

Dis/placing political illiteracy: the politics of intellectual equality in a South African shack-dwellers' movement

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Abstract

This paper starts out with the claim that the contemporary spatio-political order of the South African “world class” city is conditional upon constructing many lives as superfluous and disposable. This construction partly rests on the inherited topography of apartheid displacement which continues to push the poor black majority into zones of invisibility and inaudibility. Beyond this physical distancing, the production and abandonment of surplus people also depends on rendering them as improper political subjects. In the prevailing political discourse, poor people’s struggles are deemed less than political through notions such as the idea that all protest is related to the pace of “service delivery” or accusations of violence, as well as often explicit characterizations of dissenting people as ignorant. Such discursive moves imply and reinforce a conception of the poor black majority as unable to think and practice their own politics; that is, as politically illiterate group of people. Working with a conception of intellectual inequality as always fabricated and contingent in nature, this article elaborates the deployment and disruption of political illiteracy by focusing on the politics of South African shack-dwellers’ movement Abahlali baseMjondolo. The discussion moves through the dis/placement of the legal charge of public violence, the state violence of illegal evictions, the discourse of service delivery, and the educative trusteeship of abandonment. The article concludes with some concerns that emerge through the movement’s practice and the very attempt to research political illiteracy.

Keywords: urban struggles; shack-dwellers; intellectual equality; Jacques Rancière; South African politics

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The beginning

For reasons that are spelled out further below, let me start with the story of how I got to the point that is now somewhat arbitrarily designated as the beginning. Due to a series of more or less contingent factors, events, encounters, as well as genuine interests and commitments of a political theory student, I applied to the doctoral program of International Relations and European studies at the Central European University (Budapest, Hungary) with the proposal to study resistance to biopolitics. In the then still fresh conceptual debate between the two main politico-philosophical renderings of biopolitics, (due to a series of more or less contingent factors, etc.) I sided with Michel Foucault's ideas as opposed to those of Giorgio Agamben. That is, as opposed to an ancient aspect of the sovereign power to ban life and thus relegate it to a zone where it can be killed with impunity, I thought of biopolitics as a form of rule that emerged with modernity to efficiently govern what the contemporaneously developing social sciences named as 'the population'. While this conception of biopolitics is predominantly productive – it seeks to create subjects that conduct themselves in ways that enable the efficient government of the polity – it certainly has a dark side to it, hence Foucault's (2003, 241) aphorismic formulation: the power "to make live and let die". Thus, while Agamben's (1998) notion of abandonment is indeed symptomatic of contemporary biopolitics, his decisionist idea of sovereignty and the subject of abandonment, which he associates with the ancient *homo sacer* or the walking dead of the Nazi lager, forecloses the possibility to meaningfully think resistance to this form of politics. Thanks to my supervisor who, as a Foucauldian himself, shared my concerns with Agamben, the predominantly theoretical question of how we might think resistance to technologies of power that let die was the point of departure of the moderately unruly path of my dissertation.

More important than the struggles of trying to mould a project like this into the rather stiff epistemological and methodological frames of political science, at some point during my first year in the doctoral program I found the South African shack-dwellers' movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo's (Abahlali) website. Having read almost everything uploaded there and having gone through all the photos and documents of their protests, I was absolutely convinced that theirs is indeed an instance of resistance to being rendered superfluous and disposable, of being "let die". As I soon learned, the movement has a protocol that interested researchers needed to follow: whoever wished to write about Abahlali (2007a), should visit them and talk to them so as to see and hear what life in the shantytown feels like. Although this meant quite a leap for a politics student based in Budapest, so as to fulfill Abahlali's request, I decided to integrate ethnographic methods into my project, and in the northern fall/southern spring of 2009 I landed in Durban, where the movement started from and where their national office is located.²

² For the project recounted here, I conducted research with Abahlali baseMjondolo in Durban and the eThekweni (Greater Durban) area in two phases: between April-July 2009 and September-November 2010. Over the years to follow, I remained engaged with Abahlali's work

My time in Durban on this first occasion was defined by daily visits to the shack settlement on Kennedy Road in Clare Estate. This included conducting interviews with Abahlali members in English and sitting through their meetings conducted mostly in isiZulu; the preparations and the journey to the Constitutional Court hearing of Abahlali's appeal against the "Slums Act", as well as the task to write up an article focusing on the theoretical side of my research for a special journal issue on Foucault and global politics. One would be tempted at this point to recount this experience as that of the oscillation between my room in the middle class neighbourhood of Glenwood and the Abahlali office in the huge shack settlement on Kennedy Road, and thus as the literal and metaphorical movement between the space of theoretical and empirical work; but I feel obliged to tell this story now precisely because the encounter with Abahlali taught me to resist such epistemological ordering. Getting to know the shack-dwellers' struggle against what they and I both thought was their abandonment to a life barely livable meant beginning to understand why they insist that researchers come and speak to them: beyond the experience of "living in the mud like pigs" (Abahlali, 2010a), being rendered disposable is experienced as being rendered as someone who is denied speech and who need not be spoken to. It was beginning to appreciate the significance of Abahlali members asserting themselves as thinking and speaking beings, and what it meant when they declared their shantytowns to be the University of Abahlali baseMjondolo. Crucially, these declarations are not uttered from the assumed position of superfluous life. Instead, they suggest that the emergence of political subjectivities that reject the very allotment of insignificant life is never completely foreclosed – neither by the production of superfluous life and its abandonment to infrastructural decay on the level of governmental rationality, nor by increasing state violence in local practices of executive power.³

Circling around such considerations, this period of my project thus marked the beginning of a research trajectory that, although still had its anchor in the question of how to think resistance to technologies of power that let die, moved into the context of neoliberal urbanism and took on the *problematique* of urban governmentality, thereby formulating the question: What rationalities and technologies of power shape the urban order that produces and abandons superfluous life? On the other hand, but contemporaneously, due to encountering the work of philosopher Jacques Rancière both through people within and close to the movement and professors at my university back in Budapest, I articulated the following inquiry: What does it mean to think

from afar. During my current postdoctoral work – based in Cape Town – I have maintained contact with the Western Cape organization of the movement; although less so as a researcher than a sympathizer or activist.

³ See Selmeczi (2009) for an elaboration of my understanding of the concept of abandonment. See also Sharad Chari's (2013, 132) discussion of Durban-based environmental justice activists' refusal "to be forgotten in the toxic valley of South Durban", that is, their rejection of "detritus life".

politics in the face of the sensible order of the neoliberal “world class” city that produces and abandons superfluous life through, among other techniques, constructing it as mute and ignorant?

It was, then, the resonance between Abahlali’s assertions of their equality as thinking and speaking beings, and Rancière’s (1999; 2004) conception of politics as the disruptive logic of equality that defined the interpretive framework of my research, within which the biopolitical order of abandonment appeared as a spatiotemporal order of the visible, audible and sensible (as in perceptible both physically and rationally). The site of the power that lets die emerged as the urban government of distinct aesthetics – be it those of superfluity in Achille Mbembe’s (2004) rendering or the experience of lives discarded to spaces of infrastructural decay – that is conditional upon the construction of hierarchies; a segmentary topography that relies upon the contingent production of the difference and inequality of those who (wish to) dwell in it.

My entry point to the particular rationalities of power which operates this way was the notion of the “world class” city, that is, the ideal/ideational space of “the circulation of both people and things” in the age of globalized capitalism (Foucault, 2007: 71). Drawing on a body of literature that studies what happens to cities when the neoliberal fetish of competition launches them on an interterritorial rivalry for capital investment (Brenner and Elden 2009), I approached the measures of the City of Durban and the KwaZulu-Natal Province to dislocate the urban poor as state attempts to create a desirable milieu for the market. Surely, such efforts entail favouring some areas over others, and require that the movement between these areas be policed. For the circulation of people and things to be smooth, people, things and events perceived as non-conducive to the logic of market competition have to be moved out of its way.⁴ Hence, in about a decade after lifting all constraints to the movement of black people in South Africa, a governmental rationality different from that of minority rule under apartheid rearticulates the problem of urban access (and excess), albeit with a significant twist. Under “the new dispensation”, by the early to mid-2000s the ultimate question of urban development becomes this: how is it possible to contain the undesirable movement of people who, given their rights as free citizens of the democratic South Africa, are supposed to be as mobile as the rest (cf. Huchzermeyer 2010)?

The spatial order of apartheid outlived the demise of its political ideology, and thus this question of containment is partly resolved by the hardly challenged spatial and infrastructural segregation. Yet, taking seriously the experience of the urban order of abandonment articulated through the struggle of Abahlali baseMjondolo demands that we trace the containment of excess mobility in realms beyond the territorial. Indeed, following up on the resonance between

⁴ The conception of the *ordinary city* (as the colonial city) elaborated by, e.g. Jennifer Robinson (2006; 2008) and Edgar Pieterse (e.g. 2010) would open an alternative, potentially more productive route that I can explore here. I thank Gary Minkley for the suggestion.

Rancière's thought and Abahlali's interrogation and appropriation of the name of *the people* and *the public* required that I had to look into how the problematization of the (supposedly) superfluous people's excess mobility kept redefining the scope of the subject of economic and political government, and how, thereby, it reconstructed the urban poor as less than equal political and economic subjects.⁵ It was while working my way through this imperative, and picking up cues such as those resounded in the italicized texts that intersperse the paper that I arrived at understanding the notion of *political illiteracy* as a crucial means of constructing people who have been rendered superfluous as less than equal subjects. Emphatically, far from labeling poor people, Abahlali activists, or (local) government agents politically illiterate, through deploying this notion I seek to problematize the discursive construction of the intellectual and political inequality of those who are deemed to be in excess to the aesthetic order of the postcolonial turned neoliberal city. Albeit only latently in this article, this aim necessarily disturbs the assumptions of a body of work that diagnoses political illiteracy as an objective factor contributing to political apathy and, consequently, the so-called democratic deficit in contemporary liberal regimes (see e.g. Bron, Guimarães, and Castro 2009; Gidengil 2005; Wood 2010), and finds remedy in some form of citizenship education (see e.g. Wood 2009; Heater 2010). Closer to the critical approach motivating this article is Paulo Freire's (1985) conception of political illiteracy that he juxtaposes to critical literacy as the practice that pedagogy should nurture. Yet, Freire, too, posits the former as an existing attribute of those who have a "naïve outlook on social reality", taking it as "a given" (Ibid., 103; see also Giroux 2001; 2013).

As opposed to the presumption of inequality that, in understanding political illiteracy as a real condition prior and contrary to political consciousness I elaborate the operation and disruption of political illiteracy according to a conception of intellectual inequality as always fabricated and contingent in nature.⁶ Focusing on the dis/placement of the legal charge of public violence, the state violence of illegal evictions, the discourse of service delivery, and the educative trusteeship of abandonment, I hope to share what I learned about the politics of, or rather, against political illiteracy primarily through my work with Abahlali. I conclude by briefly reflecting on some of the concerns that emerge through the movement's practice and, more emphatically, through researching the deployment and disruption of political illiteracy.

While our national and provincial elections are significant, the local government elections we are having next month are even more important for each one of us. It

⁵ See Selmeczi (2012b) for a discussion of a methodological approach articulated by such a back-and-forth dynamics between questions and problems intermeshing empirical and conceptual.

⁶ Despite these conflicting connotations, I stuck to "political illiteracy" so as convey in the expression the sense of materiality that characterizes the construction and contestation of intellectual and political inequality; to allude to the importance of the palpable (because inscribable and legible) existence of equality, upon which the questioning of inequality so often turns (Rancière 2007; see also Selmeczi 2012b).

is about service delivery right where you are in your local government. It is very much about you. And I mean each and every one of you. It is about the daily basic needs of each one of you. It is about water, it is about your electricity, it is about the education of your children. This is an election which affects us very directly. It is a pity that the lion's share of the budget goes to the national and provincial governments. The resources in the fiscus are skewed in favor of both national and provincial governments rather than local government. The trouble is that with so much political illiteracy in our country most of our people tend to expect too much from local government than it can actually deliver, in terms of its miniscule budget. In a situation where national and provincial government is under the governance of a different party and where local government happens to be under a different party there is a lot of conflict that results from the ignorance of the different roles of the three tier-levels of government. I have noticed that there is deliberate exploitation of this ignorance of our people (Buthelezi 2011).

"Who decides what is 'public violence'? Who is the public really?"⁷

The story of Abahlali baseMjondolo's emergence as a social movement has been told many times both by the movement itself and scholars working with them (cf. e.g. Abahlali 2006; Zikode 2010; Pithouse 2005; Bryant 2007; Chance 2011). In the context of political illiteracy, the assessment that such narratives are "manufactured by intellectuals" is hardly negligible (Webb 2013, 465), but this point will be returned to later. The point of departure for the discussion here is the trope of "public violence" and the role it played in formulating the political subjectivity of the shack-dwellers of Kennedy Road. On the day of their first road blockade in early 2005, fourteen protesters from the settlement were arrested on charges of public violence. Having collected the funds for the bail of the captives now referred to as the "Kennedy Road 14", the following Monday the Kennedy Road Development Committee led a 1 200 people strong march to the Sydenham police station where they were being held. As the movement's historian later recalls, "[t]heir demand was that either the 14 be released or else the entire community be arrested because 'If they are criminal then we are all criminal'" (Abahlali, 2006 : 1). In former chairperson S'bu Zikode's words "They say we committed public violence but against which public? If we are not the public then who is the public and who are we?" (Zikode in Pithouse, 2005: 15)⁸

The work of political illiteracy – disrupted in these very utterances – can be traced along two lines in the ways "public violence" is put in place. On the one

⁷ Abahlali (2007b).

⁸ See also a quote from a talk given by Zikode (2010a, 01:13:34"; emphasis added) at CUNY: [T]hrough the courage and strength of the people, we marched the next day to demand that those who were arrested be released or all of us be arrested because they were charged for public violence. Now, which public, because we are the public. [...] Rather, take them out because we are the public that should have been the victims of their act. But if you cannot release them then arrest us. And again, the protest in the next day was also dispersed with... guns and so on. The movement grew up like that."

hand, the shack-dwellers' questions around the subject of this criminal charge point to how, in its deployment, protestors come to be removed from, and opposed to, the collective subject of the republic. While of course the possibility that protestors could commit criminal offences cannot be excluded in principle, the fact that charges of public violence against the many Abahlali members arrested during protest have, with one exception, always been dropped before cases go to trial suggests that arrest functions more as a spatio-political antidote: it discursively and literally separates "the public" from those who decide to use public space to demonstrate their dissent (cf. UPM 2011).⁹ Among other means, some of which are discussed below, this interplay between the name of "the public" and the law deployed in defence of its alleged referents certainly contributes to filtering out poor people's dissent from the city's sensible order. Suggestive of the second line of constructing political illiteracy through "public violence", on the other hand, their separation from "the public" is justified by equating the demonstrative use of public space with violence.¹⁰

Illustrative of the shack-dwellers' challenge to such mechanisms, both of these moves are carefully deconstructed in an essay written by Mzonke Poni (2009), then chairperson of Abahlali baseMjondolo in the Western Cape, on the occasion of his public violence trial where he represented himself and won. Through a semantic analysis of "public violence", the text first delinks the charge and its usual suspects, "the poor". Citing a dictionary definition of public violence, Poni (2009) argues that unlike the shack-dwellers' acts of trespass and civil disobedience (such as blockading roads or occupying land), the violent and illegal actions of the police and the Anti-Land Invasion Unit¹¹ during evictions or the dissolution of protests might well be read as "public act[s] of violence by

⁹ As activists know very well, public violence charges are effectively deployed as spatial, temporal and financial impediments to their political practice (cf. e.g. UPM in, Gabb 2011; Poni 2009; Tissington in De Waal 2012). Apropos the news that all charges were dropped against one of the KwaNdengezi Four (in KwaZulu-Natal), Abahlali (2013) comments thus: "[...T]hese charges against all four comrades were fabricated and meant to redirect our focus away from the politic of truth. [...] Why should the poor suffer before the truth could be told? Why should our struggle for land and housing be forced to the courts when we expose corruption in housing?" In accordance with Michael Neocosmos' (2011) analysis of the depoliticizing aspects of transitional justice in post-apartheid South Africa, these questions arguably point to yet another aspect of the post-democratic state's instrumentalization of the rule of law that ultimately works toward replacing politics with litigation (Ranci re 1999; cf. Selmeczi 2012b).

¹⁰ I refer to "the public" as the name of the collective political subject in politico-legal discourse and Abahlali's interrogation thereof. For a discussion of Abahlali's politics in relation to a differently conceived notion of the "publics" – as predominantly middle-class media consumers and direct spectators of shack-dwellers' protests in urban spaces – see Chance (2011). Kerry Chance rightly cautions analysts about the limitations of understanding politics as that which can be seen by the "publics", thus overlooking important mobilizing practices performed to and by publics within the shantytown, beyond what is mediatized. In my view, to reaffirm, Abahlali's political practice – e.g. challenging through appropriating the name of "the public" – disrupt the very distribution of what gets to be seen by whom, and thus the spatial clustering of publics too.

¹¹ See the City of Cape Town's description of the unit [here](#).

an unruly mob”.¹² Proceeding with the re-allocation of the common associations of public violence, Poni (2009) then asks whether or not the inaccessibility of legal aid, the state’s failure “to provide people with basic essential services”, or its enforcement of its own version of “development” realizes public violence. The fact that these conditions are generally not considered to do so, and that, in turn, poor people’s land occupations are not recognized as a form of legitimate grassroots land-distribution and thus the promotion of the public good is, he points out, telling of the discursive demarcation alluded above: “The fact that our minor and non-criminal offences are treated as criminality – as public violence – shows that in reality we are not included in the definition of the public. [...] Therefore we have to rebel just to count as the public” (Poni, 2009.).

While pointing right at the heart of politics as the disruption of the common sensibility, Poni’s last quoted sentence at the same time gestures toward the double-edged operation of political illiteracy. Whereas the shack-dwellers’ rebellious appropriation of the name of the public makes visible the miscount of the urban order where the poor should suffer in silence on the peripheries, their spatio-political containment turns upon reconstructing rebellion it as violent and (or therefore) thoughtless. A heated exchange between Abahlali baseMjondolo in the Western Cape and a group of civil society organizations led by the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), along with the local branch of an ANC affiliated trade union federation and the, also ANC affiliated, South African Communist Party (SACP), is exemplary of these dynamics that, as Michael Neocosmos (e.g. 2011) has consistently argued, is due to the depoliticizing effects of transitional justice, among them, the post-apartheid construction of violence as atavistic and antithetical to democracy (cf. Selmeczi 2012b).

The debate between TAC (and allies) and Abahlali dates back to September 2010, when Abahlali in the Western Cape¹³ (2010b) called for a “Week of Informal Settlements’ Strike”, a national week of action where people living in shack-settlements were invited “to take to the street for the whole week with a view to show our dis[s]atisfactions of the conditions in which we are living...” Although the strike was scheduled to take place during the last week of October 2010, it already erupted in several settlements in Khayelitsha in Cape Town during the days of preparatory mobilization early that month, thus resulting in Abahlali in the Western Cape’s decision to extend the time-frame of the strike to the whole of October (Majavu and Obose 2010). Protest action mostly took the

¹² Indeed, in line with Western Cape Abahlali’s (2010a) interpretation that “[b]lockading a road is not violence”; “[v]iolence is harm to human beings”, Abahlali members often make the point that protests usually turn violent only when the police intervenes (cf. Sacks 2012). As, for instance, spokesperson Mnikelo Ndabankulu notes (interview, 28 October 2010): “[...U]sually harm is only experienced when police come. Before police come, no harm happens, whether we sing and burn tires as part of our expression [...] So, when we burn tires, we sing our songs, the only thing: we’re causing traffic, which traffic always happened by the way. And then, when police come, that’s where harm take place, and usually we are only the victims”. In fact, Abahlali protests have never resulted in harming anyone.

¹³ Abahlali in the Western Cape operates with considerable autonomy from Abahlali in KwaZulu-Natal and there are some important differences in how the two have organized.

form of road blockades – including parts of the N2 highway and Mew Way, a major road running through the area – mainly built of burning tires and debris. On one occasion a bus was set on fire and, according to the spokesperson of the City of Cape Town, a fire station was also damaged.¹⁴

A couple weeks into the strike, COSATU Khayelitsha,¹⁵ the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), the Social Justice Coalition (SJC), and Equal Education published a joint statement entitled “Reject Abahlali baseMjondolo’s call for violence and chaos!”. Describing themselves as organizations whose members “work patiently, educate themselves and build local leadership to change the system of inequality”, the statement calls “progressive people in churches, clinics, schools, universities, homes and local organizations (in Khayelitsha and elsewhere) to distance themselves from mindless violence and calls for chaos...” (TAC et al. 2010). In a similar spirit, a day later the South African Communist Party (SACP) of the Brian Bunting District issued a statement that declares “Abahlali baseMjondolo’s tactics reactionary”, as well as “opportunistic, anarchist and populist”, and condemns the organization for vandalizing state property, i.e., “the already existing infrastructure in our communities” (ka-Nggentsu 2010).¹⁶ Clearly drawing a line between their own ‘thoughtful’ politics (which remains within the frames of the rule of law and protects state property), and the thoughtless chaos Abahlali is imagined to create, these texts reproduce the pedagogical myth of progress and development, thus not only obliterating the role of violent civil disobedience in the victory against apartheid, but also necessarily constructing protestors as not yet political: “We know that mindless violence and chaos have never brought freedom, decent jobs and a better life. Freedom and equality comes through patient organization, education, and sustained struggle”.¹⁷ As Abahlali points out in its response, similarly to the

¹⁴ According to police reports, on the night of 19 October ten vehicles were stoned and set on fire. Abahlali claimed that the perpetrators of this incident were “unaffiliated to them” (Burns 2010). As one of my anonymous reviewers notes, many of the protest actions condemned by the authors of the statement were, in fact, claimed by the ANC Youth League (cf. Samodien 2010; Abahlali baseMjondolo of the Western Cape 2010c).

¹⁵ COSATU stands for the Confederation of South African Trade Unions that, together with the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) formed the still extant, although slowly crumbling, Tripartite Alliance in 1990.

¹⁶ See also TAC’s General Secretary, Vuyiseka Dubula’s (Dubula 2012) opinion piece arguing along the same lines in reaction to a similar wave of protests in Cape Town in 2012. For a critical response, see Sacks (2012).

¹⁷ As I have noted elsewhere (Selmeczi 2012b), in formulating their practice as “the politics of the present tense” (interview with former vice-chairperson, 2 November 2010) Abahlali (e.g. 2006b) has always rejected the temporality of that myth imbuing what they call the “politics of patience” (interview with S’bu Zikode, 26 October 2010). As Richard Pithouse (email correspondence, 18 February 2014) noted, this term entered the South African discourse around housing via Shack-Dwellers International (SDI); (cf. Appadurai 2001), and was adopted by former Minister of Housing Lindiwe Sisulu – to Abahlali’s significant concern (cf. Zikode 2010b). That this smooth discursive movement between a (supposedly) grassroots urban movement and the highest levels of state and global politics should be worrisome is aptly pointed out by urban rights scholar Marie Huchzermeyer (email correspondence, 12 February 2014) in relation to the nomination of SDI’s president, Jockin Arputham, for the Nobel Peace

work of state agents' "public violence" discourse, in deploying such an account of violence, the signatory organizations too separate protestors from their version of the properly political subject: the patiently organizing local activist, or the "poor and the working class" (TAC et al 2010). "We have long experience of the state calling protests in which no person is harmed violent. We did not expect a social movement to do so" (Abahlali Western Cape, 2010)

Proving the contingency of the intellectual order molded by such instances intermeshing protest, violence and thoughtlessness, over the past several years Abahlali have articulated various interpretations within which public protest appears, in fact, as the enactment of the equality of speech and thought. For one, they frequently refer to spontaneous protests or organized marches as discourse. In this metaphor, as I have mentioned elsewhere (Selmeczi 2012a), demonstrations become continuous with other forms of supposed dialogue and, as such, speak of a sensible order where the shack-dwellers' utterances are not received as speech. As S'bu Zikode (2005, 2) put it in his "Third Force" essay: "We discovered that our municipality does not listen to us when we speak to them in Zulu. We tried English. Now we realize that they won't underst[an]d Xhosa or Sotho either. The only language that they understand is when we put thousands of people on the street".¹⁸ Offering a slightly different rendering of public demonstration as speech, Ndabankulu (interview 28 October 2010) explains the popularity of protests by juxtaposing them to the unequal distribution of voice at official political events:

Some people keep on saying "Hey Mnikelo, I like a protest [more] than a rally because in a rally we just get into a bus and enjoy singing while we are on the bus. But we get to the stadium, you are quiet and listen to speeches, which you cannot even question them!" Understand? The speaker of the day speaks and speaks and speaks and speaks, and you go home. But in a march everybody takes a mic and

Prize 2014. As Huchzermeyer argues in her comments on SDI's press statement published apropos the nomination, citing Mike Davis' *Planet of Slums* the organization takes the view that urban poverty inevitably leads to violent strife, thereby justifying their strategy of "dialogue" and "cooperation", which they simplistically oppose to "confrontation" (cf. Huchzermeyer 2011). As such, they reinforce the governmental attempt to contain and condemn protest action and other forms of militant struggle through constructing these as violent and therefore threatening. Rancière's (1999) writing on the police order's aim to impede the confrontational enactment of *dissensus* seems greatly relevant here.

¹⁸ On the "Third Force", cf. below. When five years later I asked S'bu about the then raging debate between TAC and Abahlali of the Western Cape, he recalled his response to others' similar inquiries: "I said: what would you do, if language is a barrier? Now, you want to talk to a person, the person does not understand, you use your normal isiZulu, or even the English, [still] they don't understand. You send emails, you write letters, and then you'll have to keep trying other methods. Now, this is one of the methods, which we know that it has passed in the past: the popular protest. [...] So, again, the normal procedures being followed as protocols; not working, you have to do other way: you are *popular*. It's popular to us – to those who do it, but it's unpopular to the allies and the state" (S'bu Zikode, interview 25 October 2010; emphasis added).

sings his favorite song, so everybody enjoys, so people love marches more than rallies.¹⁹

Another one of Abahlali's counter-interpretations exposes constructions of violence which put political illiteracy in place as erasing not only thought but also history. On the one hand, when referring to their protests as one tactic among others, Abahlali declare their actions to be thoughtful by definition. As in response to TAC et al.'s (2010) condemnation of the informal settlements' strike as "immature, ignorant and [contemptuous] for our communities" Abahlali states, "yes we have chosen a different form of struggle to TAC in this campaign. But that does not mean that we did not come to this campaign after careful thinking" (Abahlali Western Cape 2010a; cf. Abahlali 2010b; Ndabankulu in Patel 2013; Abahlali 2014).²⁰ Beyond rejecting the subjectivity suggested by the trope of "mindless violence", on the other hand, when Abahlali talk about protest action as a tactic, they often establish an explicit continuity between their practice and the anti-apartheid struggle (e.g. Abahlali 2011; cf. Anti-Privatization Forum 2009). In light of the post-apartheid reconfiguration of violence as antidemocratic and atavistic (Neocosmos 2011), such linkages to the struggle for liberation have major significance, for they point to the gap that the apotheosis of the rule of law and the consequent process of depoliticization leaves in the country's very recent history of popular militancy.²¹

The transformed, arguably amnesiac, interpretation of "ungovernability" is a case in point. In paralyzing the apartheid state, the massive wave of civil disobedience in the mid to late 1980s rendered townships and later the whole country ungovernable and was once seen as the direct route to People's Power

¹⁹ The immediate context of the quote suggests that marches are opposed to political party rallies, yet, a bit further on, Ndabankulu juxtaposes them to "boardroom politics", which seems to suggest that members prefer marches to the movement's more formalized meetings too. On another note, although here I have neither the space nor the capacity to do so, the connections between the joy of (carnavalesque) politics and thought that this quote gestures towards would be worth further inquiry.

²⁰ Announcing the occupation of the SOHCO Owned River View Flats, a block of empty social housing units, in Cato Manor, Durban, Abahlali (2014) declares: "If we are repressed we will organize simultaneous road blockades across the city during peak hour traffic. If people are left homeless we will occupy unused land or unused buildings owned by government or so-called public-private partnerships like Sohco. For years we have warned that if politicians and officials refuse to negotiate with us we will go to the streets and the courts, and that if these tactics fail we will take direct action to access land and housing and to force our oppressors to negotiate with us. We have called this Plan B."

²¹ Conversely, around the time of Abahlali's first mass protests, in the mid-2000s, criticism took the opposite angle: it was precisely because they were resorting to the same modes of dissent as those of the anti-apartheid era that protestors were condemned. As Thabo Mbeki (quoted in Patel and Pithouse 2005) urged in 2005: "We must stop this business of people going into the street to demonstrate about lack of delivery. These are the things that the youth used to do in the struggle against apartheid". In his study of COSATU's attitudes towards Abahlali, Alexander Beresford (2006, 69) shows that union members share the same sentiment, i.e., that "it's like we bare fighting our own people who are government in the same way as we fought the people in the old regime, and we can't block the road and use the vulgar language against our own people".

and thus liberation (ANC, 1986). However, in today's context, it refers to the persistence of violence and ignorance in spaces that are no longer supposed to be townships, a combination certainly sub-political.²² The excerpt from Mangosuthi Buthulezi (2011) of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) preceding this section, as well as his earlier piece entitled "We're reaping the bitter harvest of ungovernability" (Buthulezi, 2009), is an apt illustration of how that notion is being reconfigured as ignorance. To see, in turn, ungovernability rendered as violence – which is deployed in an unethical electoral rivalry so as to undermine municipal efforts to efficiently run the Western Cape and the City of Cape Town – the Democratic Alliance (DA) offers a useful archive. From "hate speech" and "violent protest" to "land invasion", the DA's (2012) "Timeline of the ANC and ANCYL's WCape Ungovernability Campaign" lumps all instances of popular unrest to the machinations of the ANC and its Youth League. To be sure, the involvement of the latter is evident in some cases (cf. Earnest, 2013), but to attribute all sorts of protests to the sinister plan of a party political contestant, while integrating them into a chronicle of various forms of violence adds up to denying the political agency of the protestors themselves. At the same time, this trivializes the appalling living conditions over which they decided to take to the street. The discourse around the now infamous "poo protests" spotting the province clearly exemplify this dynamic (cf. Phamodi 2013, Schutte 2013). Less obviously but no less importantly, together with the current criminalization of protest, the ANC's almost complete appropriation of the ungovernability campaign for the narrative of their role as the sole agent of liberation equally erases the political capacity of local struggles – both then and now (cf. Mayekiso, 1996).²³

That the pathologization of violence comes with a familiar pedagogical reflex was certainly confirmed in the aftermath and the discourse of the wave of popular xenophobic violence in 2008.²⁴ While the upsurge of workshops and educational projects would require a study on its own (but cf. e.g., Desai and Vahed 2013; Atlas 2009), in conclusion to this section's discussion of political illiteracy as violence, here I constrain myself to citing Abahlali's reaction to this reflex, for it precisely targets the links between the urban order of abandonment and the usual allocation of intellectual capacities.²⁵ In their "Statement on the xenophobic attacks in Johannesburg", following a poetic exercise in discrediting typical prejudices against foreigners and a list of the steps they decided to take

²² Cf. Gibson (2001).

²³ I thank Patricia Hayes for raising the important point about Mayekiso's "correction" to the ANC's narrative. I could not do justice to it here.

²⁴ Cf. Neocosmos (2011) for a thorough analysis of the xenophobic violence as the consequence, and not the antithesis, of the operation of transitional justice and the human rights discourse in post-apartheid South Africa, as well as a discussion of Abahlali as affirmative of a political subjectivity that challenges this assemblage.

²⁵ It also has to be noted that there were no attacks against people of non-South African origin in settlements affiliated to Abahlali.

in order to prevent attacks, Abahlali (2008) turn to political illiteracy under construction:

We hear that the political analysts are saying that the poor must be educated about xenophobia. Always the solution is to “educate the poor”. When we get cholera we must be educated about washing our hands when in fact we need clear water. When we get burnt we must be educated about fire when in fact we need electricity. This is just a way of blaming the poor for our suffering. We want land and housing in the cities, we want to go to university, we want water and electricity – we don’t want to be educated to be good at surviving poverty on our own.

As shown in the next section discussing the dis/placement of political illiteracy that enables illegal evictions, on the other side of the pedagogical reflex under attack here, the sensible interplay between the scope of “the public” and various interpretations of violence is also conditioned by ideas about what is *not* included in the education of the poor. In turn, claiming one’s space in the public and thus physically disrupting the urban order of abandonment remakes politics as an experience of learning.

In January 2012, South African circles of the middle class left were shaken up by a conflict between a leader of the Unemployed People’s Movement (UPM) and a lecturer at Rhodes University. At the heart of the conflict were three wandering books: The Communist Manifesto, a volume of selected writings by Marx and Engels, and another by Antonio Gramsci (UPM, 2012). According to the lecturer, the books were stolen by the activist to whom she opened her house when he was threatened, and, although she had been asking him to return them for months, the activist failed to do so (Martinez-Mullen, 2012). She then proceeded to lay charges of theft against him with the police. According to the activist, who suffered physical abuse at the police station after his arrest, the books were “misplaced, not stolen”, and the charges against him indicate the anger of a previously supportive academic over her failure to turn him and the UPM into proper Marxists, over his insistence to keep reading Fanon and Biko (UPM, 2012). While the lecturer claimed that the “issue” between the activist and herself is “a private, not a political, issue”, her statement centers on a binary between her “political integrity” – evidenced by a poem from Dennis Brutus who originally gave the three treasured books to her as gifts – and the activist’s and the UPM’s lack thereof (Martinez-Mullen, 2012). In turn, defending their freedom to endorse or reject any theoretical approach, statements from the activist and UPM invoke machinations of the “regressive left” and apartheid practices to punish black people’s disobedience with accusations of criminality (Kota, 2012; UPM, 2012).

“It’s like as if I’ve been illiterate all this time...”²⁶

In the short video entitled *From Shack to the Constitutional Court*, as preview to *Dear Mandela*, filmmakers Dara Kell and Christopher Nizza document Abahlali baseMjondolo’s literal and metaphorical journey to the highest court in South Africa (Sleeping Giant 2009 and 2011). In one of the scenes recorded before that journey, Abahlali spokesperson Mnikelo Ndabankulu stands in front of his brother’s tuckshop in the Foreman Road shack settlement in Durban, where Mnikelo lives and works, reading aloud Section 26 of the Constitution, on Housing Rights. Interspersing the text with his comments and analysis, he concludes that the KwaZulu-Natal Province’s “Slums Act” clearly contradicts the Constitution and its prohibition of arbitrary evictions, as it would empower landowners and the Municipality to evict people without the adequate court procedure ordering eviction, which the Constitution prescribes. “So, there it is. If you read this one carefully, it contradicts, I think you heard that” (Sleeping Giant 2009, 02:16”-02:22”).

In a scene of the final version of *Dear Mandela*, Mnikelo visits a shack settlement in Mpola (KwaZulu-Natal) where earlier that day the municipality’s armed demolition crew destroyed several shacks, leaving six families homeless (cf. Abahlali 2009). Standing next to a young woman who was evicted, Mnikelo pulls out a pocket edition of the Constitution, and starts reading it. (For the sake of accuracy, these are quotes from the movie’s transcript):

Girl: What is this?

Mnikelo: The Constitution. Housing, Section 26.

Girl and Mnikelo (Reading together): ‘No one may be evicted from their home or have their home demolished without an order of court made after considering all of the relevant circumstances. No legislation may permit arbitrary eviction.’

Mnikelo: This thing is unconstitutional.

A few shots later, Mnikelo is talking to a group of evicted people:

Mnikelo: We will rebuild these shacks but these people will come back tomorrow. When they do you must ask them “Where are your court documents? And if you want to demolish my house, you have to produce a court order. And if you do bulldoze it, who is going to compensate me?” *He will think to himself* “I

²⁶ Chairperson of Abahlali baseMjondolo in Motala Heights, KZN (interview, 30 September 2010).

thought I was dealing with an idiot!" (Sleeping Giant 2011, 08:38"-9:50"; emphasis added).

Continuing on with my discussion of how political illiteracy is being deployed and displaced, this section is built precisely around Mnikelo's last sentence and the assumption he refers to. It is when taking a close look at the roles the letter of the law and legal knowledge play in Abahlali's politics that we can trace a rather intangible, yet hugely detrimental presumption on the part of national and local governments: that people living in shack settlements or other precarious forms of dwelling need not be dealt with as rights-bearing citizens of the democratic Republic of South Africa. Interpreting the operation of the new South Africa as conducted through "distinct modes of rule within different political domains", Michael Neocosmos (2011, 369) writes that in the domain of the "working-people [...] the exercise of (illegal) state violence is central". Similarly, having described the municipal practice of illegal evictions in their study of "the lived experience of formally granted socio-economic rights", Mark Butler and Richard Pithouse (2007, 2) arrive at the conclusion that:

[T]he local state acts in a systematically criminal manner towards its poorest residents on the assumption that this behavior is within the norms of a shared social consensus amongst the social forces and institutions that count. That elite consensus is that rights formally guaranteed in abstract principle should not, in concrete practice, apply to the poor.

If this consensus, as Mnikelo's comment above makes evident, remains implicit almost by nature, in enabling the illegal eviction of the surplus people, it is one that exercises a crucial function in maintaining the spatial order of abandonment. In turn, the fact that since its formation Abahlali baseMjondolo managed to stop a large number of illegal evictions in KwaZulu-Natal (and countrywide) is not only a vast achievement on its own right, it also teaches us a lesson about the truly empowering moment of recognizing and articulating oneself as knowledgeable.

I have recalled this instance many a times, but it was in my interview with Abahlali member TJ Ngongoma in October 2010 that this moment gained one of its clearest articulations (cf. Selmeczi 2012b). Talking about Abahlali's successful resistance to illegal evictions – that very often materializes as physically blocking the way of demolition units and their bulldozers – TJ (interview, 3 October 2010) told me about "that normal resistance" as the power to "use verbal resistance without any backing". On my request to elaborate, he described this power as the event of claiming one's space: "Then you automatically... That 'uumff' comes up within you and you automatically reclaim that space, that political space, and then you become somebody, out of nowhere!" (Ibid.). Precisely exposing the epistemological hierarchy that sustains the societal consensus on the permitted lawlessness of state violence, during our

discussions Abahlali often referred to these moments, and their power to stop illegal eviction, as a process of education.²⁷ In the words of the Motala Heights Chairperson, quoted in title of this section, joining Abahlali “was actually a learning phase [...]. It was like going back to school because I was learning all about my rights and how it can be used. And it’s like as if I’ve been illiterate all this time! (interview, 30 September 2010).” Similarly, when talking about their resistance to forced relocation, members of the Motala Heights (group discussion, 22 October 2010) branch agreed: “We became wise through Abahlali... they cannot evict us”. Again, resonating with TJ’s account of the bodily experience of political subjectivization, at a recent three-day “workshop” of Abahlali baseMjondolo taking place in the Sweet Home Farm shack settlement in Philippi, Cape Town, an elderly woman from the Marikana Land Occupation stood up, and in a loud voice, with tears in her eyes declared that with the knowledge she now has, next time the bulldozers come, she will stop them and chase them away.²⁸ She will organize the youth, and together they will stop the City’s Law Enforcement Unit from destroying their shacks once again; “We must be out of order!” (Author’s research notes, 28 July 2013).²⁹

On occasions like these, resistance to relocation or being rendered homeless is linked to a process of claiming political space through acquiring and declaring knowledge that, in turn, is set against the assumption of local governments and their enforcement agents that abiding by the law is not imperative when dealing with shack-dwellers. Certainly, as the repeated demolition of shacks in the Marikana Land Occupation shows, often times there is no space, time or wavelength for shack-dwellers to assert themselves as rights-bearing. In the flurry of rubber bullets or the cloud of teargas, as another Marikana-dweller said in response to the legal advice from a SERI attorney at the recent workshop,³⁰ there is hardly a way to cite Section 26 of the Constitution and call for a court order permitting eviction (research notes, 28 July 2013).³¹ At such moments, clearly, the work of law reaches the limits of its temporality, and even though such events of state violence might as well display the “political illiteracy” of the

²⁷ Based on a series of interviews conducted over the first two years of the movement, Jacob Bryant (2007, 26-28) has made the same observation.

²⁸ In late-April 2013, about 15-20 shacks were built on a vacant piece of privately owned land near Symphony Way in Philippi East, Cape Town by shack-dwellers and backyard-dwellers who were no longer able to pay the rent for their homes in the surrounding areas. A few days later the Anti-Land Invasion Unit appeared on the site and began a thus far endless series of shack-demolitions and evictions (see a video of one [here](#)). Soon after the first incident, the occupiers named their community Marikana, in memory of the striking mineworkers who were killed by the police in August 2012: “we too are organizing ourselves peacefully and are willing to die for our struggle” (community member quoted in Sacks 2013a; cf. Sacks 2013b).

²⁹ For the Motala Heights members (group discussion, 22 October 2010) too, the process of “becoming wise” goes together with acquiring the courage to resist: regardless of the various threats of the landlord and the local municipality, they declare “we are not fearful anymore”.

³⁰ Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa: <http://www.seri-sa.org/>.

³¹ At other times, however, litigation is indeed productive (see Langford et al. 2013); even in terms of emancipatory politics (Selmeczi 2012b).

agents of government themselves,³² asserting their epistemic equality cannot provide immediate protection to those deemed less than equal, and thus forcibly removable, citizens. Taking note of this impossibility, yet with the aim to share further aspects of learning and education within the politics of Abahlali, I now move on to discuss the articulation of these aspects at moments when the shack-dwellers challenge attempts to locate and fix their politics through the reductive notion of service delivery.

Dear Mandela, the documentary directed by Dara Kell and Christopher Nizza about Abahlali baseMjondolo's struggle for a place in the city, and in particular their Constitutional Court case against the "Slums Act" of KwaZulu-Natal Province was awarded the "Best South African Documentary" prize at the 2011 Durban International Film Festival. According to the jury (Dear Mandela Blog, 5 August 2011): "A movie about courage, this documentary is beautifully shot, socially relevant and still manages to offer humor as it reveals a growing grassroots political literacy in South Africa's informal settlements".

"Since when was democracy only about 'service delivery'?"³³

Following the prohibition of their march on the Durban City Hall on Human Rights Day in 2010, Abahlali baseMjondolo decided to move ahead with their plans and, despite the court order, stage their protest. In a press statement published on this occasion, beyond criticizing the frequent deployment of "technical arguments" to limit the shack-dwellers' demonstrative usage of public spaces, they also touch upon the notion of service delivery, this all too common signifier of poor people's dissent in South Africa:

Many journalists have been phoning us and asking if our "service delivery protest" will be going ahead tomorrow. We appreciate the interest of the media but we really want to stress that this will not "be a service delivery protest". We have never organized "a service delivery protest." [...] The language in which

³² I thank Gary Minkley and Suren Pillay who, although in different ways, both made this point. Regrettably here I cannot explore it in any depth, but to get a sense of the phenomenon, see a [video](#) by Pablo Pinedo Boveda (2013), whereby from behind the camera he keeps asking members of the Anti-Land Invasion Unit and the accompanying police whether they can present to the Marikana community a court order permitting the demolition.

³³ Abahlali baseMjondolo of the Western Cape (2011).

people's struggles are turned into 'service delivery protests' is a language that has been imposed on our struggles from outside – it is not our language. Of course we are struggling for land and housing, water and electricity. But we do not accept the limited way in which these 'services' are 'delivered'. Often an important part of our struggles is to reject that the way that services are delivered. For example we do not accept transit camps. We are struggling for the full recognition and realization of our humanity in a society that denies our humanity at every turn. [...] To call our struggles 'service delivery protests' is a way of making them safe for our oppressors./We appeal to the media, and to other groups too, like academics, NGOs and churches, to please exercise an important discipline when talking about struggling communities and movements. That discipline is a simple one but it is a very important one. That discipline is to speak to people before speaking about them or for them. As we have said so many times before we are poor in life, not in mind. If you want to know why we are struggling just ask us and we will tell you (Abahlali 2010b).

Unmistakably, Abahlali put their finger on the operation of political illiteracy here by criticizing the reductive effect of translating poor people's struggles into service delivery protests. Acquiring a technical connotation, and through its endless iteration, this discursive shortcut normalizes and depoliticizes popular dissent, thus allowing for the vast majority of middle-class media consumers to stay completely detached from struggles waged in the "no-go areas" (cf. Herrmannsen 2013, Schutte 2013). Furthermore, it reinforces assumptions about the proto-political, survivalist drives behind popular mobilization. As such, it attaches these protests to a physiology of immediacy that cannot grasp the complexities of government (e.g. Buthelezi 2011) or the temporality of development (cf. Gibson 2006; interview with S'bu Zikode, 26 October 2010). "Service delivery protest" thus cannot accommodate claims about humanity or assertions of equality that are frequently at the center of demonstrations.³⁴ As the following quote from Mzonke Poni (2011) beautifully captures, beyond the substantive limitations of operating post factum as an automatic label for popular dissent, the notion of service delivery also works to circumscribe what (and where) politics for shack-dwellers can be:

We are [...] concerned that your chief of staff has said that a meeting would only deal with "service delivery issues" and would not deal with "unrelated issues". Since when was democracy only about "service delivery"? Since when was human dignity only about "service delivery"? We reject many aspects of the "service delivery" provided by your government. For instance Blikkiesdorp is, for us, a scandal and a place that is more like a prison than any "service" that is being

³⁴ Cf. e.g. a report from the Informal Settlements' Strike in Khayelitsha: "Nkanini community leader Lillian Zono said protest is not only about the lack of service delivery. 'We are also angry at what law enforcement officers did to residents of Hout Bay. We face the same challenges,' she said" (Majavu and Obose 2010). Zono refers to the violent eviction of a community in Hangberg, Hout Bay, by the City of Cape Town a few weeks before the strike started (cf. Mnguni 2010).

“delivered” to the people.³⁵ We have a democratic right to take this view and to argue for it when we engage the state. In fact we reject the whole paradigm of “service delivery”. [...] Your chief of staff wants to confine us to discussions of peripheral importance just as we are already confined on peripheral land on the outskirts of the city.

Beyond clearly marking how the discourse of service delivery works to reinforce the spatial order of abandonment, this quote is also illustrative of Abahlali’s politics as an intellectual practice.³⁶ Elsewhere I have discussed how Abahlali’s (2006, 7) declaration that “we know that we are not supposed to be living the way we do” inscribes them into the sensible order as a collective political subject, for it simultaneously exposes their living conditions as a contingent allotment and articulates the subject of the declaration as equally knowledgeable to those with a more fortunate lot (Selmeczi, 2012a). This is exactly why it is significant that the statement “We shouldn’t be suffering like this” is so often accompanied with assertions like this one: “We always say that the fact that we are poor in life does not make us poor in mind” (Hlongwa, 2007). Taking this point further, I suggest we read the previous quotes as reiterations of Abahlali’s subjectivization; performances of the shack-dwellers’ self-affirmation as “questioning people” effectively disrupting the order of knowledge that seeks to mask the contingency of equality and keep the shack-dwellers in their place. Such a disruption occurs in these instances through Abahlali’s occupation of an analytical position from which speakers undermine their counterparts’ attempts at safely containing their politics within the limits of service delivery demands. Indeed, the pronounced attentiveness to language in both excerpts is directly opposed to the necessity-drivenness of the “service delivery protest” phrase, and works to reassert the shack-dwellers’ self-articulation as speaking beings.³⁷

It is precisely in thus rejecting the reductiveness of the “imposed language” of service delivery, that Abahlali re-enacts the disruption of their emergence; the litigious appearance of “ordinary men and women [who] insist on their right to speak and to be heard on the matters that concern their daily lives” (Zikode, 2009). The quoted texts re-enact this disruption because they discursively perform the shack-dwellers’ decision that “we will no longer be good boys and girls that quietly wait for our humanity to be finally recognized one day” (Zikode, 2011). In turn, as they make it clear throughout a discussion of their

³⁵ Blikkiesdorp is the nickname of the Symphony Way Temporary Relocation Area in Delft, Cape Town; it is the Afrikaans word for “Tin Can Town”.

³⁶ On Abahlali’s intellectual practices, see also Robertson (2013).

³⁷ Cf. Rancière on Aristotle’s distinction between freemen and slaves (in *Politics* I, 1254 b 24-25): Positing that slaves (who, like tame animals, “contribute to the necessities of life with the aid of their bodies”) participate “in the linguistic community by way of comprehension but not understanding”, Aristotle can distinguish between “the contingent naturalness of the freedom of the man of the people” and “the naturalness slavery” “without referring back to the ultimate contingency of equality” (Rancière 1999, 17).

own pedagogy, stepping out of the position of “good boys and girls” for Abahlali and allies means denouncing a mode of being where they “take [their] place in the system that benefits the powerful without questioning it” (Abahlali and Rural Network, 2009: 22). Indeed, in juxtaposition to the “kind of education that others always want to impose on us” (Ibid., 44), this move configures an imperative of questioning and critique: “We must always interrogate the information we are given! And when we work with the people too, we must do this thing so that people are encouraged and allowed to interrogate everything too – there is no ‘generally accepted version’” (Ibid., 64). Hence, the distinction made between imposed education and their own approach to teaching and learning: “*this* kind of lifelong learning is a learning that helps us become questioning people – to the powerful we become suspicious, we become trouble-makers...” (Ibid., 22; original emphasis).

While Abahlali’s pedagogical practice aligned to their critical attitude will be the subject of the following section, in the remainder of this one I would like to touch upon the suspicion and epistemological disturbance that, in deploying this attitude on “service delivery”, the movement triggers among supposedly progressive “activist intellectuals” (Walsh, 2009). Providing one of the central tenets of a set of arguments surfacing on the rather troubled waters of the South African Left, Abahlali’s insistence that their struggles are not about “service delivery” has led several politically engaged academics to question the radicalism and the authenticity of the shack-dwellers’ politics. For these authors, Abahlali’s rejection of the service delivery language is part and parcel of a counterproductive discourse that, on the one hand, originates in, and is maintained by, the work of researchers sympathetic to the movement and is therefore not genuine to the shack-dwellers and, on the other hand, masks its otherwise rather conservative politics. As the argument goes, Abahlali’s claims for dignity and voice “is pretty wooly stuff” that disguises its actual wish “simply to be included in decision-making”, and thus renders the movement into a liberal NGO completely detached from “the tectonic forces that enliven South African society, such as race, ethnicity, capital accumulation and service delivery riots” (Böhmke, 2010).

Radical as they may intend to be, these utterances end up amplifying the mostly government and/or ANC-fostered accusation about a “Third Force” working behind the mobilization of the shack-dwellers (Mabaso and Mchunu, 2006; cf. Zulu, 1992, Zikode 2005; Pithouse, 2012, 2013). Just like that discursive clutch of political paranoia, the Leftist intellectuals’ arguments also turn upon a fundamental doubt about shack-dwellers’ capacity to theorize and conduct their own struggle. Furthermore, the insistence that the movement and similar organizations do, or should, indeed fight for service delivery, takes these struggles from the realm of political thought right back to the physiology of immediate needs (cf. Sinwell 2011, Webb 2013).³⁸ Further yet, in the consequent

³⁸ In his otherwise sympathetic review of the *No Land! No House! No Vote! Voices from the Symphony Way* volume written and compiled by the Symphony Way Pavement Dwellers (2011), commenting on the “critical scholarly literature on the failures of the post-apartheid state to

argument that an authentically progressive politics requires an organization with the appropriate leadership of the enlightened, here again we witness how the good old structure of trusteeship is being built over “the masses” of the politically illiterate.

Importantly, the point is not necessarily to reject these claims by insisting that Abahlali’s “vision is actually far more complex than that and much broader than simply the delivery of services” (Ekine, 2009). In fact, often times Abahlali (2010b) do indeed demand service provision or the upgrade of existing settlements – as stated above: “Of course we are struggling for land and housing, water and electricity”. Throughout my own engagement with the movement too, I encountered differing views on this issue: while some would emphatically reject the discourse of service delivery in line with the quoted statements, others argue that “the only thing that we need is service delivery, nothing more” (MM³⁹, interview 24 October 2010).⁴⁰ Yet, taking seriously Abahlali’s politics as an intellectual practice means not only to take these very contradictions as the vantage point of thinking what politics can be in the face of the urban order of abandonment.⁴¹ More straightforwardly perhaps, it means recognizing in them the “questioning people’s” resistance to being defined and pinned down to a particular idea of politics, and thus the rejection of a system “in which ordinary men and women must be good boys and girls and know that their place is not to think and speak for themselves” (Zikode, 2009).

“It is clear to us now that the majority of the elite, of government officials and of police have contempt for the poor. To them we are not human beings and we deserve to be evicted, shot and made homeless. To them we are not quite

provide basic services for the mass of poor South Africans”, Chris Webb (2013, 465) provides the following iteration of this move: “in many cases, these accounts embellish what are more often immediate struggles for basic needs”.

³⁹ This interviewee preferred to be anonymous.

⁴⁰ Adding another aspect to the discursive struggle around service delivery, prevalent in local politicians commentary on popular protest is a distinction between “genuine claims” and “political concerns” (e.g. News24 2012); the latter often being penalized with violent repression. Since demands around service delivery tend to be perceived as “genuine” and “legitimate” by local elites, it might well be safer to label struggles as such. I thank Richard Pithouse for pointing out this constraint.

⁴¹ Here I can but signal a potential direction for such thinking: instead of trying – sympathetically – to establish the purity or the elevatedness of Abahlali’s politics, taking these contradictions as cues for their debasement of the ancient opposition between material concerns and the supposed subject of the political.

civilized, we are lazy, and we have a culture of non-payment and of violence. But we are none of these things” (AEC, 2011).⁴²

The University of Abahlali baseMjondolo

Tracing back the story of my current research, at the beginning of this paper I talked about Abahlali’s request to researchers and journalists wishing to write about them to come and hear, see, feel what life is like in the shantytown. Resonating with much of the discussion so far, the current section addresses that request as a crucial principle of the movement’s intellectual work, one that targets the basic tenets of constructing the political illiteracy of shack-dwellers and other people commonly referred to as marginalized. Forging the movement’s politics and pedagogy into one practice, this principle effectively disrupts the architecture of educative trusteeship erected above the surplus people; in our case, above those whose mobility is deemed to be in excess for the “world class” city. Educative trusteeship, as Michael Cowen and Robert Shenton (1996) show, is at the heart of the modern idea of development that, essentially, was borne by the necessity to deal with the surplus population produced by the ebbs and flows of capitalism in the age of industrial revolution. In rendering both colonized people and the “lumpenproletariat” of Western cities as not yet autonomous subjects, educative trusteeship allowed the *dispositif* of development to suspend these people’s freedom which, according to the political doctrine of the age of revolutions, is supposed to be granted by nature to everyone equally. While the idea and practice of development has gone through a whole series of transformations since then, it still features among default governmental techniques, so it is not surprising that we regularly encounter it in the South African “world class” city as well. Except maybe that with regards to the surplus population of this context, due to the reinforced dynamics of spatial segmentation, development now takes shape as its own negation. Without the promise of ever reaching so-called “ratepayers” level of freedom and wellbeing, the task for the surplus people becomes learning to live with the conditions of abandonment.⁴³

As the title of a journalistic essay – “Take your shit and live with it” – poignantly suggests (Phamodi, 2013), returning to the sad controversy around the “toilet wars” of the Western Cape allows an insight into the condescending pedagogy of

⁴² The [Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign](#) (AEC) is an umbrella body of over ten grassroots organizations mobilizing around housing and basic services in the province. In 2008, together with Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) in KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape, the Landless People’s Movement (LPM) in Gauteng, and the Rural Network in KwaZulu-Natal it formed the Poor People’s Alliance. The AEC, LPM and the Rural Network have declined dramatically in recent years, however AbM continues to grow and to thrive in KwaZulu-Natal.

⁴³ In the neoliberal paradigm of development, this task is framed as “resilience”. See Julian Reid’s (e.g. 2012; 2013) work for an analysis of the notion and its political implications.

biopolitical abandonment. Aside from attributing the “poo protests” to the ANC’s Youth League, in responding to a series of instances when shack-dwellers emptied containers of feces in various high profile public spaces, the City of Cape Town repeatedly defined these people’s ignorance as the root cause of the scandal. Beyond wordy statements articulated in the register of expert discourse on Portable Flush Toilets (PFT) – the city’s celebrated solution for sanitation in marginal areas – Premier Helen Zille (2013) urged “communities” to take responsibility for the “costly” communal infrastructure and “get involved in improving their circumstances” (Zille, 2013). In turn, Mayor Patricia de Lille turned to the South African Human Rights Commission “to help in educating residents about the benefits of PFTs, to help eradicate bucket toilets” (*City Press*, 2013). Of course, beyond to the previously mentioned calls to “educate the poor” in order to prevent xenophobic violence, Abahlali in KwaZulu-Natal also have a substantial experience of such pedagogy. Whether coming from the spokesperson of the provincial Department of Housing condemning Abahlali’s outrage over yet another shack fire (cf. *Daily News*, 2008), or church organizations acting out of compassion, teaching shack-dwellers how to survive their poverty seems to be the default solution:

After the fire, people were basically telling us to teach people how to use a paraffin stove properly – how to use a paraffin stove is not something I need to teach to the people who have used them all their lives! Why is this the thing they think must be taught when we have said clearly the problem is that we are excluded from getting electricity (Abahlali and Rural Network, 2009, 45)?

Indeed, as we have already seen on the example of Abahlali’s challenge to the discourse of service delivery, the crux of “imposed education” is the construction of intellectual inequality, the denial that the target of education is a “knower” herself. Educative trusteeship turns upon the temporal distance drawn between the trustee and the not yet developed masses; their freedom is suspended up until the time they acquire the capacities of a responsible, rational subject. That is, until the time they learn to fully appreciate the city’s gift of Portable Flush Toilets, and remain quiet and content about the indignities and dangers of living in a shack settlement. “Imposed education” or, to put it in Rancière’s words (1991), the “pedagogical fiction” of modernity rests precisely upon this spatiotemporal distance of explanation, the distance that knowledge emanating from the politician-expert and the charity-expert has to travel in order to enlighten the dark pockets of ignorance.

Producing the same effect as their critical attitude discussed above, the two aspects of Abahlali’s intellectual practice that I present here, work to disrupt the construction of precisely this distance.⁴⁴ Almost institutionalizing that

⁴⁴ Elsewhere I have discussed Abahlali’s contestation of this epistemic distance as one element of what I call their politics of proximity: the imperative to stay physically, experientially, and epistemically close to the life of shack-dwellers. (Selmeczi 2012a).

disruption – and providing the context for their cited request to researchers – both aspects center on the idea of the University of Abahlali baseMjondolo. What, in fact, is the University of Abahlali baseMjondolo?

It's also part of the idea of passing on the message and grievances or exposing the life-conditions. Because what was happening: Abahlali was inviting the senior to come to shacks and live the life and experience the same conditions that we are experiencing. And then tell us that how long can he or she live in that conditions. So, one night, it is obvious that he will get up with one big lesson. [...] If you don't believe it, come and experience it and then tomorrow you'll talk a better language, because you know exactly what you're talking about. Rather than strategizing from the office and impose something that you think... that you think is better or is going to improve our lives. [...] Or, it might give you a chance to discuss issues with us and come up with a better plan. Because writing letters to you or the particular department: it doesn't help, or maybe marching to the street, it doesn't speak the language, but at least, maybe what it takes is education. So, education – we're not going to build up a class or any normal university or college that it is around the country because those colleges don't teach any of these conditions or lives that we're under but there's only one university that does that, will be the university of Abahlali (Former Vice-president of Abahlali, Interview 2 November 2010).

As Jacob Bryant (2007) argues in relation to the shack-dwellers' announcement of the "University of Kennedy Road" (and later the "University of Foreman Road" and "University of Abahlali") on protest banners in the early months of the movement's life, this act is equivalent to declaring the shantytown as a place of learning. Pushing this argument perhaps a bit further, I believe that announcing life in the shack settlement as the University of Abahlali baseMjondolo, that is, the University of Shack-dwellers articulates these spaces as those of knowledge production, and dwelling in them as a process of cognition, which consequently declares their residents as knowers. In his essay reaffirming the movement's "No land, no house, no vote"-campaign ahead of the 2009 elections, Abahlali member M'du Hlongwa (2007) expresses this most beautifully: "I want to say clearly that I am a Professor of my own suffering. We are all Professors of our suffering".⁴⁵ For it eliminates the distance between the expert and the student, it is exactly in this declarative equation between the subject and object of knowledge that the disruption of the educative trusteeship of abandonment occurs.

⁴⁵ See also the second epigraph to Tshepo Madlingozi's (2010, 209) article: "I am not educated. Nomarussia Bonase is uneducated. I don't have a degree. But I can tell you I have a degree. I went to a university; the university of East Rand. My lecturers are the citizens of South Africa, especially the people of East Rand. That is where I got educated. Nobody can come and tell me anything. I can beat the experts, the professionals who have those degrees. (Nomarussia Bonase, Khulumani Support Group East Rand Coordinator, Thokoza, Interview, 10 October 2009)"

And hence we arrive at the challenge that was already touched upon in relation to the imperative of the “questioning people”, and is taken up in the second aspect of Abahlali’s intellectual work addressed here. As their political thought is certainly not anti-intellectual or against theory (quite to the contrary), and they are aware that knowledge is often the fuel of their struggle (see the role of legal knowledge discussed above), the practical and theoretical challenge that derives from the disruptive establishment of the University of Abahlali lies in maintaining the equivalence between the subject and the object of knowledge in the face of the factual inequalities of accessing institutionalized higher education. This very problem is the subject of many exchanges in a series of conversations between members of Abahlali and the Rural Network who, within the framework of UKZN’s Certificate for Education in Participatory Development, gained access to formal higher education (Abahlali and Rural Network, 2009). The conversation sessions that were hosted, facilitated, and later published by the Church Land Programme (CLP), were named “Living Learning” by the participants and, through the learners’ reflections, took on the task of configuring a pedagogical practice that would not reproduce a distance of explanation.⁴⁶

As the participants made very clear, such distance often takes shape as the physical distantiation of those who enter higher education. “Education can sometimes destroy our struggle – when education makes leaders think of the people that they came from as the ‘uneducated’ ones, those who ‘do not understand’, those that we ‘move away from’” (Abahlali and Rural Network 2009, 60). Therefore, the role of Living Learning emerges as that of keeping the “two universities” at the closest proximity possible, which means that the knowledge which mandated learners acquire in the formal university must be made relevant for and shared within the space of the University of Abahlali, that is, life in the shack settlement. It is only through preserving this proximity, that they can avoid the separation between being and articulating the subject and the object of knowledge:

Some writers on research separate the researcher from the material being researched – and this is part of that model that says that it is objective, “neutral”, scientific. We can see that the ideas behind this model have some similarities with the ideas behind a much bigger approach to thinking about, and acting in, the world. It is the idea that you work “from the outside”, and that things are “done to”. As movements of the poor, we see this in the way that many outsiders and elites treat us and our issues. It is also true that you can have a kind of “participation” that fits into this model – but it is not at all the participation model we want. In a way, the struggles of our movements [are] an eruption against this model, an eruption that starts with declaring “Enough is enough”. Only the space created by this eruption creates the possibility of a really new kind of participation, one where outsiders can be invited to participate in what is being

⁴⁶ Cf. the insightful and admirably self-reflective essay on Living Learning by Anne Harley (2012), one of the instructors of the Certificate program that learners from Abahlali and the Rural Network were (and still are) admitted to.

made in and through that eruption – and so we make the paths by walking (Ibid., 64–65).

To be sure, maintaining an eruption, if possible at all, requires constant and careful work where the risk of recreating educative trusteeship with the attached notions of delay and backwardness is always present. Just like the event of politics in Rancière's (1999) understanding, the practice of radically egalitarian pedagogy, which I think emerges in the idea of Living Learning, is most difficult to sustain. Yet, considering the detrimental effects of the order physical and epistemological hierarchy that it runs up against, it is most desirable too. This, anyway, is my motivation for taking along this research by aligning it with the work of another social movement operating from the urban periphery, this time around in the Western Cape. While this ongoing collaboration cannot be accounted for in this paper, it has already made an impact through triggering many of the questions that now define my perspective on the problem of political illiteracy, as well as on my own position in relation to that problem. Below I conclude by outlining some of these concerns.

“How did I escape the oppression where so many people are still living in a kind of darkness? Because I really see the world differently. How to remove that membrane from others' eyes? So many people see things in this way – that how the world is, is how God meant it to be, that we are meant to suffer. How can we enlighten all others – not to think like us, but to think, to see the world?” (Abahlali and Rural Network 2009, 60; original emphasis)

Conclusion

Primary among the questions that emerge out of the discussion above is whether the very aim of working towards other people's political and/or intellectual emancipation is bound to reintroduce political illiteracy in some other form. From the position of the questioning people, how does one see those who do not yet seem to have appropriated the imperative of interrogation? And how are such questions qualified by the very conditions that movements like Abahlali fight against? In other words, how far can the practice of Living Learning be extended, when, as M'du Hlongwa (2007) notes before declaring himself to be the professor of his own suffering, “[m]ost of our time goes into just trying to survive”? As I suggested above in relation to the movement's apparently contradictory discourse on service delivery, instead of binding shack-dwellers' politics to a primal level of survivalism, it seems to me that a possible

route to responding lies in scrutinizing the collocation of these two statements – that Abahlali are the professors of their own suffering and that most of their time is spent on sustaining themselves. Thus, one needs perhaps to look more into, for instance, how various actors and groups within the movement negotiate their horizontal approach to resolving particular concerns of affiliated communities, that is, the idea “the office is not the movement” (research notes, October 2010) and “we are not here to struggle for you but we are here to struggle with you” (Zodwa Nsibande interview, 2 November 2010). While the political literacy of the general membership is hardly questioned within the movement, one could ask what sort of dynamics are (re-)enforced by the supposed representability of the organization in media and academia, and the institutional context it has to navigate, when so few shack-dwellers can actually afford to dedicate their time and resources to Abahlali’s political practice, or what observers like me tend to register as their political practice.

Indeed, how are we (activists and researchers) even to think and work around these problems without yet again rewriting political illiteracy? As noted above, at the heart of Abahlali’s intellectual work is the demand to stay close to shack-dwellers’ life; to keep their political thought relevant to, and accessible from (both physically and discursively), the space of this life. At the beginning of this paper and the journey it is produced by, I stated my aim to remain in fidelity to this demand. It is only fair, then, to ask how well I have fared: is this work relevant to and accessible for Abahlali? Attesting to my own political illiteracy, it is not, certainly not in its entirety. Among other deficiencies, whereas my encounter with the movement doubtless transformed my epistemological assumptions and methodological preferences, it took years and further encounters within and beyond Abahlali and South Africa to find, in collaborative research methods, a mode of inquiry that seems to be the most attuned to the politics of equality (cf. Strohm, 2012). Even so, collaboration and the co-theorization of political illiteracy that my current project with SOS, a radical hiphop collective in Cape Town, seeks to undertake pose an endless series of questions about the dynamics of knowledge production that are co-articulated when working within, and staying close to, the experiences of life in the face of urban abandonment.

For one, as Bernard Dubbeld asked me on the occasion of discussing its earlier version: “What of this paper” that takes shape as a seminar presentation or an academic publication?⁴⁷ More generally, Dubbeld inquired: Can the university give home to liberatory knowledge practices that could disrupt the order of political illiteracy? And, I must add: Abiding by Abahlali’s work to displace the distance of explanation, how can the university as an academic institution inhabit a space closer to the University of Abahlali baseMjondolo? In a gesture towards some possible answers, I recall Richa Nagar’s (2014) seminar

⁴⁷ South African Contemporary History and Humanities Seminar, Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, 8 October 2013.

presentation on truth-telling and co-authorship in feminist alliance work.⁴⁸ At the end of her paper, Nagar includes an excerpt of *The Jungle is Burning*, a street play co-created in 2010 by activists of the Sangtin Peasants and Workers Organization (SKMS) in Sitapur, India. Enacting a kind of truth-telling through which activists disrupt the suppression of the knowledge of those “who must at once absorb the system and reproduce it” (Ibid., 265), the Third scene is made up of speakers’ analysis of their situation, for instance:

[A]ll these tears and complaints of ours have gone on for decades. No matter which government comes or goes, the poor continue to be subjected to the same old games. Policies and schemes are run in our names; research and analyses are conducted in our names, but it’s the mansions of the rich that become taller.

The resonance of these lines with Abahlali members’, among them M’du Hlonwga’s (2007), account is striking:

We are supposed to suffer silently so that some rich people can get rich from our work and others can get rich having conferences about having more conferences about our suffering. [...] We must even be invisible when people are getting paid to talk about us in government or in NGOs! Everything is done in our name.

The reverberation of this resonance takes shape in questions around how well academic discourse does in the face of the “crudeness of truth” put forward in these excerpts and so much of the movements’ discourse that remains unwritten.⁴⁹ Tying back, finally, to previous concerns about “the two universities” (Abahlali and Rural Network 2009, 7), perhaps the point is to find ways to (writing) politics that take up the epistemologies of such crude truths, and thus disrupt the in/visibilities of working in “their” name.

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⁴⁸ South African Contemporary History and Humanities Seminar, Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, 27 August 2013.

⁴⁹ I adapt the expression of “crudeness of truth” from Sanil V.’s talk (“A Conversation on The Courage of Truth and Fearless Speech by John Mowitt and Sanil V.”, Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, 5 July 2013).

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