

## **Professors of our own poverty: intellectual practices of a poor people's movement in post-apartheid South Africa**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper addresses how a poor people's movement contests dominant portrayals of 'the poor' as a violent mass in contemporary South African public discourse. To explore how Abahlali baseMjondolo, a leading poor people's movement, articulates its own representation of 'the poor,' I examine two primary intellectual and pedagogical practices identified by movement members: first, discussion sessions in which members reflect on their experiences of mobilizing as Abahlali, and second, the website through which the movement archives a library of its own homegrown knowledge. I argue that these intellectual practices open new spaces for the poor to represent themselves to movement members and to publics beyond shack settlements. Through these spaces, Abahlali demonstrates and asserts the intelligence which exists in the shack settlements, and demands that its publics rethink dominant portrayals of 'the poor.'*

**Keywords:** Abahlali baseMjondolo, the poor, movement, intellectual and pedagogical practices, South Africa, post-apartheid

### **Introduction**

On August 16, 2012, at a Lonmin platinum mine in Marikana, South Africa, 34 miners on strike were shot dead by police. South African and global press quickly dubbed the event, "The Marikana Massacre," printing headlines such as "Killing Field", "Mine Slaughter", and "Bloodbath," while videos of police shooting miners went viral and photographs showed bodies strewn on the ground (Herzkovitz, 2012). In September, South Africa's *Mail & Guardian* reported that more striking miners "threw stones at officers" while "plumes of black smoke poured into the sky from burning tyres which workers used as barricades" ("Marikana," 2012). The police had "sworn to...stamp out the illegal gatherings, illegal weapons, incitement and threats of violence that have characterized the protests," while President Jacob Zuma's spokesperson argued that the police response was appropriate given the protests' "violence and threats of intimidation" ("Marikana," 2012).

Another aspect of the story was much slower to emerge: the miners' story of increasing participation in organized mass meetings in the weeks preceding August 16. A poor people's movement in Durban, South Africa, called Abahlali baseMjondolo (isiZulu for "residents of the shacks"), sent a representative to visit the striking miners shortly after the massacre. The representative reported that

the organized discussions amongst miners about working conditions and increasing tension with Lonmin officials had informed mobilization and began long before the violence in August made global headlines.

Moments of violent confrontation between the poor and the police, which are increasingly common in post-apartheid South Africa, routinely appear in the mainstream news. At the same time, recent academic literature on shack settlements and movements of the poor has characterized the urban poor as a suffering and unproductive surplus population, depicting a global poor who lack agency and intelligence (Davis, 2006), or labeling the protests of poor communities as transient and violent, reactionary rather than revolutionary (Harvey, 2006).

In contrast, the thinking behind the action, as exhibited by the meetings before the Marikana protests, goes largely unremarked in South African public discourse. Accordingly, this paper asks how poor people's movements contest dominant portrayals of 'the poor' as a violent, unthinking mass in contemporary South African public discourse. To explore how Abahlali baseMjondolo, a leading poor people's movement, articulates its own representation of 'the poor,' I examine two primary intellectual and pedagogical practices identified by movement members: first, discussion sessions known as 'Living Learning' in which members reflect on their experiences of mobilizing as Abahlali, and second, the website through which the movement archives a library of its own homegrown knowledge. I argue that through behind-the-scenes intellectual practices such as meetings, overnight 'camps' in which members gather for political discussions, political education workshops, the movement's website, and interactions with allies and opponents alike, Abahlali has developed a collective identity as 'the poor' in post-apartheid South Africa based on its members' experiences of sustained material poverty and inequality. The booklet in which participants reflect on the Living Learning sessions and Abahlali's website open new spaces for the poor to represent themselves to movement members and to publics beyond shack settlements. Through these spaces, Abahlali demonstrates and asserts the intelligence that exists in the shack settlements, and demands that its publics rethink dominant portrayals of 'the poor'. Ultimately, these platforms insist that South African middle-class publics engage with the poor in order to have any chance at successfully reducing poverty, inequality, crime, and other concerns of residents in post-apartheid society.

This paper is a condensed version of my undergraduate thesis, the culmination of two months spent in Durban, South Africa where I conducted interviews with movement members and engaged in participant-observation in the movement's activities, in addition to analyzing documents produced by movement members. Abahlali provides a useful lens through which to study the intellectual practices of poor people's movements because members constantly engage in theorizing that very topic. Durban, in turn, is a critical site for this topic not only because it is home to Abahlali, but also because it served as a hotbed of protest by shack settlement residents both in recent years and during the apartheid period (Bond, 2012; Pithouse, 2008; Gibson, 2006; Bond, 2004). An estimated nearly

one-third of the eThekweni municipality's population lives in shacks (Pithouse, 2008).

Abahlali baseMjondolo emerged in Durban in 2005 as a movement of poor shack dwellers led by shack dwellers. Less than a year after its founding, the United Kingdom's *The Times* reported that the movement had "shaken the political landscape of South Africa" (Clayton, 2006). Documenting the movement's formative months, academic Richard Pithouse noted that "every important decision [was] made in collective decision-making forums and every individual or group to have traveled elsewhere [was] elected and mandated and [took] the obligation to report back very seriously" (Pithouse, 2006b). Abahlali continued to prioritize this grassroots, democratic structure of mobilization as it developed in the following years into the largest contemporary movement of and for poor people in South Africa, with over thirty member communities estimated to be constituted by tens of thousands of individual members ("A Short History," 2006).

Over the years of key successes – such as its defeat of part of KwaZulu-Natal's 2007 Elimination and Prevention of Re-emergence of Slums Act – and struggle against relentless, sometimes violent, opposition, Abahlali has garnered substantial academic attention. However, this paper constitutes the first study of Abahlali's Living Learning booklet and, perhaps more surprisingly, the first study of the movement's extensive website archives.

### **'Living Learning' as an intellectual practice**

In 2007, Abahlali baseMjondolo and its affiliate movement in northern KwaZulu-Natal, the Rural Network, were invited by a local NGO to send a few of their members to study for a Certificate of Education in Participatory Development (CEPD) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). The movements' communities deliberated and voted to accept this opportunity. However, questions remained as to what a university course could actually offer South Africa's largest movement of poor people. By 2008, six members of the movements were participating in the CEPD program. They also began meeting as a group once a month outside of the structured university course schedule. In these meetings they discussed how the UKZN course pertained to daily life in shack settlements and reflected upon the role that their venture into the formal institution of the university could play in the movement for the poor. They labeled the meetings as 'Living Learning' sessions, borrowing from the Abahlali term 'living learning' to describe the processes of gaining knowledge directly from experiences in shack communities.

The stated purpose of Living Learning is to "[match] the theory with the reality of the life of the people" (Figlan et al., 2009). By "theory," Abahlali members mean the ideas they are exposed to in the CEPD course, where they discuss theorists like Karl Marx, Paulo Freire, Antonio Gramsci, and Frantz Fanon, as well as contemporary articles and studies on development. By "reality," the movement means the everyday lived experiences of the poor in post-apartheid South Africa,

including the shacks, the poor service-delivery, the protests and the resulting arrests, and the evictions. Some of the content of the conversations feeds directly into movement materials, such as when ideas and quotes from one Living Learning session were incorporated into informational pamphlets for an Abahlali event. More frequently, though, the ideas generated together in discussion serve to inform the individual members' understandings of their movement and the society in which it exists and serves.

According to Abahlali members, an additional purpose of the Living Learning meetings is to think constantly about how to "report back" on learning at university to the members of their communities (Figlan et al., 2009). Because Abahlali aspires to have every single member understand and be able to articulate what the organization is fighting for, Living Learning participants are responsible for connecting ideas from the university to the community members' existing understandings of the world and their politics. This responsibility includes explaining terms they identify as "difficult" such as globalization and neoliberalism, a task that requires "good translation and interpretation to make it really a living politics" (Figlan et al. 2009).

At the beginning of each meeting, the participants each identify topics stemming from that month's CEPD curriculum or experiences within the movement that they want to discuss. Examples of these topics include ideas of communication within the movement, 'top-down' versus 'ground-up' development, respecting others when working in a group, and Freedom Day -a South African holiday that Abahlali members refer to as "UnFreedom Day" (Figlan et al. 2009). In addition to the movement members, there is a discussion facilitator from the Church Land Programme (CLP). The CLP is one of the few NGOs that the two Abahlali and Rural Network members say respects that leadership of the poor must come from the poor. After compiling the session participants' ideas, the facilitator asks the group which topics are most pertinent to discuss. The facilitator then takes notes on the discussion for all participants to check and edit after the meeting.

The participants decided to co-author a Living Learning booklet to document the discussions throughout the 2008 meetings. A second edition that will reflect new ideas responding to changing conditions over the past six years is in the works as of early 2014. However, the original booklet is important to examine here because it is a consolidation of the first year in which Abahlali and the Rural Network theorized at the deliberate, semi-structured level that Living Learning sessions offered, laying the groundwork for the years to come. Through this first Living Learning experience, participants redeployed language from South African public discourse to articulate a new collective identity of 'the poor' as 'oppressed' by the post-apartheid 'order' but uniquely positioned to develop a liberating pedagogy as 'shack intellectuals.' The resulting booklet both asserts and demonstrates the intelligence of shack residents.

As a unique experiment in reconstituting formal education along the lines of Paulo Freire's concept of a liberating dialogue among 'the oppressed', Abahlali's Living Learning program should be of significance to anyone interested in how that concept can function in the actual practice of social movements. In *Pedagogy*

*of the Oppressed*, Freire argues that an education in which knowledge is only allowed to flow in one direction, from an authority to a recipient, actually oppresses the recipient and dehumanizes both participants. Instead, education should be viewed as an exchange from which all parties learn. According to Freire, individuals cannot be told that they should engage in revolution, but they must engage in dialogue in order to reason for themselves that revolutionary change is necessary for their freedom and humanization (Freire, 2005).

Freire writes that it is the “great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well” (Freire, 2005). However, he fails to detail how a liberating dialogue spreads from within the ranks of the poor to ultimately include the ‘oppressor’ factions of society. The Living Learning booklet, along with the movement’s website, serves as a potent example of how the poor can engage publics beyond their communities in their processes of reflection and meaning-making.

### **Identifying ‘the poor’ in the post-apartheid ‘order’**

From Abahlali’s perspective, post-apartheid South Africa is constituted by a rich elite that has monopolized political power, a middle class that has made substantial gains since the apartheid era, and millions of poor South Africans who continue to live in shacks with poor food security, limited access to employment and quality education, and the constant threat of eviction. Abahlali members view post-apartheid living conditions and class relations as both a) historical, inextricably linked to the apartheid past, and b) global, shaped by a neoliberal development regime. They do not blame their experience of poverty, therefore, solely on the national ANC government or the local ward councilors. However, despite acknowledging the complexities and transformations over time that shape that experience, for the purposes of conceptualizing a collective identification as ‘the poor’ Abahlali consolidate the actors and conditions that contribute towards maintaining the current status quo into one coherent, totalizing ‘order.’

#### **A. Apartheid legacies**

Abahlali members demarcate clear differences between their perception of oppression in today’s order and the oppression that existed under apartheid. During apartheid the people who resisted the regime represented a clear majority of the South African population that was institutionally distinguished by race and ethnicity. In contrast, the law today guarantees equality for all races and ethnicities such that those who take to the streets in protest make up a less easily defined segment of the population. The anti-apartheid struggle occurred in very different political conditions in a time when there was no pretense at universal suffrage. The government in power did not claim to represent everyone, but rather promoted policies of autonomy for each racial group. Since apartheid, the ANC has been elected to power the national government in every national election with overwhelming majorities of votes. Living Learning participants observe that many ANC party members work to promote a sense of national pride (Figlan

et al. 2009).

On the other hand, the participants also draw many parallels between the two 'oppressive' orders. Even though class has replaced race as the primary determinant of status, they argue that both orders presuppose a "politics" that is "founded on the view that only some people matter" (Figlan et al., 2009). Abahlali press statements and the Living Learning booklet routinely insist that the poor today are "still" not free. This language implies a continuation from the apartheid period when, as nearly all South Africans would agree, non-white citizens were not free. The Living Learning participants write:

We have often said that we are not free because the politics of the poor is treated like a criminal offence by the Municipalities while real criminals are treated like business partners. We have often said that we are not free because the councilors are treated like the people's masters instead of their servants. We have often said that we are not free because even many of the people who say that they are for the struggles of the poor refuse to accept that we can think for ourselves. (Figlan et al. 2009)

This passage reflects three clear patterns from the apartheid era. First, during apartheid, anti-apartheid organizations were banned while individual organizers and protesters were frequently arrested or assaulted by the police. Although anti-apartheid mobilization was especially criminalized, all black South Africans were criminalized by the state, which treated them as objects to be monitored and made them carry identification cards at all times. Similarly, Abahlali and Rural Network members face arrests for their protests, but articles posted on Abahlali's website posit that poverty is criminalized overall (Patel 2007, "Police Attack"). Similarly, they notice that the current government labels the movements as "out of order" (Pithouse, 2006a) just as the apartheid government described anti-apartheid activists. Zikode argued in one interview that, because they obviously want to maintain their control, powerful elites in any given regime will label a group that critiques the system as criminal, dangerous, or 'out of order' in order to defray support for that group (Zikode, 2012).

Secondly, during apartheid black South Africans held little of the nation's wealth and worked the most unwanted jobs, frequently as domestic workers for white families who maintained the role of the colonial masters. The poor today, who still live and work in much the same conditions as they did during apartheid, still see the wealthier classes (of all races) as trying to dictate what the poor should do.

Thirdly, during apartheid the Black Consciousness movement asserted that black South Africans needed to show that they could think for and lead themselves. Today, Abahlali and the Rural Network reject assistance from NGOs or left-wing academics who want to lead the movement of the poor or tell the poor what they should do because now, they argue, poor South Africans need to show that they can think for and lead themselves.

In addition to these implicit parallels, Abahlali press releases frequently question

why the poor are “still living the apartheid life” (Mdlalose, 2012), explicitly linking the two eras. Zikode argues that engagement in a movement of the poor allowed Abahlali members to make this significant realization: that the struggle in which many of them also engaged during apartheid never ended. In an interview he explained:

Why is it problematic when the country is in the black hands? Why can't they turn things around because they are in charge? You realize it's no more the racial question. It was really not that we were oppressed by the whites because they were whites. You learn something else now. That there was nothing wrong about skin, there was nothing wrong about race, ...it's all about power, other than anything else, it's about greed, it's about wealth accumulation. (Zikode, 2012)

For Zikode, the fact that a class of elites today has the power to ‘oppress’ the poor in spite of laws that establish all races as equal, demonstrates that race alone could not have been the basis of inequality and oppression under apartheid. Even the system that so blatantly established a hierarchy based on skin colour, he argues, was more fundamentally about establishing a particular group as the elite class with wealth and power. Again, Abahlali members are aware of the complexities that constitute ‘the order’ as apartheid legacies intersect with the new political landscape. Here, however, Zikode simplifies the conceptualization of ‘the order’ for the purpose of claiming that, like under apartheid, one group oppresses another.

## **B. The global development regime**

The Living Learning participants make clear that ‘the order’ is also shaped by the contemporary neoliberal development models which have informed South African policy since the 1990s. Development theories profess goals to raise living standards and increase equality, but Abahlali members often experience development as maintaining, or sometimes even worsening, the situation of many of South Africa’s poorest citizens. The Living Learning participants write:

Africa is rich in its people and resources – but we are poor. We are poor because the bourgeois classes take the resources, chow the money, and oppress the people. We are left with nothing – just maybe begging for some loans from the IMF [International Monetary Fund] or the World Bank. And even if these are given, nothing comes down to the people on the ground. Those on top just keep on taking – through running the companies, taking bribes and, as if that’s not enough, even through taking back our money through tax. We are really poor and oppressed by these things. (Figlan et al., 2009)

Here, the booklet’s contributors suggest that the reason that poor people do not have better living conditions is because the middle and upper classes take and

consume a supply of resources which would otherwise be plentiful. From Abahlali's perspective, then, the poverty of its own members is the fault of another group of people and centrally, the structures that allow one group to oppress another.

The perceived failure of the IMF and World Bank's development projects is important because it leads Abahlali members to challenge models that are created by academics, maintained by elite educational and development institutions, and taken up by governments around the world. Several Abahlali members who were interviewed stated that they enjoy learning about development theories in the CEPD course and that they often find ideas with which they agree. That said, throughout my interviews the very word "theory" was employed more frequently in a negative sense than it was used in either a positive or neutral sense. Participants described the difficulty of "[challenging] the theory of the government" (Figlan et al., 2009), and labeled local councilors against whom they protested as "the theorists." Several of the participants posited the idea that if one learns about a subject through theory, "the outcome will be theory" (Figlan et al., 2009), or, in other words, will not have a real impact.

While most participants did employ the word "theory" to refer to various academic ideas and ideologies, one Rural Network member told a story in which he used "theory" to effectively mean "the wrong analysis," which is a unique but valuable usage to explore closely. He recounted a land dispute in which a wealthy farmer claimed land where poor families were living. He stated that "the theory part of it says, no, the farmers, they are good. They are taking care of the community members." In contrast, "the practical part of it says, come, let's see the whole. Come, let's see the destruction that took place" (Rural Network Member, 2012). He argued that some people analyzed the situation by assuming that the farmer was a good person, which he identifies as "the theory part." However, he suggested that anyone who actually took the time to learn what happened on that land – "the practical part" – would find that assumption wrong, as they would see that the farmer had hurt the residents' livelihoods. It is important to emphasize that this example does not reflect the way in which the term "theory" is employed by all Abahlali members or for all situations. However, the fact that it is used in place of what might otherwise be called "the wrong analysis," even in this one example, reflects the distrust felt by movement members for theory and the way they see it playing a destructive role in the day-to-day lives of the poor.

Time and time again, the Living Learning participants have seen development projects – initiated by the government or NGOs and promoted by academics – that aim to address poverty and to make life better for the poor. In many of these projects, they argue, the development actors fail to consult with the poor people they hope to help, and instead dictate 'top-down' solutions:

There are many at the University who think they are there to learn what to come and 'teach the poor' when they are finished studying. It is clear that they imagine they are our educators. They assume we are empty enough and stupid enough for others to learn what they decide, and that they will come and think for those of

us who are poor and cannot think. (Figlan et al., 2009)

NGOs, too, the participants write:

...are always denying and undermining the knowledge of the people. In their minds, the poor must be given capacity building, education and training, political education which, of course, they will provide. (Figlan et al., 2009)

From their exposure to NGOs and academics, the participants perceive that the poor as a group are considered to be stupid and uneducated. With these stereotypes, academics and NGOs then assume that the poor need them to solve their problems, to lift them out of poverty. The participants thus articulate how the stereotype of stupidity establishes ‘the poor’ as passive objects of development projects. Moreover, the language of these two passages – particularly the words “assume” and “of course” – suggests that the participants doubt these so-called experts will ever think critically about their presumed role as “teachers” of the poor.

The ‘order’ in which Abahlali locates itself as ‘the poor’ is thus the set of specific post-apartheid conditions shaped by the intersection of apartheid legacies with a growing global development regime. For the writers of the Living Learning booklet, the state officials, academics, NGO representatives, and the general middle-class public that constitute this ‘order’ are likely to perceive ‘the poor’ as stupid, criminal and ‘out of order’ objects of development.

### **Redeploying ‘out of order’**

Although Living Learning participants articulate that members of the government and middle class society disdainfully label them as ‘the poor’ and ‘out of order’, it is obvious from Abahlali’s website that members self-identify as ‘the poor,’ and ‘out of order.’ These terms, then, are not entirely externally imposed labels. In fact, Abahlali’s understanding of ‘the order’ allows the Living Learning participants to redeploy the terms ‘the poor’ and ‘out of order’ to challenge the perception of ‘the poor’ as violent, criminal, and uneducated masses. If today’s post-apartheid order, as Abahlali members argue, has not substantially altered the ‘oppressive’ structures of the apartheid order, then those who fight against today’s order are continuing the unfinished struggle for liberation. Similarly, if today’s post-apartheid order promotes ineffective projects to reduce poverty while simultaneously removing agency from the poor, then those who are ‘out of order’ are simply seeking to address poverty more effectively. In both these cases, for Abahlali, being ‘out of order’ becomes a good thing.

Reflecting on their Living Learning meetings, the booklet’s authors state explicitly that it is good to be ‘out of order’:

The kind of education and knowledge, the searching for truth that we are doing, is too generous for the powerful. It has no formal ‘syllabus’ except the life and priorities of the people themselves...This kind of education and knowledge recognizes that, as comrade Mnikelo (Ndabankulu) would say, ‘it is better to be out of order,’ to be outside the prescribed curriculum. (Figlan et al., 2009)

Abahlali thus contests the idea that being labeled as ‘out of order’ is a bad thing. Instead its members redeploy the phrase to argue that being ‘out of order’ is essential in a movement that hopes to substantially change ‘the order’.

This passage also reveals that when Abahlali members use ‘out of order,’ they refer not only to engaging in protest, but also to the education and thinking that takes place in the movement. On its website, Abahlali asserts that constituents of “the institutionalized left” – academics and NGOs – are often “competing elites,” but they are “united on the position that the poor should not think their own politics and that doing so, no matter how calmly, peacefully and rationally, rendered the movement ‘out of order’ and even criminal” (“University”). Abahlali members believe, therefore, that even just to claim that the poor can think is to be in opposition to elite power structures. Anne Harley, the coordinator of the CEPD course at UKZN, writes:

Publishing their reflections was thus a political act, intended not simply to allow others engaged in struggle to learn from their reflections, but to consciously critique the assumption that knowledge is generated only in the academy. (Harley, 2012)

Living Learning participants imagine that some state officials, NGO members, or academics view their monthly meetings as ‘out of order’ in a negative sense because the poor should not think. In turn, they themselves view the monthly meetings as ‘out of order’ in the most positive sense, exactly because they constitute a space for thinking and for challenging stereotypes of ‘the poor’ by doing so.

Thinking ‘out of order’ becomes particularly important in light of the following tale, recounted at a Living Learning meeting:

Someone in the group told the story of a pig that had been kept in a cage. Then one day, the pig was released from the cage and tied to a tree instead. And the pig celebrated, saying, ‘I am free now’. We all laughed about this story – and then our story-teller added: ‘But you know, even if you cut that rope, the pig will still just circle around the tree and not move away.’ We realized that this is what apartheid has done to us. (Figlan et al., 2009)

This is a critique of those who are not ‘out of order.’ In this story, the pig fails to fully understand freedom, as it celebrates a change of scene in which the pig is still

in no way “free.” The participants interpret this story as a metaphor for the millions of South Africans who celebrate the end of apartheid on Freedom Day each year despite still living in shacks and facing crime, unemployment, and eviction. The idea that the pig would not leave the tree even if the rope were cut speaks to the participants’ perception of those who do not use what freedoms they do have in order to take action to make their lives better. In spite of the threats and harassment they have faced as movements of the poor, Abahlali and the Rural Network claim that they have found space outside of ‘the order’ in which to use some of the small freedoms they do have – the right to protest, the right to free speech – to try to move away from the ‘oppressive tree.’

In this societal order, the poor are in a unique position. First, they do not have the access that upper and middle-class members do to the institutions that they believe produce obedient people. In one interview a Living Learning participant argued that formal education is “all about colonizing your mind,” producing individuals who shift seamlessly from readily accepting what they are told in school to readily accepting the views of a political party (Abahlali member 1). While Abahlali locates obedient individuals across all classes, the exclusion of the poor from institutional education establishes the lower class in a position of particular outsiders to ‘the order.’

Secondly, the poor have another source of knowledge that directly contradicts what they are taught to believe in school and what municipality officials tell them. The daily experience of material conditions in shack settlements teaches residents that the post-apartheid South Africa does not guarantee the equality promised by the anti-apartheid liberation struggle, and that post-apartheid efforts for development have not substantially improved shackdwellers’ livelihoods. Every human learns constantly from his or her experiences, but the life experiences of the poor provide the most stark material for opposing the post-apartheid order.

### **Producing ‘shack intellectuals’**

Out of South Africa’s poor communities and their residents’ mobilization, then, comes the production of a new kind of intellectual – what Abahlali calls the ‘shack intellectual’ – in contrast to the perceived obedient upper or middle-class intellectual. The shack intellectual is one who engages in learning and theorizing from the shacks, from poverty. Shack intellectuals can be anyone in the shack settlements; they do not constitute an elite group within the movement. Indeed, the participants argue that the well-educated individual should not be evaluated by standards of “good English...good isiZulu...not breaking the rules of grammar...having lots of degrees and qualifications” (Figlan et al. 2009). Instead, they define a truly well educated person as:

Someone who, firstly, knows their surroundings, knows their environment, and secondly, someone that humbles themselves not to be bullying or arrogant but instead to show a big mind by being able to adjust to their environment in a way that is not intimidating or undermining for the people in that environment.

(Figlan et al., 2009)

In fact, this redeployment of the word ‘educated’ is essential for a movement of the poor to assert their ability to think for themselves. With few exceptions, the poor in South Africa are typically excluded from the opportunities that would allow them to become ‘educated’ by the upper or middle-class definition. If good English, good Zulu, and degrees from institutions defined an educated person or an intellectual, then there would necessarily be a lack of educated people in Abahlali and the Rural Network. By redeploying the term ‘educated’ to mean someone who learns from his or her daily experiences, the Living Learning booklet’s authors assert that it is possible for even the poorest individual to be well-educated. When asked to give examples of learning from experience, Abahlali members provided a range of responses from learning about eviction law by living eviction cases, to realizing that putting thousands of people on the street forces municipality officials to listen, to simply understanding what it is like to live in a shack. The assertion that this education is valuable, and essential to understanding poverty, allows for the existence of shack intellectuals. At the same time, this assertion also critiques the in-order intellectual who appears to always want to impose on those who are less ‘educated.’

It is important to note that the quote defining the well-educated person emphasizes humility. By humility, the participants mean that those who have opportunities such as university courses must constantly be aware of the dangers of seeing themselves as educated and the other community members as uneducated. Living Learning participants suggest that they must always remember that, if learning from experience is the best means to understanding the conditions in shack settlements, then every individual, regardless of formal qualifications, is equally capable of participating in the reflection and production of meaning that is essential to the movement. This humble character is not only deemed important for leaders within the movement, but also for outsiders with whom the movement engages. While Abahlali eschews intellectuals who would seek to lead the movement from above, the movement has worked with academics, NGO workers, and religious leaders who have demonstrated humility through their willingness to learn from and with the poor.

Several interviewed movement members expressed the belief that there is great wisdom in the shack communities. In the Living Learning sessions they articulate that the key for a ‘shack intellectual’ to remain a ‘shack intellectual,’ rather than assimilating the obedience of the elite classes’ intellectuals, is to remain grounded by constantly listening to the thoughts of his or her community members. Listening to the community involves physically going to a shack settlement and asking for a mandate for any major decision that affects its residents, sitting in open meetings for hours until everyone that wants to speak has been heard. In poor communities many residents are unemployed or out of school, so they can engage in these long, open discussions in a way that middle or upper class citizens may not have time to do. Likewise, a ‘shack intellectual’ living in poor communities is expected to have the time and dedication to listen to everyone’s

opinions and ideas. In contrast, Living Learning participants suggest that many officials and academics demonstrate little desire to go the settlements to listen to shack dwellers' opinions.

'Shack intellectuals' can therefore fill what appears to Abahlali to be a large hole in the effective knowledge and sincere concern on the part of the officials, NGO workers, or academics who are, according to 'the order,' supposed to be helping the poor. The movement members make a strong distinction between the perspective, and thus the potential, of the 'shack intellectual' from that of the upper or middle-class intellectual:

We noticed that there is a difference when the poor say another world is necessary and when civil society says another world is possible. We conclude to say that it is the formations of the poor and the grassroots that are the agency to make this world come – not civil society. (Figlan et al. 2009)

The participants observe that experiencing daily life in conditions of poverty and being grounded in the thinking in poor communities serve to make the shack intellectual desperate for a better world in a way that an upper or middle-class intellectual could never be. When they write that "civil society says another world is possible," they suggest that, for government officials, NGOs, and academics, the whole concept of development is just an interesting experiment to see whether change can be made to benefit different segments of society. In contrast, because they themselves are theorizing from positions of poverty, they know that the poor engage in thinking and action for change because they have no choice. It is "necessary" that conditions improve for them. Thus they ascribe a greater need to effect real change to the 'shack intellectual,' and conclude that 'shack intellectuals' may be able to bring about actual freedom where middle or upper class intellectuals have failed.

Freedom, real freedom, and the experience of real freedom, has to be something that is outside what is prescribed to us; it will come from becoming masters of our own history; professors of our own poverty; and from making our own paths out of unfreedom. (Figlan et al. 2009)

Here, the Living Learning participants reject the notion that the terms "master" and "professor" must be used to demarcate an elite expertise. Instead, they redeploy the terms to insist that every shack dweller can engage in intellectual reflection in order to overcome "unfreedom."

By rejecting given definitions in this passage, the participants argue explicitly that thinking 'out of order' or beyond "what has been prescribed to us" is the essential means to freedom. In the perceived post-apartheid order that 'oppresses' the poor and establishes them as an unthinking mass, the 'shack intellectual' is produced out of the very necessity for the poor to have their own 'out-of-order'

thinkers to counter this ‘oppression’. He or she is suited to that role precisely because of his or her experience of shack life and grounding in the knowledge produced in reflection with other shack dwellers. In other words, Abahlali’s notion of a ‘shack intellectual’ is only possible in the specific material living conditions and class relations of post-apartheid, development-focused South Africa.

### **Digital archiving as an intellectual practice**

‘The University of Abahlali’ is perhaps the movement’s most explicit redeployment of language that typically reflects exclusion in the post-apartheid order. Acknowledging that poor South Africans face huge obstacles to attending formal university, Abahlali has created its own university. The ‘University of Abahlali’ has neither a campus nor a set curriculum. Rather, it refers to the members’ thinking, experiencing, and learning through the struggle of daily life in post-apartheid South Africa. One movement member explains that the reason for the name is:

...To acknowledge the fact that education is not only happening in recognized institutions but also to acknowledge the fact that there is an indigenous knowledge that people can learn from anywhere and at anytime. We learn in the streets, in courts, in community meetings, in camps, workshops, political education and in protest. Where we resist evictions, we resist oppression, resist poverty, resist inequality we say struggle is a school... We view it as an intellectual space outside the mainstream institution. (Abahlali member (1), 2013)

By claiming the term ‘university’ and defining it to include informal learning, Abahlali rejects the idea that learning from textbooks or professors offers greater knowledge or expertise than can be gained through experience. The term, ‘the University,’ developed organically from a hand-painted banner at one of the movement’s first protests, where a youth had written, “University of Kennedy Road.” In their interviews, several of the movement members recalled this moment and their immediate appreciation of how suitably the words matched the way people felt about constant learning through mobilization.

When the quoted movement member lists examples of ‘University of Abahlali’ spaces where movement members learn, it is notable that these locations constitute a mix of spaces within the communities, spaces outside of the settlements, and the workshops and political education which could take place in either environment. The spaces she lists outside the shack settlements are ones that Abahlali members only occupy as a result of their mobilization as a movement, for it is in engaging with and making demands of the municipality that Abahlali members move into the streets and courts, engaging publics beyond the poor in the poor’s dialogue on poverty and post-apartheid society. This variety of spaces demonstrates that Abahlali members, by being politically active, have entered into some new spaces that poor residents of shack settlements would not

typically occupy.

One of these spaces is the movement's website, featuring an online component of the University of Abahlali. The 'University of Abahlali' page breaks a collection of over 1,900 links into twenty-two organized sections featuring archives of political writings by movement members, primary documents from other movements around the world, relevant institutional reports and policies, and extensive ethnographic, historical, and theoretical research on poverty and political mobilization. The theory section alone cites 244 documents, from the works of Karl Marx to Steve Biko. The sections on material produced by Abahlali contain about 1,250 links that archive what movement members deem to be the essential background information on important events or experiences that shaped the trajectory of the movement, such as Abahlali's first year of protests, or its successful campaign against the Slums Act in the Constitutional Court. The University's introduction page explains:

Most of the intellectual work done in Abahlali baseMjondolo is undertaken in discussions in meetings, innovations in song etc rather than via written dialogues but this page archives a selection of some of the digital (written) traces of the various kinds of ongoing intellectual work undertaken in and around the movement in the form of press statements, pamphlets, articles etc produced from within the movement as well as the odd newspaper article etc that has been particularly important. ("University of Abahlali")

The website content therefore reflects only a portion of the intellectual practices within the movement. However, through thousands of press releases and articles, and hundreds of photos and video clips, the website does paint a picture of the events and ideas that are important to the movement, shown through media selected by members rather than filtered externally.

The website archives close to 3,540 pages of press releases, representing a wide range of the movement's intellectual practices. On January 17, 2013, for example, the press releases on the homepage featured a video of former Abahlali President S'bu Zikode speaking in Oslo, Norway in November 2012 ("S'bu Zikode"), a video of a Abahlali-led panel discussion in Baltimore, USA about *Dear Mandela*, a 90 minute documentary on living conditions in shack settlements and the movement's Constitutional Court victory over the 2007 Slums Act ("From South Africa"), and two press releases criticizing government policies and misguided NGO responses for exacerbating the devastation brought about by a recent massive shack fire ("Abahlali with QQ", "Government"). The press releases assert that democratic meetings and deliberations are taking place, informing the website's viewers that the post-apartheid South African poor are creating new spaces in which to produce their own knowledge, excluded as they are from more traditional schools and universities. While the Living Learning booklet compiles reflections upon movement practices overall, these press releases are uniquely valuable for capturing the intellectual practices of the poor in real time, as shack settlement residents respond to the activities, events and ideas that are most

relevant to the present moment. The authors of these press releases and articles write with interpretations and emotions drawn directly from recent experience.

The online 'University of Abahlali' is therefore a digital space in which Abahlali members can represent their movement themselves, emphasizing the intellectual nature of their activities and asserting the ideas generated in their intellectual practices. By entering this new digital space, Abahlali invites academics, potential critics and supporters from around the world, and other movements of the poor to learn at and contribute to the 'University of Abahlali'.

### **Producing publics at formal academic institutions**

The Living Learning booklet and the reflections of the 2008 meeting participants revealed that movement members sometimes use the word "theory" in contexts that give it a negative connotation, opposing it to the "practice" from which movement members gain valuable knowledge that informs further action. Abahlali proposes that academics could avoid the tendency to misunderstand the needs of the poor if they were to actually work with movements of the poor in developing proposals and theories to raise living standards. In March 2006, S'bu Zikode gave a speech at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) in which he introduced the traditional "university of the academics and students" to the concept of the University of Abahlali baseMjondolo, "where we think our own struggle" (Zikode, "Rethinking"). He invites his listeners to the latter University in order "to unite and think and fight together where the poor are, where the poor live, where the poor suffer" (Zikode, "Rethinking"). This invitation establishes the idea that one can be a student at both universities, that the movement's university is also open to those who are not poor.

A key component of the invitation, however, is that the students and faculty of formal universities come to the poor communities. Although the 'University of Abahlali' does not have a formal campus, Zikode makes it clear that one learns about the poor by entering the spaces where they live. The invitation therefore draws a significant parallel between the movements necessary for the two universities to come together. Abahlali members want to be included in the institutional university in order to represent themselves. Their participation in events like Zikode's speech signals movement into a space that the poor do not usually occupy. In turn, the academics need to learn from the day-to-day experiences and thinking within the shack settlements in order to shape more effective policies on poverty. This need requires them to move into a space that Abahlali believes academics do not occupy enough, preferring to theorize from within the removed academy. Abahlali's invitation to academics mirrors the same invitation the movement offers to journalists and government officials to spend time in poor communities, imploring them to experience the life of the poor for themselves rather than making assumptions.

The online 'University of Abahlali' archives contain documents about the movement produced by formal university academics, including student researchers, who have spent time with members and participated in movement

activities. Abahlali members emphasize that they appreciate academics who come to poor communities in order to learn and think ‘with the poor’ at the ‘University of Abahlali,’ rather than making assumptions about the poor from afar and trying to think ‘for the poor’. In one of his interviews, Zikode stated:

By engaging different people, different researchers, they come here, we also learn. Not only that they come and learn from us, we also learn when people come and interview us. (Zikode, 2012)

Through interviews and conversations with researchers, movement members reflect on their experiences of protests and material conditions in shack settlements. Visiting researchers or activists may offer new interpretations or draw connections with theories, historic events, or other movements that Abahlali members were not aware of. By archiving works written about the movement by these visiting academics, Abahlali publicly asserts that the movement is engaging with different thinkers and external interpretations of the movement.

The ‘University’s’ “Academic research on Abahlali baseMjondolo” section features 57 academic writings on their movement and an additional ten focused on the closely allied Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign (WCAEC). Other sections document academic research on shack settlements more generally, reports on housing and evictions, and essays on violence in South Africa. Despite the negative connotations that Abahlali members associate with the word ‘theory,’ the ‘University’s’ “theory” section contains 244 writings. The 63-item “history” section provides background on the South African and global contexts in which the movement exists. Through these archives, Abahlali demonstrates that its members engage in thinking about the reasons for and manifestations of poverty and protest beyond their local context. Additionally, because they are intermingled on the ‘University of Abahlali’ homepage with the materials produced by movement members, these external writings provide evidence that Abahlali members see a very important space for the intellectual contributions of those who have received a more traditional educational training at formal universities. The ‘University of Abahlali’ thus constitutes a space for the thinking and ideas produced by the poor to interact with the thinking and ideas produced about the poor by academics.

### **Producing global publics**

The massive expansion in Abahlali’s contacts around the world is in part due to the increase in travel opportunities that have become available to movement members. These travel opportunities, in turn, have often arisen because other organizations around the world have learned of Abahlali through its website, clearly underscoring the importance and effectiveness of the website as the movement’s globally public platform. The 2006 press release that declared Abahlali was “no longer on [its] own,” identified Harare, Zimbabwe as the

movement members' only destination outside of South Africa. In contrast, in the second half of 2012 alone, movement members visited four countries to meet with solidarity movements and speak about Abahlali's mobilization as 'the poor.' S'bu Zikode traveled on two separate trips to Mexico and Norway.

When the movement's headquarters and the homes of many members at the Kennedy Road settlement were attacked on September 29, 2009, it was a crucial moment in the movement's history for many reasons, one of which was the subsequent influx of evidence that Abahlali had entered the awareness and conversations of individuals and communities around the world. The movement received and posted letters and statements of support from organizations and individuals in South Africa, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, Nigeria, the United States, Canada, Denmark, the United Kingdom, Ireland, France, New Zealand, and Australia, as well as some transnational organizations. Abahlali posted images and reports on the solidarity protests in Grahamstown, Cape Town, New York, and London ("The attack").

In fact, a significant majority of materials posted on the website in the immediate aftermath of the attacks were external materials, articles written in the mainstream news and statements from other organizations. This majority reflects the simple fact that in the month following the attacks, more material was produced outside of the movement than within, with the global community reacting strongly at the same time as Abahlali members were facing dislocation that hindered their ability to meet and produce press statements. A letter from Abahlali to the South African clergy, many of whom had publicly supported Abahlali since its beginning, reveals a very important second reason for why Abahlali posted so many external documents in response to the attacks. The movement writes:

There are many people who can only see the poor as dirty, dishonest, criminal, short-minded, ignorant and violent. Whenever we organise and mobilise there are many people who can only see us as people who be being used by someone else and as people who are a threat to society. We constantly face all these stereotypes and prejudices. But with you standing with us many people's minds are opened and we have a better chance of being recognised as human beings, human beings who are poor. ("A Letter," 2010)

Most of the ideas in this passage reflect an essential part of Abahlali's experience-based understanding that the poor are viewed as criminal, dangerous, unthinking, and always directed by someone else. But within these familiar concepts, a new idea emerges. Abahlali asserts that the clergy's public support has the power to make the general population think twice about assuming those stereotypes of 'the poor,' partly because of the respect they have for the clergy specifically, but also because the clergy members are recognized as human beings. The passage implies that without the clergy, the poor are not considered human beings, so cannot be listened to as human beings. Abahlali thus identifies the particular importance of having support from outside of the poor to make the rest

of the population more willing to listen.

This does not mean that Abahlali claims any dependence on the clergy or other supporters. Rather, the movement states that external supporters can play a significant role by contributing ideas to the 'University of Abahlali,' thereby magnifying and drawing attention to the perspective of the poor represented in it too. In this view, voices that "count" in the eyes of the state and middle-class public are not limited to the clergy, but can come from anyone who is not identified as poor, particularly those in esteemed positions as academics, government officials, or organizations like Amnesty International. From the perspective of Abahlali members, people in such esteemed positions "count" because they are widely considered to be intelligent, often experts. As a result, other upper and middle-class publics both in South Africa and abroad appear to the poor to believe that what these experts have to say is important and a true reflection of post-apartheid conditions.

Knowing that a global public views its website, Abahlali employs the words and documents of people, like clergy members, that its members believe will "count" for that global public. The representation of external writings does not diminish the importance of Abahlali's own documents on the website, but rather Abahlali posts both internal and external documents so that that they support each other. The public availability of these documents then attracts the attention of other individuals and organizations around the world that, in turn, also engage with and show support for Abahlali. The website facilitates this cycle and builds an ever-growing network of solidarity across the world. The website's documentation of this deliberate global network further contests the notion that 'the poor' constitute a homogenous unthinking mass.

### **Engaging the global poor**

In their notes in preparation for a conference on gentrification in Manchester, England in August 2009, Abahlali members analyze the extent to which they perceive the global poor to be fighting the same struggle around the world. The authors of the notes state that they "fully support the struggle of the poor against the rich everywhere in the world" ("Notes on Gentrification," 2009) using the singular of the noun to project the image of a unified global struggle. Many of the similarities Abahlali members observe in different countries today are tied to the pressures of development.

However, the authors of the conference notes observe that some of the specific terms they know are used in other countries, such as "gentrification," do not apply exactly to Abahlali's experiences. They reject the idea that they should "[try] to fit [their] story to match the theories and ideas developed elsewhere by others who do not know [their] story" ("Notes on Gentrification"). This statement reveals that although the broad story of the poor fighting the rich might be the same around the world, Abahlali believes that varying local conditions mean that the experiences of 'the poor' are not the same from one place to another. Even one group of the poor, they argue, should not speak for another. This idea reflects

their emphasis on democratic structures within Abahlali, where one settlement or leader cannot make decisions for others. This is an important insight when considering the potential for a global movement of the poor, as the creation of democratic structures that allow for a balance of strong leadership and grassroots activism would be difficult to scale up to the international level. Despite the shared experiences of ‘top-down’ development and the powerlessness felt by those without money in a money-driven society, the knowledge of the poor remains grounded directly in experience within local communities.

Even with substantial differences among movements of the poor around the world, materials like these conference notes reflect that Abahlali’s movement into new intellectual spaces and the resulting exposure to related global movements’ allow the movement to expand upon its own theorizations of being the post-apartheid poor. In the gentrification conferences notes, Abahlali members reflect that their experiences with evictions do not really mirror what they understand as the gentrification of urban areas in cities like Manchester. However, applying the term “gentrification” to their own experiences leads the notes’ authors to arrive at a new conceptualization of their struggle. They propose that “what we might call ‘resistance against the gentrification of our struggle’” is “one of the most interesting conversations to have” (“Notes on Gentrification”). They reflect:

Through our struggle/s, we create new political spaces for contesting power; this inevitably creates speculative interest from professional vanguardist ‘activists’ and ‘civil society’ looking for constituencies to populate their imagined fantasies of resistance and revolution; they try by all means to invade and take over (often with offers of money) the space our struggle opened up and; unless we sustain a living politics militantly against this onslaught, the result looks very much like what the academics describe as the result of gentrification: namely; the poor get moved out once again. (“Notes on Gentrification”)

In these notes, Abahlali members articulate that new spaces where the movement’s intellectual practices thrive are continually at risk of unwelcome infiltration by those who want to lead the poor. They observe a trend in which certain members of the middle class public are drawn to the intellectual spaces initiated by the poor, like meetings and conferences, but then seek to dominate these spaces with their own agendas. The poor, they argue, must constantly be aware of this trend and act to resist it, or face dislocation from their own intellectual practices. It is precisely through one of these new intellectual spaces of the poor – a conference in the United Kingdom – that Abahlali is able to view this phenomenon as concretely tied to a different concept that resonates in many other parts of the world: gentrification.

By presenting these thought processes on its website, Abahlali asserts that the poor engaged in politics in South Africa contextualize their post-apartheid experiences by examining the forces that create and maintain poverty around the world, gleaning new insights into their own circumstances through these

comparisons. Even though Abahlali's understanding of its own struggle is first and foremost informed by the experiences of its members in the shack communities, awareness of other problems and movements around the world does shape Abahlali's understanding of how the post-apartheid order it contests fits into a broader global context.

The 'University of Abahlali's' "Documents from other movements and struggles," "History," and "Links" sections highlight that Abahlali's awareness of similar movements extends to all continents, to rich and poor countries alike. Currently, the collection encompasses 82 documents from other movements, including movement manifestos and charters, speeches, interviews, letters & statements, and essays ("Documents"). The number of documents alone stands as an assertion of the range of new people and ideas occupying space within the 'University of Abahlali,' people and ideas with which the non-militant poor in South Africa would have little reason to interact. The list begins with "The Twelve Articles" from the Peasants' War in 1525 Germany ("The Twelve"), and two documents from English peasants in 1649 ("A Declaration"). The website offers no explicit contextualization of these documents, and makes no claims that 'the poor' in South Africa today are the same as 'the poor' four to five hundred years ago in Europe.

However, it is clear that even these earliest documents explicitly reflect several of Abahlali's core critiques of society. Other documents include the Mexican Zapatista declaration of the revolutionary potential of the dispossessed poor ("El Despertador"), West Bengal Shramik Sangram ('Workers' Struggle') Committee's call for organizations built and led by the poor ("Fight Against"), and an article by American activist Willie Baptist on the importance for activists to study and understand the contemporary conditions in which they mobilize (Baptist, 2010). For each of these documents, Abahlali makes no claims that the other movements or poor populations in question see the world in the exact same way that its own members do. However, by highlighting the words of these other groups on its website, Abahlali accomplishes many important goals.

First, precisely by giving no introduction to these documents, Abahlali lets the voices of others move into the 'University of Abahlali' and speak for themselves. This is particularly important given that Abahlali members' experiences teach them that they, as the poor, have to struggle to make their voices heard. Often, they argue, NGOs and academics try to speak for them, making false assumptions without really listening to what the poor have to say themselves. They know from their exchanges with many other movements of the poor that this trend has been experienced all over the world. Therefore, Abahlali uses its website as a platform for other movements of the poor to represent their experiences and ideas, unhindered by the judgments of outsiders including Abahlali members.

Second, there is sense in amplifying the same message through as many voices and platforms as possible, given Abahlali's assessment that they as the poor "do not count." Even if Abahlali's claims have not yet begun to "count" for the general public, there is a chance that upper or middle-class publics do believe that Martin Luther King or Steve Biko's ideas "count". By displaying the ideas of these

historic activists who have risen to global acclaim, Abahlali's members take up their responsibilities as 'shack intellectuals' and draw connections between what these activists said then, and what Abahlali is saying now. The addition of these external voices to the 'University of Abahlali' thus serves to strengthen the 'University's' voice outwardly.

Third, by presenting documents which were produced independently from Abahlali members' experiences but which draw on similar experiences of the poor elsewhere, Abahlali is able to assert the reliability of knowledge drawn directly from day-to-day life. The fact that many movements and organizations have come to the same critiques of development and capitalism is useful to Abahlali both as affirmation of its emphasis on informal learning and as apparent confirmation that the post-apartheid order is inextricably shaped by global factors. The addition of these external voices to the 'University of Abahlali' thus serves to strengthen the internal confidence of the 'University,' and empower all its participants.

Despite the fact that the website cannot capture the full experiences of their movement, the website is a crucial new space for the poor engaged in protest to occupy. It serves as a secure space for the ideas generated in the communities of Abahlali to interact with the ideas generated by poor movements and other supporters from around the world, strengthening the 'University of Abahlali' both as an external platform of engagement and an internal space of empowerment. As an archive of the movement's intellectual practices from the beginning of its founding through to the present day, the website contests the notion that the protests of poor people are constituted by unthinking masses; instead, it demands that middle-class publics acknowledge the depth of thought and learning occurring in poor communities.

## **Conclusion**

Returning to the Marikana massacre, it has become increasingly apparent over the last year that the immediate media coverage of the incident paid relatively little attention to the miners' story. An analysis of South African newspapers' sources found that "from 12 to 22 August, a moment when opinions were strongly influenced...27 per cent of references were business sources, 14 per cent were managers and owners of mines, and only three per cent were 'workers'" (Alexander et al. 2012, Duncan 2012). The government's Marikana Commission of Enquiry has since confirmed that the event, which seemed to observers around the world to be an explosive and spontaneous moment of violence that spiraled out of control, was actually preceded by the miners' conscious efforts to organize and articulate demands that arose from reflecting as a group. If we accept that these intellectual practices are particularly susceptible to being overshadowed by the more public occasions of protest and violence in mainstream media, then we, as academics, policy-makers, or anyone interested in the nature of politics of the poor, must make an extra effort to push behind-the-scenes intellectual activities to the forefront of public discourse in order to fully understand contemporary

South African politics.

Furthermore, ignoring the intelligence in shack settlements has serious implications for policy and development projects. Not only does excluding the poor from decision-making processes increase the likelihood that a policy or project will not address people's real needs, but removing their agency also risks alienating them such that they seek to actively resist imposed initiatives.

I hope that nobody will mistake this paper for a full exploration of Abahlali's intellectual practices. The Living Learning booklet and the website are only two particular products of collective intellectual reflection that occurs constantly in everyday life experiences and could never be represented in its entirety. I also cannot make broad claims about poor people's movements around the world, for these movements are tremendously diverse in how they articulate their identity and claims even within South Africa alone. I do believe, however, that the need to highlight the intellectual practices that shape these movements' identities and claims is a global one.

These forms of self-representation both state and demonstrate that intelligent thinking is occurring in shack settlements, addressing my question of how movements of the poor contest dominant perceptions of 'the poor' as a violent, unthinking mass. I aim for this paper to serve as another testament to the fact that there is deep thinking and reflection taking place within shack communities in post-apartheid South Africa. It should also serve as a suggestion that we should pay attention to intellectual practices in poor communities around the world. As the movement's website demonstrates, Abahlali members regularly encounter other movements that are engaging in the same discussions about how to convince publics that the poor are capable of theorizing and representing their own movements. The rapid expansion of digital communications technology, in particular, provides new accessible platforms through which poor people can share their experiences and magnify each other's voices. The extent to which policymakers and other local and global publics will listen, however, remains to be seen.

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