Uncomfortable Collaborations: Contesting Constructions of the Poor in South Africa

Shannon Walsh

This article deconstructs the problematic way the ‘Poor’ are represented by the intellectual ‘Left’ as a fixed, virtuous subject. Even while this fixed identity is actively mobilised by people themselves to gain symbolic and real power, I argue that the philosopher’s fixation on the singular subjectivity of the oppressed confines the ‘Poor’ to their very subjugation. Instead, I propose a more nuanced understanding of how agency and oppression occur within the uncomfortable collaborations that are forged between various actors. My argument is grounded in experiences with the shack dwellers movement in Durban (Abahlali baseMjondolo, ABM), and young AIDS activists in Khayeltisha and Atlantis, South Africa.

Academics flourish out of the despondency of the destitute. ... Even after letters of consultation and coverage in the media, not a single government official has come to tell us their position. There has been no water in our settlement for 40 years, no toilets. Before the 1994 elections they were promised to us but they have still not come ... We have lost hope (Sbu Xaba, community leader from Banana City shack settlement). 1

Sbu Xaba’s frustration and despair is understandable. After the end of apartheid there was genuine hope that the lives of the poor would improve. This is what the incoming ANC government had promised. But as more than a decade passed, hope turned to frustration, despair and anger. Those most affected by these broken promises, the ‘poors’, 2 have not been silent. In 2005 alone there were 6,000 protests in South Africa. The growing dissatisfaction was evident on 27 April 2006, as Abahlali BaseMjondolo (the shack dwellers’ movement), with community movements throughout Durban, organised an ‘UnFreedom Day’ event in protest of the dire conditions in which so many people live. Their cry resounded around the country: ‘No Freedom for the Poor!’

As the voices of the poors grow in force and volume many other actors clamour on board to decry the injustice of their situation and to explain, report and comment on their struggle. Xaba identified that ‘academics flourish out of the despondency of the destitute’ and he should know, with the shacks of Banana City 3 sitting insecurely on the grounds of the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal. The university has been attempting to ‘relocate’ and evict residents of Banana City, some of whom have been living there for over 70 years.

While Xaba identifies the academics as part of the community he is both a part of and that he is up against, there is almost no reporting or investigation into this ‘flourishing’ class. How do the dynamics of power work within the relations
between these various actors within community movements? This article has two parts, and in them I argue for an unpacking of the construction of the Poor and a broader understanding of the ways agency and oppression occur within the uncomfortable collaborations that are forged between various actors. In the first section, I unpack the identity of the ‘oppressed’ or the Poor as a singular subjectivity. I argue that we need to find ethnographic ways of speaking truth to power (Said, 1993) while simultaneously speaking ‘truth to, and with, the disempowered’ (Desai, 2006). How can Left academics and activists work to insert understandings of power into research and praxis to contest stereotypes that increasingly bind us to a dialectical ‘us versus them’? How also do we break apart ‘the facile axiom that the poor somehow are an embodiment of the truth and, as long as they organise democratically, the line of march they take will advance the cause of freedom?’ (2006:7).

To answer these questions, I will look at three interlinking elements. First, I am interested in how the Poor subject is often created through an evocation of a politics of compassion. This subject has a fixed, essentialised identity which is represented as an ‘embodiment of the truth’ which activates political agency through the voicing of concerns and demands. Second, I unpack how those who are oppressed adopt and challenge this construction, and third, I suggest new ways of thinking about subjectivity that account for the frictions and desires at play within the social field.

Given this starting point, the second half of the paper will attempt to broaden an understanding of uncomfortable collaborations. Once we move away from organising political meaning and mobilisation around identity-based politics, it may be possible to enter into new terrains of action. I’m interested in exploring how uncomfortable collaborations can burst open geographic and identity-based alliances, de-territorialising groupings around commonalities of desire, struggle and event. These collaborations are not mini-utopias, but sites of friction in which diverse power struggles and contestation at the local and everyday level arise. I borrow from Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s definition of friction as a state in which ‘heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power’ (Tsing, 2005:5). Frictions are always present within collaborations of struggle involving the presence of the Left, NGOs, academics and others with ‘interventionist’ goals who form a critical, though often invisible, element of many community movements. I am arguing for a departure from essentialised identities in order to reveal deeper alliances than middle-class-activist meets poor black-revolutionary-subject meets Northern-feminist, and instead signalling lines of flight, new ways of seeing, and collaborations towards a ‘liberation of political desire’ (Barchiesi, et al. 2006:5).

I reflect on my own fieldwork within social movements in South Africa to uncover how constructions of an essentialised identity of the Poor is maintained on one hand by elites, while on the other hand used pro-actively by those most directly oppressed to gain power and activate agency. At the same time, I am interested in how middle-class activists, academics, aid workers and, in this case, the Poor engage in sometimes damaging interactions and patronages that ignore the maintenance of power within the Left, and glorify the Poor black subject to the point of a kind of reverse discrimination or negrophilia.

I explore these two terrains – the construction of the Poor within elite spaces and the friction of uncomfortable collaborations – to re-locate desire into the social field and
how we struggle within it. I follow the urging of Deleuze and Guattari (1972) that desire is the location of socius innately linked to economic production, recording and consumption. How does desire propel movement within social struggles, and how does this operate within the habitus and life strategies of the everyday (Veriava, 2006; DeCerteau, 1994)? Through re-visioning social space, a truly anti-capitalist mode of inquiry and action might emerge. This is a project that is self-reflexive while remaining perceptive to historical processes and lived experience: it is an ethnography-in-motion.

Who are the Poor?
The historical construction of poverty is a relatively new phenomenon linked to the propagation of development discourse after World War Two. Development discourse used systems of thought and action to construct the world into a grid of developed or underdeveloped people and nations deeply bound to a capitalist, neoliberal worldview. As Arturo Escobar (1995) has detailed, development discourse used industrialisation, free market economics and urbanisation as the primary vehicles for ‘poor’ countries to arrive at the modernisation and prosperity that is enjoyed by members of the First World. The living conditions of the First World are positioned as the ultimate ends of this development journey. The ‘underdeveloped’ world, in turn, has been constructed through the elaborate maintenance of discourse at political, economic and cultural levels (Escobar, 1995). In this, poverty as a discursive field became defined in political-economic terms. The more extensive construction of poverty itself as a category of analysis and intervention only became hegemonic in the 1970s after Robert McNamara’s vociferous promotion of the concept in the World Bank.

Prior to this poverty, viewed simply as the inevitable accompaniment of failure to develop economically, was rarely the explicit focus of development initiatives, or of academic study (Green, 2006:1110).

By 2001, the economic model of poverty had been revised by the Bank, in part through the assimilation of civil society and activist positions. Critical development debates made some in-roads towards challenging the concept of an economic solution for global inequality. Poverty, by the 2001 version of the Bank’s analysis, is ‘a state of relative powerlessness and exclusion from decision-making processes’ (World Bank 2001:31). While this stretches notions of poverty out of the exclusively economic realm, the continued construction of poverty as an object served ‘to homogenise attributes of poverty and the situation of those categorised as poor’ (Green, 2006:1111). In the Bank’s paradigm:

Not only is poverty ascribed agency to impact on the lives of people who ‘fall into’ it. It is represented as an evolving entity that must be ‘attacked’ rather than as a consequence of social relations (Green, 2006:1112).

Understanding this trajectory of development reveals the friction between this discourse and that of the Left’s. In attempting to counter some of the problematics of the Bank’s style of engagement the Left has at times homogenised and decontextualised injustice and oppression through the maintenance of a virtuous Poor or grassroots subjectivity that is ‘pure’, close to the ground, and sacrosanct. Ultimately this view presents stagnant, tired binaries that miss the emergence of new political subjectivities and possibilities, limiting creativity and ingenuity, but also
maintaining the very power differential it is meant to destroy. Bertrand Russell (1984) traces the origins of the idea of a ‘superior virtue of the oppressed’ to a certain kind of paternalistic ideology developed by the Left during the French Revolution, and remaining there ever since. Adulation for the oppressed, he argues, usually arrives via a hegemonic actor, one who may well be part of the subjugation of the very ‘oppressed’ he so admires.

The fixing of the virtue of the oppressed can become patronising to the point of domination. If we truly hope to investigate and create oppositions to the encroachment of neo-liberalism, the Left might start by examining the ideologies and discourses already present, within and without, that limit those possibilities. Russell is scathing in his analysis of how idealising the oppressed is useful to the hegemonic classes, both to assuage guilt, but also to refuse the oppressed real power since it is their very subjection that makes them virtuous. Yet when power is finally equalised ‘it becomes apparent to everybody that all the talk about superior virtue was nonsense, and that it was quite unnecessary as a basis for the claim to equality’ (Russell, 1984).

While the Left banters around the virtue of the oppressed, some of these discourses have also enveloped the imaginations and strategies of the oppressed, though in a different way. Those who are materially oppressed are adopting and co-opting the identities they are given, both by the Left and by the state, to search out and enact new agencies, asserting membership within various constructions (from Poor, to HIV+ etc.) in attempts to mobilise resources, status, health care and other services, enacting what some have called a therapeutic citizenship (Ngyuen, 2004). In this case, perhaps even virtue can be set alight in the service of social and material leverage. This is one encounter of the friction within what I call uncomfortable collaborations.

**Leaving Out the Messy Bits**

In asking who the Poor are, we must also ask who are the elites, the middle-class activists and Left academics that are a primary audience for this paper. While the activists I reflect on here – and consider myself a part of – contribute significantly to the maintenance and sustenance of many community movements at various economic, political and social levels, we often escape internal or external scrutiny. This may be due to the fact that we are the same people who are narrating community movements to the public. This group tends to write the academic papers, books and news reports that define movements, yet it is rare that they situate themselves within its narratives or work with those movements on a daily basis. While applauding the many contributions that City People bring to community struggles, Ashwin Desai laments how many also bring ‘infectious political diseases’ based on their particular histories and political desires which seep into social movements (Desai, 2006). I agree with Desai that it is disingenuous to exclude the interactions and interrelationships between these players that come to mark almost every social movement in South Africa.

It is this group of elites that should be seen as a counterfoil for my interrogations of Poor subjectivities. I take up Laura Nader’s warning that ‘everything you say against [the poor and powerless] will be used against them’ to examine how this operates at the local level and how we might begin to unpack the ways we interact, write, work and think about poverty and the Poor (Farmer, 2003:26). Interrogating those relationships, with an eye to improving our ability to work together more
productively and equitably, will likely entail an encounter with some messy bits that we often like to ignore. An example of narrating out the messy bits is illustrated in an experience I recount below. The discomfort and embarrassment of being lauded with unwanted status within disadvantaged communities based on class and racial hegemonies, while not uncommon, is often excluded from reports about community movements where class, gender and race differentials exist. How do we deal with these uncomfortable moments as sites of friction and struggle? These experiences, and the realities they reveal, are difficult to contend with, much less to write about.

After working for a number of months in Durban I was heading back to Canada. At the last minute I was invited to a farewell party, thrown for two other activists and myself who had all been working in the community. A beautiful spread was prepared for us in one of the shack settlements, a tent rented, chairs set up, a video projector organised, and food and drink procured. It was a beautiful gathering of around a hundred people. The City People were seated at a large table at the front of the tent. Each community leader came forward during the ceremony to speak illustriously on our behalf, praising each of us in turn. Gifts were given. It was pointed out that in Zulu culture praise is not normally bestowed on the living, and we should be duly honored to receive such praise in our lifetimes.

During the ceremony a million thoughts ran through my head. Of course, it was deeply touching to be thanked in such a heartfelt way, to be given so much from those who have so little, and it could be said that there were few elites who had ventured into the jondolos (shacks) and who actively supported the struggles of the people there, but still, it was an uncomfortable encounter. Others in the community worked so hard, thanklessly. Why was I being honored? Of course in part it was because of the work I had done with them, but it was at least also in part garnered from my whiteness and foreignness. My discomfort was visceral, even though I was touched by the kindness and sincerity of my hosts. An uneven balance had been struck between us that this moment laid bare, and no matter what I might do, I would always be seen as an outsider in this way, always praised more than a black woman who came from the shacks who did more work under worse conditions. Not to mention the immeasurable things I was gaining from my interactions with these communities, not the least of which might be first-hand perspectives that would feed into my own academic writing, as they are right now. How could I challenge this praise, while also not offending my hosts? I tried to say something to this effect when asked to speak but it was ineffective.10

The fact that I found it difficult to adequately challenge this moment is an important part of the story. It was only with those few individuals that a partial unveiling of these binaries could occur; with those whom I shared a similar trajectory of political desire. The friction in this encounter reveals why these collaborations are uncomfortable. Clearly elites or middle-class activists are often not seen as equals in poor communities where they work. Our farce of solidarity, if it does not factor in the power dynamics at play, suits our own desire to be seen as righteous, good, well-meaning, guiltless. Simultaneously, our silence around these tensions and inequalities factors out our own desires; the how and why we come to these spaces. I agree with Desai that to truly move forward we must recognise how we have been shaped and influenced by our interactions with each other, and ‘to blink or fixate on our own supposed ‘purity’ right now will be tragic’ (Desai, 2006:12). By recognising these interactions and frictions we can begin to unravel the uncomfortable collaborations in action. These collaborations are not only theoretical, but arise because of the material conditions that dominate the realities of people’s lives and which cannot be ideologically swept under the carpet. Theory is too often constructed out of the limbs and lives out of the most oppressed.11
Uncomfortable Collaborations

To give a cursory look at one site in which uncomfortable collaborations are being created I turn to Kennedy Road, a shack settlement I’ve worked in (and briefly lived in) that is the centre of the Abahlali baseMjondolo (shack dweller’s movement). Kennedy Road is a shack settlement comprising of approximately 7,000 residents situated in Clare Estate, Durban. The community movement Abahlali baseMjondolo formed there in November 2005 after a tyre-burning road blockade to protest ‘the sale, to a local industrialist, of a piece of nearby land long promised by the local municipal councillor to shack dwellers for housing’ (Abahlali, 2006). This genesis narrative is the one primarily given by university-based academics that have been involved in the movement since early in its inception, weaned from community members through interviews and first-hand experience (Bryant, 2006; Pithouse, 2005).

Abahlali have been the source of a great deal of academic and activist writing since this beginning, cropping up in the New York Times, the Mail and Guardian, the Economist, Isolezwe (isiZulu paper), and almost all of the other South African papers including most radio and television stations in the country. The extensive writing on the movement has quickly turned it into a cause célèbre within the South African Left, gaining the movement significant notice by city officials.

I focus on this site in particular to draw attention to why an investigation into the specificities of friction and uncomfortable collaboration as encounters of power are so critical. A sweeping valorisation of the inherent truth in the isolated and fragmented identities of the Poor is not only misleading, but it is potentially damaging to community movements. A theoretical binary ignores forces of power and contestation, both within these sites and across them in their varied and contradictory forms, and instead creates a ‘holy good’ in opposition to a ‘rotten evil’, which infiltrates into the way struggles are waged and politics enacted.

Within the context of globalisation and the multiple forces, trajectories and power struggles operating at various scales, this kind of simplistic view of encounters has little hold. Further, as James Ferguson (2006) contends, the process of globalisation, for Africa at least, is not one of ‘flows of capital’ but one of disconnection and separation, of capital hopping, of enclaves, borders, divisions and alternative geographies. Africa may be presenting us with an example of what the future may look like: pockets of wealth, hierarchies of power, spatially linked through capital and often within volatile, unstable states set against tracts of poverty, where large NGOs, corporations and ‘grassroots’ actors overlap and assume functions of the state, horizontally creating new intersections of power. We must trash notions of what he calls vertical topographies of power, which juxtapose state, civil society and other players in a complex hierarchy, to look more closely at modes of operating within social movements and state structures that overlap, re-inscribe and reconfigure relationships of power and governance.

Through problematising these vertical topographies of power we can investigate and contribute to actualizing points of departure towards a radical politics, while also being able to better see what is actually happening within and across uncomfortable collaborations. Within these intersections, the complexities make static, one-dimensional identity politics useless in understanding global and local convergences of power. As Anna Tsing points out, ‘the effects of encounters across difference can be compromising or empowering. Friction is not a synonym for resistance. Hegemony is made as well as unmade with friction’ (Tsing 2005:6).
Sites of Friction

We have seen and we have noted that some of the academics, who can not be mentioned, have begun to play a major role. So comrades, we believe that the civil society academics, intellectuals, have a role to play within Abahlali. The very same people will make us very strong, because we may be strong in toyi-toying but not strong in strategizing, so our cleverness is that; that we provide a platform for the clever people to utilize (S’bu Zikode, elected president of Abahlali BaseMjondolo, 2006).

An analysis into the sheer number of actors, spaces and events that come together in the creation and development of Abahlali gives significant insight into its often neglected complexity. Looking closely at the forces of different agents that intersect with the movement can provide glimpses into the frictions of power at play in social movement spaces.

These frictions have a great deal to teach us about how gains are won and lost, how power is wielded and withheld. My point is not that we must always tell the whole story, but that it is important not to position ABM members as Poor subjects apart from the apparatus of power that surrounds them and within which they engage, challenge, contest and collaborate. To construct the singularity of experience for any one of its members without reference to the multiplicity of experiences of power on various scales and geographies – in short to create a ‘pure’ Poor subject out of this dynamic mix of forces – would be a massive oversight. While references to certain actors (the police, the City, the councillors, the Minister of Housing, the middle-class Indian neighbours, Moreland) make their way into the writing about the movement, others (the urban activists, academics, (most) NGOs, residents not part of the movement, rural families, and capitalists) are not mentioned. This is a certain kind of storytelling, to be sure.

Of course every story has a narrator and every story must leave some things out in lieu of others. Yet the frictions between what is told, and what remains in the shadows, often lays at the core of how politics are enacted and how movements define, defend and create themselves. For example, debate has once again grown vociferous around the role of middle-class activists in community movements. While the ABM has spoken out angrily about the loss of some academic activists and resources to their movement due to shuffling at a university institution (the Centre for Civil Society, CCS), others have decried what they see as ‘the tragic manner in which the ABM has become a pawn in the hands of certain “academic activists” whose actions – in academic spaces – have resulted in isolation for them as individuals’ (Naidoo, 2006) and who have hid behind the ABM to wage their own battles for institutional space.

This friction manifested concretely at the Social Movements Indaba (SMI) held in Durban in December 2006. The AMB, after having been part of the organising team leading up to the SMI for many months, boycotted the event and then disrupted it to voice their concerns and criticisms of the event. The SMI was a meeting of over 30 community movements, NGOs, middle-class activists and academics meant to build solidarity between movements at a national level in South Africa.

Friction here happened at multiple, almost mind-boggling, levels. Middle-class activists and NGOs were criticised by the ABM for writing about the movement without having a direct relationship with the ABM itself. They also criticised the CCS for what they saw as a wrongful dismissal of four academics who had been funnelling CCS resources into the movement. Sides were taken. Many members of
community movements had tirelessly worked to put together the SMI and were deeply offended by the co-opting of their space by what they saw as a chauvinist flaunting of power by ABM. They were also dismayed by issues raised by the ABM regarding internal tiffs with an academic institution which was not directly linked to the SMI meeting. Other activists smelled a rat, and opined that ABM was being ‘used’ by these same disgruntled academics to wage battles on their behalf.

At the same time as the SMI meeting was underway, ABM was participating in a weekend workshop on housing issues held by the NGO, COHRE (Centre on Housing Rights & Evictions). There was evidently confusion within ABM about what the SMI was, based on the fact that they made demands meant for government officials concerning land and housing to the SMI, while in fact the SMI was a collection of comrades and fellow community movements from across the country, not government officials. This embarrassing mistake further emphasised a sense that the demarcations between various roles, solidarities and antagonisms were not clear.

Activists quickly came out vocally around the SMI and began to articulate their own understandings of the frictions at work in community struggle. Prishani Naidoo, an activist who has worked extensively with the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) in Johannesburg, wrote the following on a national activist message board in relation to the SMI debate:

> I have never presumed to ‘speak on behalf’ of those who know the material conditions being fought better than I do, but I have not surrendered my own voice either (a voice that is itself a product of personal and collective struggle). While I have certainly listened and been directed in struggle by those directly affected, I have also shared with them my own ideas and experiences, and often disagreed with them about strategies and tactics. This I have done as an equal in a community of people in struggle, but recognising that I do not participate in this particular struggle from the same position.

Naidoo criticised other activists who valorise the ‘authentic’ voice of the Poor and who act as ‘self-appointed guardians’ of that voice. Internal fighting amongst the academic/activist left ensued, finding some vent in the most widely circulated weekly paper in South Africa, the *Mail & Guardian*.

While criticising NGOs and some academics they feel are not sympathetic, ABM are also deeply involved with other academics and NGOs that they have chosen to work with. Desire based alliances have been made which have more to do with favouring some institutions and academics over others, rather than with ideological fallouts. Some of the favoured academics position themselves as ‘support workers’ for ABM rather than visible allies in the struggle. This curious positioning is an attempt, they say, to allow ‘grassroots movements’ to lead themselves, and therefore they ‘perform a balancing act of sorts, offering their assistance without taking over the movement’ (Harris 2006:25). Yet, as I am arguing here, uncomfortable collaborations and frictions are always at work, whether middle-class activists have the best intentions to remain at a distance from movements or not.

This can be evidenced at a discursive level. Early on in ABM’s struggle the main issues were identified as land and housing. Recently, gaining ‘voice’ has become a larger preoccupation, due in part perhaps because the core cadre of activists have seen a fair amount of media coverage garnered in part by the influence of academics and middle-class activists using media savvy and connections.
As Harris (2006) writes, ‘when asked what [Abahlali’s] biggest accomplishment as a movement has been, most members did not hesitate to answer that it was winning the right to speak for themselves’ (Harris, 2006:25). The genealogy of this conceptual shift would be necessary to trace in detail, but even at a surface reading it can be seen as an example of how frictions between NGO/academic discourse and this particular social movement have played out. For example, Richard Pithouse, one of the most prominent commentators and an honorary member and organiser with Abahlali recently described

_Abahlali’s founding protest not as a service delivery protest, but as a bid to be heard, to be given a voice … Abahlali don’t want to be represented by elites. They want to have their own voice. They want a say in government_ (in Harris, 2006:25).

Yet in early accounts of Abahlali’s mandates, the idea of ‘voice’ was rarely mentioned. In transcribed interviews land, housing and the frustration of waiting too long for service delivery were consistently given as the reason the communities had mobilised (Bryant, 2005; Purcell, 2006). There has been an evident evolution of how the movement is conceptualised internally which has in no small part been effected by the way ABM has intersected with other activists, the city, the law, and other factions.

It is interesting that while so much has been made of ‘voice’, a truly amazing amount of discourse has emerged in recent interviews and writing in which Abahlali members articulate their ‘democratic’ role to speak for those who have no voice (Harris, 2006:25). In one turn, ABM claim that the most central gain of their movement has been to be able to ‘speak for themselves’, while at the same time, several activists feel that though they do not have the resources to mobilise beyond Durban, ‘Abahlali is already a national movement’ that speaks on behalf of all shack dwellers (Harris, 2006:40). While a key slogan is ‘speak to us not for us’, Abahlali has begun to articulate a right to speak on behalf of other poor people living in shacks. The contradiction between ‘speaking for themselves’ and ‘speaking on behalf of other poor people’, as long as it is done by poor people themselves, is uncritically accepted by the Left and those writing about the movement. The trickling in of the ‘Speaking for Ourselves’ discourse and its embrace to such a degree that now other ‘Poors’ are now being spoken for is a very curious example of friction at work.

This cursory synopsis of frictions at work in spaces of supposed solidarity points to the need to take seriously an analysis of struggle and of subjective positioning that includes how antagonisms and uncomfortable collaborations operate. It also highlights how these uncomfortable collaborations can disrupt the possibility of imagining new modes of struggle necessary to confront neo-liberalism.

Towards the Broken (or Unfitting the Fixed)

While the World Bank creates a homogenous ‘Poor’ subject, the Left at times also envisions an oppressed agent that is sacrosanct in its wretchedness. Ultimately this creates a politics of piety that relies on the benevolence of the big-hearted who hear the lamentful cries of the Poor and spring into action to ‘help’. Miriam Ticktin (2006) has shown how dangerous, and binding, this style of politics can be. She traces how a politics of compassion abstracts political reality, reducing claims for justice to that of ‘bare life’. A politics of compassion, while being usefully exploited for claims of residency and citizenship by migrants in France, is ultimately deeply problematic in the way it conflates social and economic well-being with biological illness or health.
The move away from a discussion of rights and justice to humanitarianism as exception that relies on the compassion of individuals, NGOs, and the state creates an even more arbitrary, unfair system of power.

The Northern imposition of a therapeutic model of self-improvement through institutions, aid workers and humanitarian organisations, also feeds into a politics of compassion in which populations are encouraged to lower their expectations and aspirations (Pupavac, 2004). Material complaints are de-politicised as onus is placed on the individual and community to undergo emotional and psychological development in order to improve their lives. This politics of piety has no room within social movements that seek to address material grievances. The slogan ‘Solidarity Not Charity!’ mobilised frequently by the community-initiated Common Ground Collective is an apt reminder of the trouble with a charity model. 15

Refiguring political understandings of justice and equality towards a therapeutic and compassion-based model loses sight of the concrete everyday economic and structural needs of the various groups under investigation. They disrupt and contest discourses of empowerment and intervention and ironically deny agency to those already lacking political power. At the same time they point out how these subjects still activate political action even within this degraded terrain. In addition, the valorisation of the Poor as the ‘embodiment of Truth’ creates a category of people (the oppressed) that are deemed unworthy of honest debate, discussion and engagement through placing them on a pedestal of wretchedness.

Can we learn to conceive, theoretically and politically, of a ‘grassroots’ that would not be local, communal, and authentic, but worldly, well connected, and opportunistic? Are we ready for social movements that fight not ‘from below’ but ‘across’, using their ‘foreign policy’ to fight struggles not against ‘the state’ but against that hydra-headed transnational apparatus of banks, international agencies, and market institutions through with contemporary capitalist domination functions? (Ferguson, 2006:107).

By valorising the very condition of being ‘Poor’, the poor themselves are immobilised. Their fight against poverty conflicts with the only way they are mobilised to access power: through valorising their bare life (Agamben, 2005). The Poor are thrust between a rock and a hard place. To have legitimacy, gain power and voice within spaces of the Left, NGO programmes, workshops, and international programmes, means to stake a claim on an identity as the virtuous Poor, yet to be Poor means to have no power. Ultimately, this faulty, circular reasoning leads to a conclusion that ‘if virtue is the greatest of goods, and if subjection makes people virtuous, it is kind to refuse them power, since it would destroy their virtue’ (Russell, 1984). Rather than this colonial and patronising view of struggle and those who are fighting against subjugation, we should rather follow Ferguson’s urgings to,

rethink our ideas of popular struggle and to prepare ourselves to learn from Third World transnational ‘hackers’ with a sense of media politics, as well as a sense of humor – and from movements that offer us no a pure and centred subject of resistance but, like the sub-commander [Marcos posing for a Benetton ad], a quite different figure: masked, ambivalent, impure, and canny (Ferguson, 2006:108).

To insist upon a sacred space of oppression as the only one from which struggle can occur means that there is no genuine political will towards liberation. If our struggle is broader than winning small concessions here and there to improve material conditions within capitalism, we must jettison a mode of struggle that is so politically short-sighted.
Rethinking Subjectivity

To understand what we are leaving out in a static view of identity, we must explore more fully what new models of subjectivity might look like. This is perhaps what Heinrich Böhmke was recommending when he wrote that:

> the notion of ‘subjectivity’ is [a theoretical] tool … we must all start grappling with. Whatever the case, a radical rethinking of actually existing social-movements as the agent, vehicle, promise and pretence of revolutionary struggle in South Africa is called for (Böhmke, 2006:64).

In an attempt honestly to evaluate the potential of new subjectivities I want to draw on a few examples from my own fieldwork, as well as drawing on proposals for understandings agency advanced by contemporary anthropologists.

Over the past number of years I have been doing research with a group of young people around HIV prevention in Khayelitsha and Atlantis, South Africa. At the point that I describe, we had been working together for five years. I had watched these young people grow into adults, leave high school and enter the world of jobs, university, and for some, poverty. As my work with them deepened I began to notice how they had activated their involvement in our project over the years as well as their own status (as HIV+, as peer educators, and activists) to make gains and secure footing for their own social, economic and physical well-being. In a sense they mobilised a *therapeutic citizenship* as a part of their identities (Nguyen, 2005). There is a growing body of work in anthropology that examines biological and *therapeutic citizenship* as a site for political agency across global terrains (Petryna, 2002; Nguyen, 2005; Ong, 2006). Vinh-Kim Nguyen argues that the international AIDS industry functions in a dialectic with local political bargaining to create *therapeutic citizens*, who use their health status to mobilise resources and stake claims for treatment and care within global moral economies in which treatment is very inaccessible. He documents the irresponsibility of the global AIDS industry in adequately dealing with the pandemic, in fact even worsening the situation through ill-conceived projects, yet opening a space for *therapeutic citizenship*, in which what is at stake is life itself.

In our study, one participant used status gained from being a published author within the project as a means of activating status in her community as a ‘go-to’ person for advice, care and support; a young man used various elements of his participation within the project to find ways to travel abroad, speak on panels and at conferences and get paid work as an educator; another young woman publicised her HIV status, activating her potential to get treatment within health networks she might not otherwise have accessed; yet another young woman used her experiences to gain some notoriety in her community (speaking on the radio) which eventually helped her find a job as a social worker with young sex workers in her community. There are many other examples that show how collaborations with an HIV prevention project were transformed, utilised and mobilised to access material and psychological gains, however small. In this case, the association with the virus, not only their particular status, and their active engagement as young people became a means to find alternative strategies of the everyday, at least for a while. Five years after our first encounters, they told new, surprising narratives of how participation in the project influenced their practical lives in terms of trips, jobs, school opportunities and other social and economic benefits.
Some ways of naming AIDS in isiZulu and Xhosa, for example, can also denote a sense of agency within a biological claim. *Ufuna ukuba famous* (she wants to be famous), or *Ufuna imali kahulumeni* (he wants money from the government), can both be used to describe someone with HIV or AIDS (Dowling, 2006). While these expressions have negative connotations, they also indicate the possibility of status and economic gain. While I am not implying that people are abusing or misusing the system, I am trying to draw attention to the fact that people are negotiating a system that is for the most part not providing for them. They are active in this negotiation, finding loopholes here, potential benefits there, in a context where very little opportunity is available to them. In this way, we can see subjectivities that are active, desiring and mobile. Biological citizens and therapeutic citizens both challenge neo-liberalism through an agency that is continually shifting between identities, operating in and through joints the of power and state structures.

While biological status might be mobilised in the face of grim realities to gain some compensation or recognition from the state, it could also be the groundwork for new strategies of engaging with one another and with ‘oppression’, ultimately leading to ways out of the dangerous lifestyles that young people in disadvantaged communities can find themselves in. In this story written Thumb, a young man in our research group, describes how his life is transformed by his friend’s HIV disclosure.

*I grew up in the township called Gugulethu in the 1980s. That time was during the Apartheid era, and there was a lot of criminal activity in my life. We used to vandalise property, hit trucks, do highjackings. The police sometimes chased us. We used to carry tools to defend ourselves. I’ve done these things and played my role with gangsters. I didn’t stop my criminal activities when we moved away from Gugs and went to Khayelitsha.*

*Then something happened to change my life completely. My best friend told me that she was HIV positive. I didn’t believe her at first, because we used to joke around a lot of time, doing crazy stuff together. We were both in school. We spent our time studying, having fun, sharing ideas. We always joked a lot and made up stories, so it took me a whole year to believe her. But it was difficult for her to cope, and even though at that time I knew nothing about HIV and AIDS the one thing I knew was to give her the support she needed.*

*It was a time of change, and something changed about me. She made me understand life and about HIV and AIDS, and other issues. I quit a lot of things. I took a big step in my life and quit being in a gang. She and I started an Action Committee at school. The whole school supported us. We did a lot of campaigning at school and around using condoms, awareness about HIV and AIDS.*

*Since that day I never looked back again. I’m still supporting her all the way through, giving her love, care, understanding, openness, acceptance. I dream of making this world a better place for all of us, one in which we have peace, respect, and openness about our health conditions so that we can save a lot of people living with HIV and AIDS by providing them with treatment and prevention earlier (Schuster, 2003:63)*

In Thembis story his enacted agency fed into the HIV prevention programmes around him. His life experience and his desire motivated his engagement and his transformation. In this space he enacts various levels of agency, from becoming a peer educator, to a campaigner, and a support worker for his friend. From his own subject-position he interacted with systems of organisations, school and government around him through lines opened up through his care and desire for a friend.
At the same time as valuing the ways these lines open up, it should not be seen in the conservative and increasingly mainstream notion of a grassroots agency that presents activism as an interior transformation aimed at changing behaviours and lifestyles. Desire is not pure.

Conclusion
I’ve provided these examples as points of entry into alternative visions of identity, subjectivity and community. Ultimately, I suggest not a return to a universalising humanism where power relations are obscured, nor an identity politics on which stakes are claimed by subject positions in a vertical topography of power, but something beyond both where we can reconstruct agencies on various intersecting and conflicting scales, activating in some spaces what is oppressive in others, and finally, mobilising that which bursts forth from desire as much as from materiality.

Materialist understandings of identity miss the intricacies of how one exists in the world, the ontological realities that are linked to oppression, power, desire and inequality. Materiality has a hand in creating subjectivities, but to accept that those subjectivities are not derived from other forces as well confines us in a capitalist conception of the Poor. We know this not to be the case from our lived experiences, personal connections and intimate relationships within and between class, race and gendered identities. Perhaps what we need to realise is that all knowledge born out of ‘uncomfortable collaborations’ is situational and linked to a specific context in dialogue, where any number of subjectivities (such as the subaltern and the academic) exchange their partiality. In the end, knowledge will be produced by this exchange and transformed by the interaction, in ways that may be critical, enriching, invisible, or exploitatively ultimately qualitatively different to the ways in which each subject entered the terrain. Yet the recognition of how we are changed by these interactions is not, in itself, enough. Recognition of how these desiring subjectivities interact must cause us to challenge the very assumption of an authentic position, understanding how both sides in any encounter emerge transformed, and how this process is constantly occurring. Rather than slipping into a sea of post-modern subjectivities, it should cause us to grapple more clearly with power and positioning by revealing more concretely the way our interactions support, collaborate and hinder us. It should also allow us better to identify unity and purpose within, against and beyond capital’s rigid class contours.

We must start to recognise desiring subjectivities that actively subvert, contest and collaborate with the system to stake claims for better lives. It is critical to not get caught up in stagnant identity politics and dialectical constructions of ‘us versus them’ in order not to miss the agency that is happening horizontally between and across the apparent passivity of ‘delivery syndrome’, rights-based and legal demands, and other more obvious forms of resistance that haunt so many community movements.

It is through analysing lines of flight and spaces of habitus that we might be able to creatively contest and invent together. Uncomfortable collaborations are one such space to see power at work in the everyday. To transform our notions of the ‘Poor’ to active, desiring subjectivities means first to destroy the discourse that has been spun around them, yet also to acknowledge that without announcing it, many choose to mobilise these identities to stake claims for material, social and political gain from the state. This is part of how the friction between various forces can often open up the most unlikely spaces for change.
**Endnotes**

1. My field notes from the Informal Settlements Management and Clearance briefing, July 2006, hosted by the Centre for Public Participation.

2. I use Ashen Desai’s term ‘porous’ to designate a heterogeneous group of South Africans who are actively resisting and fighting for their rights to life, as well as being the most hard hit by neo-liberal state policies, subject to eviction, water cut-offs, electricity cut offs etc. Elsewhere I use the term the ‘Poor’ to indicate the fixed subjectivity of wretchedness that I am critiquing here.

3. Banana City has been part of the university community for over 50 years. UKZN’s Vice-chancellor Prof. M.W. Makgoba has been trying to evict families off this land throughout the last year.

4. By ‘activist’ here I mean what is often referred to as middle class activist or City People within social movements in Durban. This group are involved in political struggle for their own diverse set of reasons, which deserves a paper in itself. I use the terms City People, urban activist, and middle-class activist interchangeably.

5. In other locations and moments the oppressed subjectivity might be organised around other dimensions, such as statelessness, HIV status or other health related groupings, indigenous identity, etc. For my purposes here, the category of the ‘Poor’ actually cuts across many of these other identities and has been unproblematically taken up as an identity both by Left activists and academics as well as by local community movements.

6. *Negrophilia* has been used to describe the obsessive fascination by whites with ‘negro’ culture, music and artistic production in America. I use it here to capture the neurotic exotification of the black subject, in this case the ‘Poor’ black subject, that is in itself a kind of racism. I think here of Said’s ideas around Orientalism.

7. While I don’t have the space here to adequately discuss how the World Bank and other so-called anti-poverty agencies construct technologies and discourses of poverty to the exclusion of the very bodies and realities of those they study, and the historic forces that create them, an understanding of how ‘poverty’ has been politically constructed is an important backdrop to this study of subjectivities.

8. *Therapeutic citizenship*, in Ngyen’s discussion, utilises health status to access medications and mobilise local and global networks of support. I am not very convinced about the use of citizenship here, yet I like what both Nguyuen and Petryna (2002) point to in order to theoretically re-vision the ‘revolutionary subject’. The concept of citizenship is complex, linked to ideas about the nation-state, belonging, and often xenophobia. In the context of migrant populations at the very least, the concept of citizenship may gloss over some material and structural issues at play in the relationship between bodies and the state, which are heterogeneous.

9. Of course this is a generalisation. Ashwin Desai, for one, situates himself at points during the Chatsworth struggles in *We are the Poors* (2003), and I’m sure there might be other examples.

10. Field notes.

11. This inability to speak freely has not always been the case, and most certainly was not in the history of South African Left. One wonders if it is the post-apartheid era, where the stakes are not as high (you may get tear gassed but are less likely to be shot) that has allowed the entrance of so many reformist political figures from the middle classes to stagnate real engagement? Perhaps we have not yet emerged from the climate in which Steve Biko found himself during the SASO days; a climate in which a multi-racialism that includes whites and elites cannot happen yet, unless it is duly acknowledged, exposed and continually challenged. Most certainly narratives that exclude the role of whites and elites in community struggles do not help advance the consciousness and causes of those they hope to support.
12. This quote was taken from the transcripts of the video recording of Zikode’s speech.

13. Unfortunately I don’t have room within this paper to tackle all the intricacies at play across the various sites and between and among the various actors in the story constructed around Abahlali baseMjondolo and within the specific site of Kennedy Road, to illustrate friction at work in a particular space. In a longer version of this article I set out the various players in detail: activists, NGOs, academics, the State (executive, judicial, legislative), community movements, petty capitalists, land owners and big capital, local home owners, shack dwellers outside the movement, geographic spaces and IFIs. This overview still misses the historic forces of apartheid and class divisions within the movement itself, but begins to tease out the complexity of the forces and frictions at play.

14. Elsewhere these people might be called ‘allies’, but there is a tendency around Abahlali for the academic/activists to position themselves as ‘support workers’. I have myself worked with Abahlali in this way, so this should be seen as an auto-critique.

15. The Common Ground Collective is a ‘community-initiated volunteer organisation offering assistance, mutual aid and support’ who work with communities to provide for ‘their immediate needs’. They ‘emphasises people working together to rebuild their lives in sustainable ways’ and were largely responsible for aiding disenfranchised people in New Orleans after the hurricane.

16. In her study of how Ukrainians medicalise their lives in a post-Chernobyl context, Adriana Petryna (2002) also looks at how individuals enact agency even within grim social and biological realities. Here, being a sufferer is financially rewarded by the state, thus positioning health in a political terrain. In this case, the construction of collective and individual responses, contestations and interactions with the system is what Petryna calls biological citizenship. Biological citizens tool themselves with knowledge of medicine, science, technology, and bribery, to negotiate with the state for their very existence.

17. But perhaps this limited materialist view of a class dialectic partially comes from the fact that social space is often not shared beyond the march, the barricade and the lecture hall between academics, middle-class activists, and the so-called Poor.

Bibliography


Deleuze, Gilles & Felix Guattari (1972), Anti-Oedipus, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.


Rejoinder: Collaborations, Co-optations & Contestations in Praxis-Based Knowledge Production

Patrick Bond

In her brave autocritique of how formal academics operate in South Africa’s low-income activist settings, Shannon Walsh hopes that ‘uncomfortable collaborations can burst open geographic and identity-based alliances, de-territorialising groupings around commonalities of desire, struggle and event.’ Walsh’s points are valid. Yet I think context is missing and needed. We are, after all, only in the initial stage of reviving these collaborations in the face of 1990s co-optations and subsequent contestations of ‘knowledge production’ between proponents of the government-allied centre-left and the independent left-left. Until these are clarified we can consider the search for genuine accountability of researchers to their subjects, and the search for more honest representations of local politics.

It’s not a new problem, and after 18 years of research on political economy, environment and social struggle in South African townships, I also worry that those of us committed to local/global democratic organisation, economic justice, non-racial and anti-patriarchal politics and radical ecological consciousness have not found more systematic ways of recognising mutual strengths and weaknesses across the community-intellectual, town-gown divide. During the 1990s, these concerns were raised in the civic movement by, amongst others, Mzwanele Mayekiso (1996, chapters 5 and 12), who critiqued external researchers’ work in Soweto, Alexandra, and other hotspots of social struggle, largely on grounds of their relatively conservative assumptions and political agenda. (For example, one target of Mayekiso’s, Oxford-trained Charles Carter, whose dissertation compared the 1986 Alex Six-Day War to the Paris Commune in scathing terms, is now an executive director for AngloGold Ashanti.)

Durban is a particularly vibrant site of study about – and in support of – social activism, not only since the 1999 rise of South Africa’s ‘new social movements’ – partly emanating from Chatsworth’s Indian and African residents (Desai, 2002). At least a quarter century earlier, traditions of radical intellectual engagements began at three of the main campuses that today comprise the University of KwaZulu-Natal: Howard College, Westville and the Mandela Medical School. In the 1970s and ‘80s, faculty and students like Steve Biko, Fatima Meer, Rick Turner, David Hemson, Blade Nzimande, Moss Ngoasheng, Ari Sitas, Alec Erwin, Francie Lund, Bill Freund, Ian Phillips, Mike Morris, Dhiereu Soni, Brij Maharaj, Doug Hindson, Jeff McCarthy, Dan Smit, Vishnu Padayachee, Jennifer Robinson and Claudia Reintges, amongst others, generated innovative collaborative work with trade unions, communities, environmentalists, women and youth.

But a good many once committed academics then reverted to consultancy status (drawing on former leftist networks and knowledge as surprisingly valuable currency), and in the process moved far to the right during the 1990s. The most spectacular turn was by Erwin, who ranks amongst the main advocates of neoliberalism and who, as a result, lost his seat on the African National Congress (ANC) executive in the Polokwane political massacre of December 2007 and faced subsequent ridicule for his pro-corporate role in the country’s electricity crisis. The journal debate (1997) lamented the loss of these intellectuals in a 1997 ???????
Here we refer to an extraordinary social phenomenon, based on what seems to be ceaseless individual meanderings, nearly all by white males in their 40s and 50s, from mid-1980s grassroots to early 1990s ‘class roots’ politics: the lead marxist critic of the Anglo American Corporation turned to advertising his consulting services (as a trade union insider) to Anglo and other firms; the two leading marxist critics of the Urban Foundation (Anglo American’s social policy think-tank) became two of its key strategists; numerous academic marxists did top-secret consulting work for the Urban Foundation, such as regarding land invasions (contemporary and historical) at precisely the time the UF’s land speculation strategy was most threatened by the invasion tactic; the two leading marxist critics of orthodox pension fund management became important exponents and practitioners of orthodox financial packaging through the big institutional investment firms; an energetic marxist-workerist educator led a high-profile post-apartheid labour commission that rejected a national minimum wage; the lead marxist critic of export-led growth strategy debuted in the *Financial Mail* by endorsing Taiwan as a model for post-apartheid SA and subsequently co-authored *GEAR*; the most influential marxist economist within the trade unions turned from advocating social democracy in the pages of the SACP’s *African Communist* to fiscal discipline and free trade within the Finance and Trade/Industry Ministries; and last and possibly least, South Africa’s lead marxist peasant scholar, who was jailed for his SACP ties during the 1960s and later (at the Sussex Institute for Development Studies during the 1970s) supervised the doctoral theses of leading South African neo-Poulantzians, eventually became the strategist of ‘homegrown’ African structural adjustment at the World Bank (and presently serves as the Bank’s London representative) **I REMEMBER HIM WELL SHALL WE NAME HIM?!**

The demand upon intellectuals for accountability to the Movement was taken less seriously as every passing day revealed another profound compromise of principles and ‘engagement’ with the forces of reaction. Under the circumstances, the desire for that elusive ego-boosting quality, relevance, which always motivates political-intellectual work, became overwhelming ... The problem tended to be the older generation’s diminishing rootedness in struggle, added to the self-flattery and opportunism associated with the corridors of power, which continually undermined more durable, and politically radical, analytical approaches to social problems.

As another telling illustration, the former *Review of African Political Economy* contributor in South Africa, Billy Cobbett, moved to the World Bank in the late 1990s, having implemented its policy recommendations when he was the leading housing official during the mid-1990s. Cobbett, formerly director of the radical urban NGO Planact (and the man who invited me to South Africa in 1990, for which I’ll remain forever grateful), introduced a market-driven housing policy in 1994, even at the risk of the inevitable declaration by the SA Constitutional Court, in its September 2000 Grootboom ruling, that the *White Paper* – fronted by housing minister (and SA Communist Party chair) Joe Slovo, on his death bed at the time - was unconstitutional due to its failure to serve the poor.

Co-optation was and is the most predictable danger associated with intellectual work for mass movements, as Ralph Miliband and Leo Panitch (1990), James Petras (1993) and Issa Shivji (2007) point out in relation to such ex-leftists and NGOs. More interesting at the moment, though, is the unpredictable detour South African community politics – and intellectual worker allegiances – took as the early 2000s
rise of urban social movements in Durban, Johannesburg and Cape Town began to ebb. Ironically, without the benefit of formal organisational linkages (such as the Social Movements Indaba network), the pace of social protest intensified dramatically during the mid-2000s, soaring from 5,813 recorded protests in 2004-05 to more than 10,000/year (Nqakula, 2007). Like many other such grassroots movements in history (Castells, 1983), the radical post-nationalist community groups – which were mostly rooted in formal urban proletarian settings – failed to expand their work into both lowest-income peri-urban shack settlements and rural areas, and also into the formal trade unions and other relevant movements such as the Treatment Action Campaign.

To illustrate, in mid-2007, Durban was exploding with protest: informal sector traders against municipal restrictions (with more than 500 arrests one day alone); fisherfolk tossed off docks by forces of gentrification; a myriad of community groups angry about slum conditions or pollution; students against financial exclusions; and public sector trade unions in the midst of an extraordinary month-long strike for decent wages. The tragedy of that moment and so many others was the failure to link up the activists and their causes.

Often it is the work of solidaristic intellectuals and progressive service organisations (sometimes misnamed ‘NGOs’) – whether we like it or not, and it would be dishonest to claim otherwise – to assist in strategising the terrain, connecting the dots, and liaising with others like-minded in potentially allied organisations. But this layer (myself included) failed to cohere across the SA left during the 2000s, in the way they had much more effectively during the 1980s, and it is here that a prior uncomfortable collaboration should be established.

One prerequisite is semi-psychological in nature, namely a fatally shaken confidence on the part of the progressive petit-bourgeoisie in the ANC’s ‘liberation’ project. Every day, this state of mind draws nearer thanks to the ruling party’s outright corruption (especially in arms trafficking), crony capitalism (‘Black Economic Empowerment’), favouritism to big capital (so evident in ongoing aluminium smelter electricity supply during the 2008 load-sheds), further painful inroads of economic liberalisation, sustained (and extreme) poverty and unemployment, still worsening inequality statistics, more rapid environmental degradation, ongoing oppression of women, connivance with the great powers in foreign economic policy and diplomacy, and the like.

The rise, fall and rise of Jacob Zuma, opportunistically supported by trade unionists and communists, offers further pessimism about internal ruling party reform, given an adverse balance of forces. Any alternative movement to Mbeki’s well-recognised authoritarian-neo-liberalism is too easily hijacked by the ANC’s conservative populists, with all their patriarchy, ethnicism, militarism and corruption (e.g. a third of the new National Executive Committee members have a dodgy record, according to the Mail & Guardian). More than enough was revealed in Zuma’s 2006 reaction to rape charges, in his dealings with sponsors such as jailed financial manager Shabir Shaik, and in his obsequious reactions to pressure from Citibank, Merrill Lynch and the Davos crowd in the days just before and after his ascent to ANC leadership at Polokwane.

Thus there is a period ahead of renewed contestation between the independent left and centre-left intellectuals and functionaries. A critical mass of the intelligentsia should, in the process, shed any remaining illusions about the ANC’s ‘social
democratic’ policies and the construction of an alleged ‘developmental state’ (on the basis of a very slight rise in the social wage as a percentage of GDP, from 14% in 1994 to 16% in 2007). At that point, real collaborations can begin, unhindered by co-option from the now-exhausted and delegitimised neo-liberal institutions.

The next wave of academic migrant workers into township sites of struggle will hopefully be welcomed as much as Walsh is in the Durban shacks. In the meantime, in preparation, accountability should be more vigorously demanded from below, particularly against intellectual workers’ tendencies to self-glorification, careerism, exaggeration, vanguardism and gate-keeping. Also in the meantime, the networking function – i.e. the rather more comfortable collaborations between people of similar training and orientation – can assist a great deal, if properly conceived and channelled.

Regrettably, this is not yet happening, as we have witnessed across the South African independent left. The Treatment Action Campaign won’t work with anti-privatisation activists in the water and electricity struggles – no matter that these are very obvious interlocks and overlaps with health – due to very different positions in relation to the ANC. Those strategising for labour and community rarely meet. Occasionally the socialist and autonomist/anarchist wings are in dispute. Personality conflicts and pernicious state intervention have divided other movements, including Jubilee and the Landless. Activists and allied intellectuals alike deserve blame for not taking advantage of the many openings since around 1999.

I agree with Walsh that research and political solidarity in, for example, Durban’s highest-profile community of the mid-2000s – the Kennedy Road settlement that catalysed the Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) movement – has generated a great deal of dust in the air as a result of intellectual posturing. It may well be, as Desai puts it, that Kennedy Road highlights three kinds of exterior writers committed to the movement there: propagandists, research tourists, and ‘uncomfortable collaborators’. The latter are far fewer than they need to be, in AbM and other movements.

If ‘academics flourish out of the despondency of the destitute’ – true insofar as social and especially class misery contributes to the kind of powerful anti-capitalist critique that travels well in these days of neo-liberal globalisation, particularly from such a symbolic site of national liberation – then what happens when despondency becomes anger? When will the demand for justice, and for intellectuals committed to justice, arising from 10,000 community protests a year, begin to generate genuine gains?

It is in making these inquiries that another kind of academic enterprise can flourish: the production of knowledge in praxis. Only when more intellectuals get to the starting point on Walsh’s journey will we know if we can claim more insight and genuine understanding of society’s possibilities – and also of repressive/co-optive or even concessionary behaviour by the state and capital – than at present, when too many South African (and other) readers of ROAPE set the journal back down on the table beside the comfortable armchair.

Patrick Bond,
Rejoinder: The Propagandists, the Professors & their ‘Poors’

Ashwin Desai

Shannon Walsh has spent a considerable amount of time in the shacklands of Durban. This has given her access to shackdwellers beyond the normal stratum of the leaders of the movement Abahlali baseMjondolo. Together with the fact that she has decided not simply to become a propagandist of a cause with which she identifies or simply ignore the tensions that emanate from her ‘insider/outsider’ status, makes her paper insightful.

She uses the occasion of her farewell – in which she is the recipient of lavish praise, together with two other academics from overseas – to reflect on the immense power she is accorded in her collaboration with the movement she worked in and researched. This is noteworthy because so many narrators of social movements, including those who are the staunchest defenders of ‘the voices of the poor’, have simply ignored the immense class, race, gender and locational privileges they are afforded. Instead of reluctantly embracing the power she is being offered, Walsh takes her anthropological torch and begins to shine it in the faces of herself and those who are like her.

In all the writing about Abahlali from middle-class academics, local or foreign, Walsh’s is the first not only to properly acknowledge but also explore the problematics of the role of academic-activists. This role derives not so much from her position of material privilege but rather her position of power in the organisation. It seems that this power is at once taken and also, beguilingly, actively ceded. She recognises the concealed way in which this power is exercised through narratives of the movement, and neatly traces how Abahlali’s original self-stated programme of protest around service delivery has now become one of a (again self-stated) struggle to obtain voice, speak for themselves and be included in government decision-making. She notices how this change coincides with the interests and writing of academics working as trusted collaborators of Abahlali.

Walsh’s argument – that the sort of construction of the ‘Poor’ subject that has to some extent been imposed upon that movement via the veritable industry of academic-activists writing is both inaccurate and patronising – is particularly illuminating. I would add that it is also not particularly revealing of the processes at play in the...
exploitation and oppression of the Poor in post-apartheid South Africa and lends itself to theoretical and analytical dead-ends.

What is worth pursuing in Walsh’s paper, simply because no one has shone the light on it for quite some time, are the power relations that lay at the heart of how the Poor come to be represented, and the questionable research methods adopted by those who have narrated social movements.

It seems to me there are three kinds of ‘outsiders’ who write about movements like the shackdwellers. First, there are the propagandists: those who have joined the movement but continue to live in middle-class neighbourhoods, doing little more than writing article-length flyers praising their coveted movement. Then there are the second breed, the parasites: those who live off the propagandists for ‘facts’ but through whose work we have the mushrooming of some evocative theory too. These academics make tourist-type visits to the shacklands, mainly writing articles relying on secondary information and passing this off as fieldwork. Abahlali are, for this second type, either near perfect exemplars of the ‘wretched of the earth’ or grassroots socialism. I think here of a recent article by Michael Neocosmos (2007). And there is the third kind, the ‘interconnected intellectuals’: those like Walsh who identify with the movement, struggle alongside the shackdwellers, do deeper ethnographic work but are also prepared to problematise the relationship they have inside and outside movements, even if it means being stranded in a precarious position themselves.

Why then do people in the second category get it wrong? It flows I think from both a methodological shortcoming and the way intellectual production takes place. The methodological issue arises from the research process. This research consists, at best, in a fleeting stopover with a ‘minder’ linked to the academy who has access to a community, and secondary material overwhelmingly penned by the very brace of academics who have joined the movement and are committed to being its propagandists.

Walsh urges us to look into the relationship between movements and the academy, where a certain type of ambition is telling. These are the ‘messy bits’ that Walsh asks us to take a closer look at. This does not have to be done in a salacious or self-righteous manner, but as evidence of the considerable intrusion of the desires, fantasies, ego and needs of many of the academics, herself and myself included, into social movement spaces – behaviour never subject to the same level of scrutiny as those of the ‘Poor’ themselves.

My gripe with Walsh is that she misses the ideological lineage and moorings that seem to trespass these movements. A clue to this lineage is cogently captured by James Wolfensohn in launching the World Bank’s Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us? series:

What is it that the poor reply when asked about what might make the greatest difference in their lives? They say organisations of their own so that they may negotiate with government, with traders, and with non-governmental organisations. Direct assistance through community-driven programmes so that they may shape their own destinies. Local ownership of funds, so they may put a stop to corruption. They want nongovernmental organisations and governments to be accountable to them …These are strong voices, voices of dignity (on flyleaf in Narayan, Patel et al. 2000).
What often transpires is that this ‘politics’ of voice becomes increasingly inward oriented, painstakingly creating a veneer of democratic decision-making but within spaces so disempowered that there is little or no room for manoeuvre. In order to challenge this creeping insularity and parochialism and to move beyond the Wolfensohnian model I would contend that we need to name the systemic enemy which is capitalism. By naming the enemy we engage in debates on strategy/tactics and identify the weapons and alliances we need to defeat the enemy. If we name the enemy, we also realise quickly that splitting organisations of the poor to fight petty academic battles – as has happened in Durban - consumes energy and resources, and does not challenge the system in any way. I am a little surprised that Walsh’s critique stops where it does. It is one thing laying bare the intersections of power within the movement but what does this mean for a confrontation with power?

For example, Abahlali baseMjondolo has fought battles via the courts to prevent eviction from shacks. These are important defensive battles but one can see how they do not advance a broader anti-capitalist struggle. In the absence of this, Walsh does not advance any evidence from the shackdwellers or the academics thinking in this regard, even though the limited character of courtroom discourse is a well-known problem for community organisers who risk demobilising their street capacities by entering the legal system. It may be uncomfortable to point out that not only is the Emperor going about naked, but the Poor and their Professors do too, and naming this nakedness is exactly where Walsh’s paper takes us. It is Walsh’s undressing of the realpolitik of research on lowest-income African communities that allows an opening of debate about how knowledge is produced in these spaces, who produces it and to what end.

Author’s details here

References


A Response & An Update

Shannon Walsh

I appreciate both Ashwin Desai and Patrick Bond’s responses, but would like to make a brief clarification and update. There is no holy grail of ‘genuine accountability of researchers to their subjects’ as Bond is hoping for. In contrast, I am arguing for unravelling how these divisions re-inscribe grammars of power, trapping ‘subjects’ in their own subjugation. It is precisely the re-enforcement of the ‘community-intellectual, town-gown divide’ which disables political possibility. Ranciere perhaps explains this better than I have when he argues that,
in Bourdieu as much as Plato, the poor comprise in their very exclusion from the vocation of philosopher the condition of philosophical possibility. Present as objects rather than subject of knowledge, appearing only in the guise of philosophy’s exempla, the poor enable the philosopher to constitute himself—as other than the poor (Parker, 2005:xiii).

Bond assumes (wrongly) that I am making the (rather tired) argument that academics should get their hands dirty, or ‘not sell out’. Quite contrary, I am interested in how we begin to refigure relationships that transgress the fixed identities that have brought us to this stalemate of political possibility.

I must also resist Ashwin Desai’s call to describe the anti-capitalist tendencies (or not) found in the people with whom I’ve shared time and ideas, in order to resist the subtle forms of structural violence that occur through naming and coding people into categories, populations and segments. As Stevphen Shukaitis and David Graeber point out, even the most well-intended social movement research often becomes a part of ‘organizing forms of knowledge that are necessary to the maintenance of alienating structures, from the most horrific to the most mundane’. They caution that,

Trying to put a name on the directions of tomorrow’s revolutionary fervor is for that reason perhaps a bit suspicious, even if well-intended, because the process of tacking a name on something is often the first step in institutionalising it, in fixing it—it is the process that transforms the creativity of the constituent moment back upon itself into another constituted form and alienating structure (2006:31).

These namings don’t do much for movements or for constituent power, leaving little more than journal articles like this one to mark the spot of something that, if it existed in the first place, has long since disappeared or reconstituted itself. The neoliberalism-enabling-machine of civil society, or ‘social movement theory’, quickly damps subversive and enabling strategies that are being created everyday in people’s (and movement’s) lives by explaining and describing them, underlining the legitimacy around being visible to power, being public, using courts, waiting in line. Writing in this way suppresses as much as it includes. I agree that,

Constituent power is what emerges most fully and readily when these institutional structures are shattered, peeling back bursts of time for collective reshaping of social life. It is from these moments that archipelagos of rupture are connected through subterranean tunnels and hidden histories, from which one can draw materials, concepts, and tools that can help guide us today, wherever we might find ourselves (Shukaitis & Graeber, 2006:31).

In believing our own propaganda we often miss the real constituent power of which we are also a part. Instead we become ‘oppression tourists’ chasing after the latest horrific injustice, engaged in what Doris Lessing called that favourite middle-class pastime, outbidding one another to see who ‘had acquired more grace by being close to other people’s sufferings’ (1973:77). The question best asked, and often asked by movements who have rightfully shut out interlopers posed as allies who leech careers off the daily work of organisers, is: ‘What use is this to us?’

The tensions I describe are at the core of ‘how’ and ‘if’ we can collaborate across these divides with each other as equals who criticise, desire, fight, love and dislike each other from time to time at this moment in South Africa. The dangerous romanticism towards ‘the Poor’ that I argue against here, is simultaneously an argument for being whole in the social relations we develop, first-and-foremost with