bailey 2010).
11. The singers were the only non-local performers, and they travel with the piece. They have been trained by a Windhoek-based composer, Marcellinus Swartbooi, who also arranged the songs for the production.
12. Brothers Daniel and Matthew Pencer. (Yael Farber has been partly based in Canada for the past five years.)
13. Thanks to Marcia Blumberg for pointing out the different nuances created by the lighting for the closing vignettes in her insightful lecture: 'Reworking Strindberg: staging Yael Farber's *Mies Julie*' (Thinkfest, National Arts Festival 2012), in which she tracked how these effects had undergone changes from the opening night to subsequent performances.

References

- Apthorp, S. 2012. Black 'human zoo' fury greets Berlin Art Show. *Bloomberg News*, 3 October. <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-10-03/black-human-zoo-fury-greets-berlin-art-show.html> (accessed 17 October 2012).
- Badiou, A. 2010. This crisis is the spectacle: where is the real? *The Communist Hypothesis*. London: Verso. <http://stormchan.org/study/src/1345840069690.pdf> (accessed 13 June 2013).
- Banks, S. 2012. I'd like you to be disturbed. *Exberliner Magazine*. <http://www.exberliner.com/articles/interview%3Abrett-bailey> (accessed 10 October 2012).
- Blumberg, M. 2012. Reworking Strindberg: staging Yael Farber's *Mies Julie*. Unpublished lecture, Thinkfest, National Arts Festival, Grahamstown, 28 June to 8 July.
- Brett Bailey, Exhibit A: Dr Fischer's Cabinet of Curiosities; Found Objects.' *Kiasma Theatre*, 27 May 2010. <http://www.kiasma.fi/calendar/kiasmatheatre/brett-bailey> (accessed 1 October 2012).
- Cavendish, D. 2012. Edinburgh Festival 2012: *Mies Julie* – the smash hit of the Fringe. *The Telegraph*, 16 August. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/edinburgh-festival-reviews/9480925/Edinburgh-Festival-2012-Mies-Julie-The-smash-hit-of-the-Fringe>. accessed 6 October 2012).
- Corrigall, M. 2012. Beyond the past. *Sunday Independent*, 15 July: 6–7.
- Daniel, J. 2012a. <http://thebaxterblog.wordpress.com/2012/06/20/mies-julie-exploring-the-national-within-the-realm-of-the-personal/> (accessed 16 September 2012).
- Daniel, J. 2012b. Brett Bailey on MedEia: 'A straight drama is seldom enough for me'. *The Baxter Blog. In the Wings and Behind the Curtain*. <http://thebaxterblog.wordpress.com/2012/08/16/brett-bailey-on-medeia-a-straight-drama-is-seldom-enough-for-me/> (accessed 16 September 2012).
- Dolan, J. 2005. *Utopia in performance: finding hope at the theatre*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Edmunds, G. 2012. Chit chat: Omphile Molusi. *City Press*, 15 June. <http://www.citypress.co.za/entertainment/chit-chat-omphile-molusi-20120615/> (accessed 1 October 2012).
- Flockemann, M. 2011. The road that calls: from poor theatre to theatres of excess. In *SA Lit Beyond 2000*, ed. M. Chapman and M. Lenta, 159–176. Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Flockemann, M., J. Cornelius and J. Phillips. In press. Grahamstown 2012: 'Theatres of Belonging. Longing and counting the bullets'. *South African Theatre Journal* 26.
- Gibson, N. 2011. *Fanonian practices in South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- 'Itsoseng and *For the right reasons* by Omphile Molusi.' 2008. *Realreview* <http://realreview.co.za/tag/omphile-molusi/> (accessed 1 October 2012).
- Jones, M. 2012. Machel calls for SA to face its demons by setting up a new TRC. *Cape Times*, 3 October: 1.
- Makhofola, G. 2010. R10m for Itsoseng. *The Sowetan*, 12 October. <http://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/2010/10/12/r10m-for-itsoseng> (accessed 1 October 2012).
- Mbembe, A. 2004. Aesthetics of superfluidity. *Public Culture* 16(3): 373–405.

- Mbembe, A. 2011. The dream of safety. Lecture at the Victorian and Albert Museum, Monday 4 July. <http://dreamofsafety.blogspot.com/2011/07/achille-mbembes-lecture-at-victoria-and.html> (accessed 28 September 2012).
- Mbembe, A. 2012. Culture and demagoguery: the spear that divided the nation. *Cape Times*, 5 June: 11.
- Molusi, O. 2008. *Itsoseng* and *For the right reasons*. Cape Town: Junkets Publishers.
- Olivier, B. 2012. Presenting the unrepresentable and other posers. *Cape Times*, 18 September: 12.
- Sanders, M. 2002. *Complicities: the intellectual and apartheid*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Smith, T. 2012. Exhibit A touches a nation's pain. *Tonight whats on link*. <http://www.iol.co.za/tonight/what-s-on/gauteng/exhibit-a-touches-nation-s-pain-1.1333323> (accessed 1 October 2012).
- Taylor, D. 1997. *Disappearing acts: spectacles of gender and nationalism in Argentina's Dirty War*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Taylor, D. 2003. *The archive and the repertoire: performing cultural memory in the Americas*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Zikode, S. 2006. 'We are the Third Force.' *Abahlali baseMjondolo*. <http://www.abahlali.org/node/17> (accessed 10 March 2009).