# The Third Force of Ubuhlalism:

# Living Politics, Living Learning and Futurity

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# Abstract

In South Africa, the poor have their own university, politics and philosophy. The state and elite evict poor people from cities, make decisions on their behalf, and relegate them to unsafe and inhumane conditions. The post-Apartheid state has failed the poor. Recognising the government's inadequacies, Abahlali baseMjondolo (Abahlali or AbM), the movement of/for/by the poor, claim what is rightfully theirs: land, housing and being treated with human dignity. This thesis studies AbM and their philosophy and politics, Ubuhlalism, to investigate Abahlali's world-making practices. Taking Ubuhlalism as a point of departure for a situated feminist research praxis, I aim to research AbM on their own terms. Through aligning to Abahlali's own narratives, those found in AbM's counter-archive and from my in-person hangouts with the movement, this thesis seeks to trouble theoretical frameworks such as Achille Mbembe's (2003, 2019) necropolitics, that relegate AbM to the status of *living dead*. My critique argues that theorisations that reduce oppressed groups to their oppression obscure marginalised groups' lived realities and resistance strategies, thereby withholding their futurity. To listen closely to Abahlali's investments in futurity I investigate Abahlali's rehearsals for the future, highlighting how AbM insists on a futurity that is alternative to the futures propagated by the state/elite. I put Abahlali's world-making practices in dialogue with Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's (2013) Undercommons to draw attention to AbM's practices of refusal, study and planning as strategies that resist systems of oppression such as the criminalisation/racialisation of poverty. In this thesis, I ask what are the world-making practices of Abahlali? How do their lived politics insist on an alternative sense of futurity that resists their relegation to the status of *living dead*? And, what can be learned from Ubuhlalism as practiced by AbM in shaping a situated feminist research praxis?

# Acknowledgements

To Abahlali baseMjondolo, thank you for welcoming me into your fold, I hope to one day deserve the honour. This thesis would not have been possible without the comrades of Abahlali, most notably Thapelo Mohapi, S'bu Zikode, Sne Mncanyana, Bathabile Makhoba, Mqhapheli Bonono, maZandile Nsibande and Thozama Mazwi. My supervisors, Dr. Mikki Stelder and Dr. Clare Bielby have been instrumental in shaping this thesis. Mikki, thank you for going above and beyond—and back again. To my support system, you have been unwavering rocks in the neap and spring tides throughout my studies and especially this thesis. I am because we are.

# Table of Contents

ABSTRACT ..... 3

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ..... 4

TABLE OF CONTENTS ..... 5

GLOSSARY ..... 8

1. INTRODUCTION ..... 10

**1.1 Political Land(scapes)** ..... 11

1.1.1 The Social Value of Land ..... 13

1.1.2 Abahlali's Counter-Archive ..... 15

**1.2 The Politics of Ubuhlalism** ..... 17

**1.3 Abahlali's Futurity** ..... 18

1.3.1 Research in Solidarity ..... 19

**1.4 Chapter Overview** ..... 22

2. WALKING WITH ABAHLALI: A SITUATED FEMINIST (RESEARCH) PRAXIS ..... 23

**2.1 Dirty Research** ..... 24

2.1.1 Refusing Research ..... 25

**2.2 Abahlali's Ways of Knowing: Abahlali and I/Me/We** ..... 28

2.2.1 Abahlali and/as the Academic ..... 29

2.2.2 The Idiom of Abahlali ..... 32

2.2.3 Abahlali as Plural ..... 35

**2.3 Research as Service** ..... 37

2.3.1 Hanging out with Abahlali ..... 39

2.3.2 Reflexivity ..... 41

**2.4 Conclusion** ........................................ **44**

**3. LIVING (DEAD) FUTURES** ........................................ **47**

**3.1 The Living (Dead)** ........................................ **48**

3.1.1 Biopower and Blackness ........................................ 49

3.1.2 Social Death and Necropolitics ........................................ 54

3.1.3 The Spatiality and Infrastructure of Informal Settlements ........................................ 58

3.1.4 The Violence of Essentialisation ........................................ 63

**3.2 Modes of Resistance** ........................................ **65**

3.2.1 Rebuilding as/and Resistance ........................................ 66

**3.3 Conclusion** ........................................ **68**

**4. UBUHLALISM AND THE UNDERCOMMONS** ........................................ **70**

**4.1 The Undercommons and Ubuhlalism** ........................................ **71**

4.1.1 The Surround of the City/Social/Political ........................................ 73

4.1.2 Ubuhlalism as Praxis ........................................ 75

**4.2 Refusal/s** ........................................ **77**

4.2.1 Refusing Political Affiliation: "The ANC is killing us" ........................................ 79

4.2.2 Refusing Pity: "Nothing about us without us" ........................................ 79

**4.3 Study as Resistance/Refusal** ........................................ **81**

4.3.1 The University of Abahlali ........................................ 82

4.3.2 The Frantz Fanon Political School ........................................ 84

**4.4 Planning Futurity** ........................................ **86**

4.4.1 Sowing Seeds of Remembrance ........................................ 87

4.4.2 Sowing Seeds of Futurity ........................................ 88

**4.5 CONCLUSION .......... 89**

**5. CONCLUSIONS: PROVOCATIONS AND ORIENTATIONS .......... 92**

5.1 A FUTURE FOR UBUHLALIST RESEARCH .......... 93

5.2 FEMINIST FUTURES .......... 95

**REFERENCES .......... 98**

# Glossary

| | |
|---|---|
| Abahlali | "[literally: 'those who stay/live'] residents in a neighbourhood or members of Abahlali baseMjondolo Movement" (Figlan et al. 2009, 91) |
| AbM | Abahlali baseMjondolo |
| ANC | African National Congress |
| Asivikelane | An NGO partner of Abahlali baseMjondolo |
| GAA | Group Areas Act |
| GBV | Gender-Based Violence |
| JMPD | Johannesburg Metro Police Department |
| eKhenana | An AbM community and branch. Also eKhenana Community or eKhenana Commune. |
| Mjondolo | A shack. Also umjondolo. |
| Mohapi, Thapelo | Elected General Secretary of AbM |
| Nsibande, Zandile | Co-founder of AbM and elected Chairperson of the Women's League. Also maZandile Nsimande, which references her status as a mother. |
| PIE Act | The Prevention of Illegal Eviction from and Unlawful Occupation of Land Act 19 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Rural Network | An organisation who fights for the rights of the rural poor, particularly those who live on farms. |
| SAPS | South African Police Service |
| Self-connections | Self-made connections to municipal resources like water and electricity, which are technically illegal. |
| SERI | Socio-Economic Rights Institute |
| Slums Act | KwaZulu-Natal Elimination and Prevention of Re-Emergence of Slums Act 6 |
| Ubuhlalism | Abahlali baseMjondolo's philosophy and ideology |
| Ubuntu | An African philosophy |
| UKZN | University of KwaZulu Natal |
| Ward Councillor | Elected government officials who represent a geographical section of constituents |
| Zikode, S'bu | Elected President of Abahlali baseMjondolo |
| isiZulu | One of South Africa's eleven official languages and the most commonly spoken language in the country and within AbM. |

# 1. Introduction

> In this country the mobilised poor,
> those who have organised themselves
> to speak and act for themselves,
> are taken by the politicians to be enemies
> of this society – the same society
> that we are expected to guard, clean and build in
> silence.
> —Abahlali baseMjondolo

Bulldozers arrived at the Kennedy Road informal settlement in Durban, South Africa on March 18, 2005. A crowd of people who lived in the shacks nearby gathered excitedly. They had been promised this land by the city council for years, a promise renewed just one month prior by the municipality's chair of housing portfolio (Zikode 2005). The crowd swelled until it was blocking the road (this was later known as the Kennedy Road blockade) and word travelled that bulldozers were not readying land for housing, but a brick factory. The crowd demanded answers and in response builders called the police and a local councillor. The councillor told the police that the shack-dwellers were criminals and the police descended on the crowd with dogs. Shack-dwellers were beaten, bitten by dogs and fourteen were arrested.

Shack-dwellers felt betrayed by city councillors who were meant to be representing them and "this betrayal mobilised the people" (Zikode 2005). Twelve representatives from surrounding informal settlements gathered and from this meeting Abahlali baseMjondolo (Abahlali or AbM) was born. Meaning people who live in shacks in isiZulu, Abahlali is a movement of, for and by the organised poor.[1] AbM was officially established on October 6, 2005 when thirty-two people were elected as representatives of the

[1] Abahlali is used multiple ways and means the organisation of AbM, its members and people who live in shacks. For example, Abahlali is an organisation. Abahlali are also the members of that organisation and Abahlali are people who live in shacks. The meaning of Abahlali is heavily context dependent in who/what it refers to.

twelve aforementioned informal settlements. Fifteen of these representatives were women and seventeen were men (Masiangoako 2022).[2]

## 1.1 Political Land(scapes)

Abahlali emerged in Durban, Kwa-Zulu Natal (KZN). Durban and KZN both have a long history of political violence during and post-Apartheid. Between 2004 and 2009, protests in South Africa increased by 40 percent (Masiangoako 2022) and this time was characterised as the "rebellion of the poor" (Alexander 2010). The Kennedy Road blockade was one of these protests. This wave of protest action was attributed to the widening gap between rich and poor, failed service delivery and broken promises about land regarding Apartheid's redress. A statement from Abahlali reads:

> When you live in a shack in this country you are considered to be someone who cannot think. Your dignity is not recognized. You are left to live with the rats and the floods. You are left to burn. Your life does not count as a human life. Almost 25 years after apartheid we are still condemned to indignity. We are still forced to live like pigs in the mud. We are still sentenced to die in the fires. When we refuse indignity and stand up for our humanity we continue to face arrest, assault, torture and assassination (AbM 2018).

As advocates of the poor, Abahlali pose a threat to the state who claim (and fail) to represent the poor. Abahlali are vocal critics of dominant political structures that would rather Abahlali keep quiet. However, despite state repression that seeks to evict shack-dwellers and displace their communities, Abahlali have successfully challenged provincial and national bodies to upgrade multiple settlements in situ, as well as ensure basic services are delivered. AbM employ litigation and engage in protest action to achieve their objectives as too often attempts to work with the state via meetings and community participation are denied. S'bu Zikode, Abahlali's elected president, explains this well:

> 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 will not understood [sic] Xhosa or Sotho either. The only language that they understand is when we put thousands of people on the street. We have seen the results of this and we have been encouraged. It works very well. It is the only tool that we have to emancipate our people. Why should we stop it? (2005)

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[2] In direct collaboration with Abahlali, a Community Practice Note was developed by the Socio-Economic Rights Institute's (SERI) researchers, namely Thato Masiangoako (2022). Based on extensive interviews with members and secondary research, this publication is arguably the most accurate account of AbM and is validated and celebrated by Abahlali themselves.

Abahlali has grown to over 115 000 members in more than seventy settlements. AbM have urban and rural branches in five of South Africa's nine provinces and are the largest movement of/for/by the poor in the 'new' South Africa, which refers to the country post-Apartheid (Masiangoako 2022). AbM is an independent, nonpartisan, democratic, and membership-based social movement. New members apply to join AbM when their settlement is faced with evictions, or other challenges, and seek help from Abahlali. The organisation's leadership will then visit the settlement and give a presentation on AbM's ethos and purpose via a community meeting. The community mutually decide whether they will join Abahlali, and to do so they must demonstrate community-led organising and the cultivation of internal solidarity (Masiangoako 2022, 60). Once the community has decided to formally join AbM, Abahlali leadership will provide civil and political education and a new Abahlali branch is established. This process may take months or years before the branch is launched and at the launch a branch council is elected by the community to serve as leadership. All positions are voluntary and elected.

Each branch council participates in elections for their provincial council, which is elected every year and meets every month (62). The National Council assumes accountability for AbM by making decisions through consultations with all pertinent individuals or committees. The National Council meets monthly and at the Annual General Meeting (AGM), the secretariat's positions may be challenged and the people holding them re-elected. This National Council is made up of the president, deputy president, national chairperson, general secretary, treasurer and national spokesperson. For a visual representation of how the organisations works, see fig. 1 below.

(Figure 1)

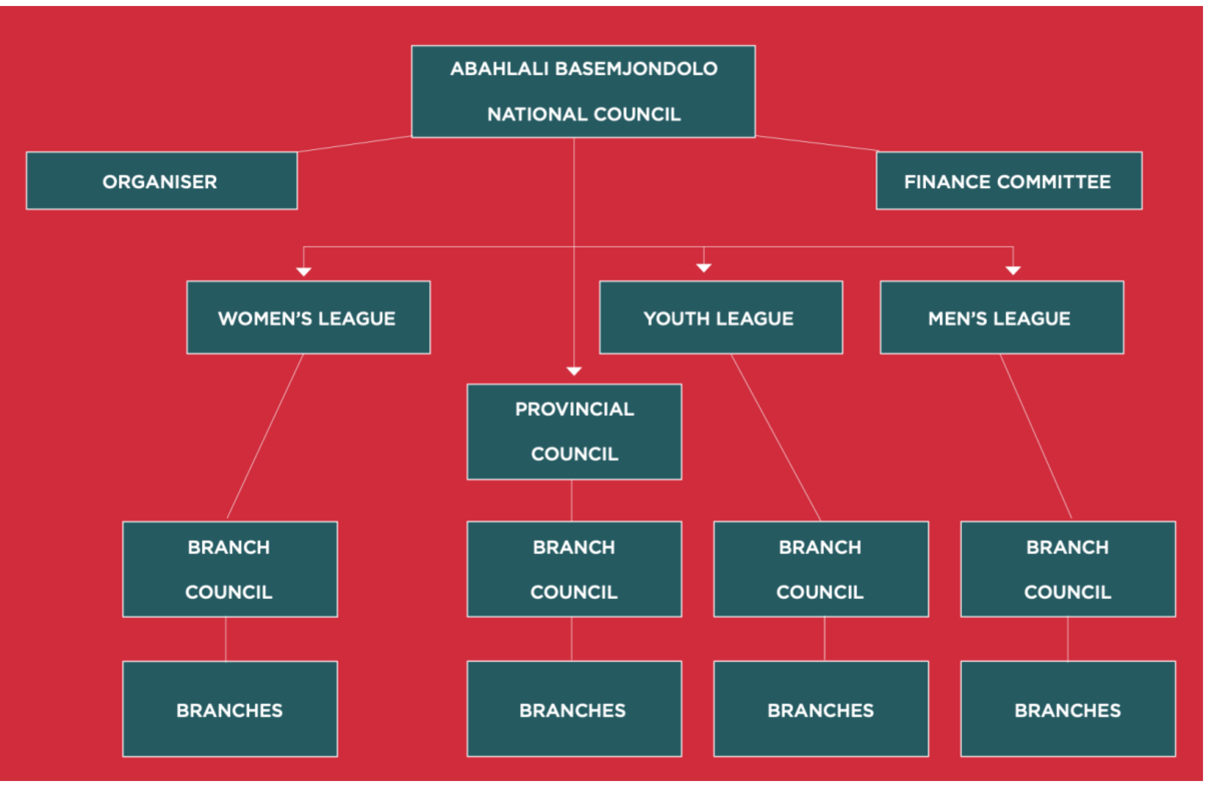


*Figure 1. This diagram comes from SERI's Community Practice Note of Abahlali baseMjondolo and explains the organisation's structure. It can be found on page 61.*

In 2008, Abahlali established a Women's League and Youth League (Masiangoako 2022). The Women's League works to recognise gender dynamics within their movement and they encourage women to participate fully in AbM. The league also considers how poverty impacts women in particular, prioritising issues like Gender-Based Violence (GBV), toilets, women empowerment, and parental rights, including children being admitted to schools and being treated with dignity (64). Gender awareness is enshrined in Abahlali's Constitution and women must make up at least 50 percent of every committee. One of the co-founders, Zandile Nsibande, explains that "women are the backbone of the movement... because even in protests... the women are always the ones who are burning tyres. Women are always in the forefront" (quoted in Masiangoako 2022, 63).

### 1.1.1 The Social Value of Land

Most informal settlements are a result of people wanting access to cities but having no means to rent homes. People's inability to rent property is due to lasting spatial and economic injustice left over from Apartheid and the current government's failure to provide adequate and affordable housing, despite constitutionally-

mandated land reform (SERI 2018, 14). These people then occupy unused land within, and on the outskirts of, cities and build their homes (shacks). This land may belong to municipalities or private owners and the shack-dwellers are illegal occupiers in the eyes of law. The South African Constitution, Section 26(3), states that evictions and the demolishing of homes cannot be carried out without an order of the court that must consider all relevant circumstances (Masiangoako 2022). The Prevention of Illegal Eviction from and Unlawful Occupation of Land Act 19 of 1998 (the PIE Act) regulates all evictions and states when evictions lead to homelessness, the municipality must provide alternative, but temporary, accommodation. This applies to shack-dwellers, and the PIE Act is one of the legal frameworks Abahlali uses to provide some protection to informal settlements facing eviction. Land is a central issue for Abahlali who believe their land occupations serve as a form of self-allocation, since both public and private reallocation of land have been unsuccessful. Abahlali assert that informal settlements are political acts of land occupation that redistribute land to those who need it most. Consequently, Abahlali advocate for prioritising land's social value over its commercial worth (Zikode 2021a). A common sentiment within AbM, whether in conversation, speeches or T-shirt slogans is *umhlaba noma ukufa* meaning land or death, showing how Abahlali's high commitment to land reform and the stakes involved.

The government and elite see the poor's mass urbanisation as the "mushrooming of informal settlements" (Mboto 2023) by "land grabbers" (City of Tshwane spokesperson Sipho Stuurman quoted in Luvhengo 2022).[3] In response to the increase of informal settlements, multiple cities and provincial governments have established anti-land invasion units. The state and elite can be broadly described as anti-informal settlement and aim to "eradicate slums" (shacks) from the cities through forced demolitions/evictions and relocations to transit camps (that Abahlali compare to prison-like conditions) or faraway land (Masiangoako 2022; Kell and Nizza 2012). On the other hand, Abahlali demand the formalisation of informal settlements where they were originally built (in situ), affordable housing and basic service delivery. For AbM, relocation should be the last possible option. The state and elite's preference for relocation of shack-dwellers speaks volumes for how shack-dwellers are not considered fully human, for no attention is paid to how relocations break apart communities, take away limited job

[3] Class in South Africa is a contested category and so I use elite to signify those in South Africa who have significant political, economic, or social power and influence, as well as control over resources. I refer to the government and elite as a pair because the political elite, business elite and wealthy are not easily extricable and are often one and the same.

opportunities, hinder children's access to schools and erase any labour done on that land to build homes, gardens and community areas.

In order to describe and analyse the power formations that seek to oppress marginalised groups, Achille Mbembe (2003, 2019) theorises necropolitics. Necropolitics provides insight into how violent and illegal evictions, inhumane living conditions and state-sanctioned violence and intimidation are oppressive tactics that allow the state/elite to govern shack-dwellers through their exposure and proximity to death. Within this theoretical framework, Mbembe states that groups deemed disposable by the state have "[conferred] upon them the status of *living dead*" (2003, 40). This categorisation reduces oppressed groups to the oppression they experience, leaving little to no room for attention to their acts of resistance. I will flesh out necropolitics, and my critique thereof, in Chapter 3 Living (Dead) Futures.

### 1.1.2 Abahlali's Counter-Archive

The Abahlali movement gained widespread attention after it successfully fought the KZN Elimination and Prevention of Re-Emergence of Slums Act 6 of 2007 (the Slums Act) in the constitutional court in 2009 (Masiangoako 2022).[4] The media heavily reported on the case and a documentary, *Dear Mandela* (Kell and Nizza 2012), chronicles its progression. Abahlali have remained in the news cycle and often use this publicity to their advantage.

One of Abahlali's resistance tactics is to publicise the abuses of the state/elite. Members take photos and videos of unlawful evictions, arrests and harassment and disseminate these to journalists, international solidarity networks, their mailing list that has over 4500 subscribers and AbM's website (Masiangoako 2022, 74). Where possible, Abahlali name the officials who orchestrate the abuses, chronicling the longstanding histories of anti-Abahlali views and actions held by officials and revealing the actors within these systems of oppression. This practice of documenting and publicising abuses generates an accessible and reliable public record across digital media platforms, the news media and their own

[4] Section 16 of the Slums Act was in conflict with the constitutional entitlement to appropriate housing and declared unconstitutional. The Act sought to abolish the safeguard against illegal evictions provided by the PIE Act, and so it was determined that the Slums Act violated the requirement that evictions and relocations only be considered as a last resort and that the Act prevented meaningful engagement as has been read into section 26 of the Constitution (SERI 2018, 25).

website. Abahlali use the media strategically to put pressure on public officials (Mohapi 2023a). When a settlement is facing issues with waste removal and sewage services, AbM will seek out journalists to report on it. Abahlali's website, Abahlali.org, is a repository for the documentation of these abuses, media coverage, press statements, organisational documents and Abahlali's political education. Dating back to December 2005, all website entries are freely accessible online.

Archives represent the relationship between power and knowledge, qualifying what is worth knowing and what the valid ways of knowing are. Archives are a source of power due to their relationship with authority and their ability to demarcate origins, a Western obsession (Derrida 1994 cited in Steedman 2001). However, Carolyn Steedman (2001) reminds us that "nothing starts in the Archive, nothing, ever at all, although things certainly end up there" (1175). Nevertheless, archives claim an authority over the subject matter that they are dedicated to. What counts as an archive is a political question because the social contexts where they were created, the power dynamics that influence the archive process, and the materiality of the documents and artefacts, all play roles in the creation and validity of an archive. The relationship between archives and power is undisputed. Archives produce, reproduce and perform power because "merely having them is a claim to power, and importantly, to a history of power and the power of history and of historical coherence" (Mikdashi 2022 ch. 2).

A counter-archive is an archive that challenges and contests dominant archives, and official records, by highlighting previously silenced narratives (Kashmere 2010; Kros 2015, 153). When the state and elite characterise shack-dwellers as criminal and less-than-human, Abahlali's archive counters this point of view by talking back with their own narratives, lived experience and documentation of their struggle. Thus, I position AbM's online repository as a counter-archive to that of the state/elite. Positioning Abahlali's website as a counter-archive is a political choice that honours poor, Black epistemologies and works towards drawing attention to AbM's own conceptions of themselves, readily denied by the state and elite. Recognising AbM's collection as an archive affirms their claims to lived knowledges and aligns the connotative power of authority of the archive to that of AbM. Further, by positioning their website as a counter-archive, this thesis recognises AbM's self-knowledge as valid in the academic context and sees AbM's repository as theory. I will expand on how I have approached and worked with their counter-archive in Chapter 2, Walking with Abahlali: a situated feminist (research) praxis. Abahlali's counter-archive is a tool in their struggle to resist state/elite oppression and achieve human dignity and this thesis takes this tactic seriously.

## 1.2 The Politics of Ubuhlalism

Abahlali practice Ubuhlalism, a philosophy, ideology, politics and praxis rooted in their interpretation of Ubuntu (Pan Africanism Today Secretariat 2020).[5] Ubuhlalism centres relationality above individualism and is based on a communal worldview characterised by "collective respect for human dignity" (Grade 2012 cited in Mawere and Mubaya 2016, 95). Although against individualism, this should not be mistaken for lack of individuality as Abahlali's fight for human dignity is one that is realised on the communal and individual level. Ubuntu has been passed down spontaneously through oral tradition and practices (Mbigi 1997 cited in Mawere and Mubaya 2016). Although practiced worldwide, it specifically originates from Black people in Africa.[6] Ubuntu informs a way of life whereby a community looks after one another and no singular person's needs are put before another. Ubuntu also clearly weighs preservation of life above accumulation of capital/wealth (Mawere and Mubaya 2016, 97). As both a praxis and an aspiration/goal, Ubuntu is an inherent investment in the future because by placing the community above the individual and profit there is an acknowledgement of the continuity of the community beyond the individual and what a singular person can own. Simply, people die and profit can become loss, but the community lives on. As in Abahlali's case, Ubuntu has been integral to the survival of African communities who have used it to endure poverty and deprivation (Mbigi and Maree 1995 cited in Mawere and Mubaya 2016). Furthermore, Ubuntu places emphasis on humanity's connection to physical land, mirroring one of the fundamental concerns of AbM who advocate for the social value of land over its commercial value. The praxis of Ubuhlalism will be fleshed out in-depth in Chapters 2, Walking with Abahlali: a situated feminist (research) praxis, and 4, Ubuhlalism and The Undercommons.

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[5] Ubuntu has been investigated and analysed by many thinkers before me and to do justice to their work is not within the scope of this thesis. However, we will embark on a brief foray into the philosophy of Ubuntu in the thematic contexts of this project.

[6] Although Ubuntu precedes colonialism and thus the category of Black, I emphasise the concept's origins as not only indigenous to Africa but specifically to Black people in a move to honour Black epistemologies.

## 1.3 Abahlali's Futurity

Alison Kafer (2013) and José Esteban Muñoz (2019) state the future is political.[7] Kafer (2013) reiterates that "the futures we imagine reveal the biases of the present" (28), revealing how futures are entwined with prejudice and limited by current points of view. When alternative futures are imagined, they not only work towards alternative futures, but also work to dismantle and work against current conditions that would render those futures unthinkable. In the same breath, futurity according to Lee Edelman is "an investment in and attention to the future or futures" (Kafer 2013, 28), or what Muñoz (2019) calls "anticipatory illumination[s]" that enact, perform and rehearse future worlds (49). Abahlali has multiple world-making practices, such as radically democratic socialist politics, political land occupations, (re)defining relationality, and who is counted as human. I take these acts of world-making as investments in the future that take place in the present. Thus, acts of world-making that insist on alternative futures is how I understand futurity in this thesis.

Kafer (2013) calls into question the political nature of disabled futures, noting how there is a presumed homogenous narrative that a future without disability is something we all want (20). The same could be said for informal settlements. The state and elite believe that a future without informal settlements is the unanimous ideal for the future. However Abahlali contest this and want informal settlements to be formalised, in situ, and given basic services, not eradicated or displaced/relocated. Here we can see two separate futures at stake, that of the state/elite and that of Abahlali. We can also see how notions of the future and progress are "deployed in the service of the compulsory" (Kafer 2013, 27) where those who cannot conform to norms such as whiteness, middle-to-upper class status, legal employment, state-sanctioned residency, and citizenship status are seen as barriers to societal advancement (28). Abahlali's rehearsals for alternative futures, their futurity, are seen as obstacles to the state and elite's notions of what the future is supposed to look like and are therefore perceived as a threat and treated accordingly. In this thesis, I will show how the state and elite attempt to withhold and deny Abahlali's futurity. Abahlali's acts

[7] Kafer and Muñoz are from Crip and Queer Studies respectively. Their theoretical analyses of futurity are relevant to AbM not only because both speak from marginalised positions, but also because I find generative possibilities in traversing across these studies and thinking with them in alternative contexts. As a queer and crip person, this is also due to following one of my own lines of desire.

of world-making are targeted by the state and elite because of the threat they pose to the status quo. This targeting can be seen in the criminalisation of the poor and state-sanctioned anti-poor in/direct violence. On the other hand, AbM's radical investment in futurity can be seen in Ubuhlalism, the University of Abahlali, Living Learning, and living politics, which I will expand on in further chapters.

In short, there are two relatively opposing futures at stake, a progression of the status quo and a radically different one where the poor are not criminalised; informal settlements are formalised and given basic services; there is a socialist radical democracy; and, shack-dwellers live long, healthy, dignified and unmolested lives. These opposing futures are invested in respectively by the state/elite and Abahlali, and work done by the state/elite to inhibit Abahlali's futures from becoming realised is denying and withholding AbM's futurity.

I am interested in the world-making practices of Abahlali and how their lived politics invest in alternative futures. At the same time, state and elite repression work to curtail Abahlali's futurity. Therefore, the guiding questions of this thesis are: What are the world-making practices of Abahlali? How do their lived politics insist on an alternative sense of futurity that resists their relegation to the status of *living dead*? And, what can be learned from Ubuhlalism as practiced by AbM in shaping a situated feminist research praxis?

### 1.3.1 Research in Solidarity

I have never lived in a shack. I am not a member of Abahlali and in all likelihood, I never will be. As a white South African, I am inherently complicit in the broader system that subjugates Abahlali. This is not only because my positionality means I benefit(ed) from Apartheid, but also due to my participation in the South African economy, internalised biases and more. However, I have been captivated by AbM's struggle since I first heard about it. As the group in South Africa that arguably has the least resources, Abahlali have nevertheless been able to build a radically democratic socialist movement that fights for the oppressed. It is not difficult to see that South Africa needs radical change to heal from the wounds of coloniality and Apartheid and I see Abahlali as the group doing the most meaningful work to address this. Not only in demanding the right to land, service delivery and government accountability, but in the fundamental ways we see one another as human beings who all deserve dignity. In the individualistic neoliberal moment we now find ourselves in, I see Abahlali as an example of how to reconfigure our social relations. This is not to

romanticise their struggle, nor co-opt it as inspirational in problematic terms. However, in Abahlali I find the radical potential of alternative world-making.

I firmly believe that the ideal person to do research with Abahlali is a member of Abahlali. However, I find myself in the predicament of wanting to do this work, this research, while also acknowledging that I am not the best suited to do it. My own future is inextricable from Abahlali due to my feminist beliefs that none of us are free until we all are. As Fred Moten puts it "coalition emerges out of your recognition that it's fucked up for you, in the same way that we've already recognized that it's fucked up for us" (in Harney and Moten 2013, 10). I want to invest in a more equal future and part of that investment is to be/think with AbM through my work and research. As such, I navigate the position of knowing I am unsuitable for this work (as a white, privileged outsider), yet cannot let that prohibit me from attempting to contribute to the liberation of the poor. Further, the economies of research show that privileged outsiders have always, and probably will always, do research *on* insider underprivileged groups. My first refusal is to do research *on* Abahlali.[8] Instead, I research *with* AbM.

I have been fortunate to spend time with Abahlali in March of 2023 in eThekwini (the metropolitan municipality of Durban) where I was guided by Thapelo Mohapi, their elected general secretary. Mohapi (2023a) told me that research should not be charity work but should rather be an act of solidarity with AbM and it is here I take my cue. Following the lead of Abahlali, this thesis project seeks to be in solidarity with Abahlali, investigating issues that are pertinent to AbM and coming into relation (Sheik 2023a) in a manner that honours Ubuhlalism.[9] Coming into relation refers to acknowledging and nurturing our interconnectedness. I also see this mode of solidarity and coming into relation as feminist.

My commitment to the feminist approach I employ in this thesis stems from lived experience in the feminist and women's movements of South Africa and abroad, materially and digitally, as well as particular exposure to feminist theory in academia. Working from a feminist standpoint is integral to my work because of feminist commitments to positionality (hooks 2014; Rich 1986; Haraway 1988), lived knowledges (Gatenby and Humphries 2000; Hill Collins 1999), intersectional racializing assemblages (Puar

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[8] Refusal in research as a concept will be fleshed out in the following chapter where I will outline how I have attempted to go beyond the semantics of on and with.

[9] Solidarity and Ubuhlalism have distinct meanings within the context of Abahlali and I will expand on both concepts in Chapters 3 and 4.

2012; Weheliye 2014), and reflexivity (Ahmed 2007), a non-exhaustive list. Similarly, my commitments to Black and African liberation are informed by a short lifetime as a white person in post-Apartheid South Africa and my readings of African intellectuals on cognitive justice, epistemic disobedience (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018) and re-centring Africa (Ngũgĩ 1981, 1993)—a partial list. It is imperative that my thinking be informed by these thinkers and also grounded in the struggle of Abahlali. Without repeating these oft-cited scholars, although I will reiterate some of these commitments in the following chapters, I will engage with their thinking throughout. I cannot meaningfully demarcate where and how these revolutionary thinkers have influenced me, because they have influenced it all.

To give a brief overview of these feminist and Black and African liberation influences, bell hooks (1989), speaking from a Black feminist perspective, highlights the potentials of theorising from the margins. For hooks, marginality is more than a site of depravation, it is a site of radical possibility where resistance to dominant modes of oppression can be cultivated. From hooks, I have learnt to honour the lived knowledges and resistance strategies of marginalised groups and pay particular attention to the language used, not only by those groups but by myself, because "language is also a place of struggle" (1989, 15). Adrienne Rich (1986) and Donna Haraway (1998) similarly emphasise the importance of contextualising theory to the position one is writing from and knowledge to the community it belongs to. Bev Gatenby and Maria Humphries (2000) highlight the ethics of care and accountability in feminist approaches, as well as lived experience as valid knowledge. Through Black Feminist Epistemology, Patricia Hill Collins (1999) also draws attention to lived experience as a criterion of meaning, ethics of care and personal accountability, challenging the subject-object dichotomies in research and knowledge claims. Jasbir Puar (2012) complicates Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) notion of feminist intersectionality by reconceptualising intersectionality as a set of processes and within this set of processes and Alexander Weheliye (2014) foregrounds race. Sara Ahmed (2007) lends a critical perspective on how racializing processes operate and invites readers to examine their own positionality and the ways whiteness shapes the world. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) underscores the pursuit of intellectual autonomy in Africa by challenging dominant Western epistemological frameworks to decolonise knowledge production. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1981, 1993) advocates for the decolonisation of the African mind through placing Africa at the centre of discourse and analysis.

## 1.4 Chapter Overview

In Chapter 2 Walking with Abahlali: a situated feminist (research) praxis, I investigate how Ubuhlalism as practiced by AbM can inform a situated feminist research praxis, which I employ throughout the thesis as I attempt to research and write in solidarity with Abahlali. Chapter 3 Living (Dead) Futures analyses the socio-political context shack-dwellers live in and how in/direct violence propagated by the state/elite attempt to withhold Abahlali's futurity. I argue that theoretical frameworks, that seek to analyse the power formations complicit in this marginalisation, reduce Abahlali to their marginality and overlook AbM's acts of world-making. Chapter 4, Ubuhlalism and the Undercommons, takes up the argument of the previous chapter to pay close attention to the lived realities of, and acts of resistance by, Abahlali and how these rehearsals for different futures insist on alternative futurities to those ascribed *living dead* (Mbembe 2003, 2019). Throughout this thesis, I make use of Abahlali's counter-archive and my personal encounters with AbM to ground my narrative and analysis, attempting to write in solidarity with Abahlali. In the final chapter, Conclusions: provocations and orientations, I briefly outline the arguments of my chapters and tentatively answer my research questions. Further, I theorise future research praxis with AbM and how Ubuhlalism, when taken as a point of departure, radically influences feminist thinking, doing and being-with.

# 2. Walking with Abahlali: a situated feminist (research) praxis

In Abahlali's boardroom, a page is stuck to the door, see Figure 2 below.

(Figure 2)

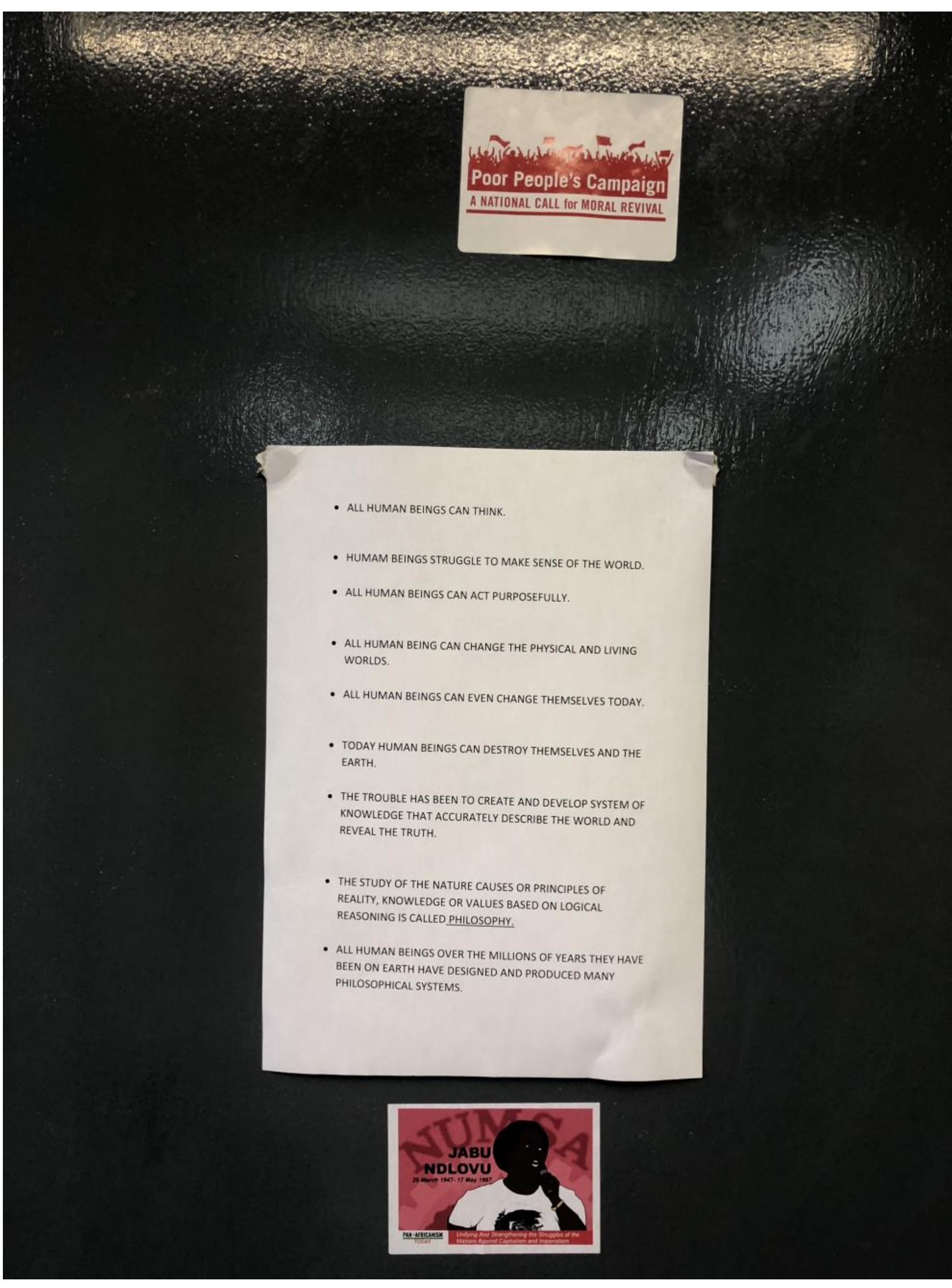


*Figure 2. This printed page is displayed on the internal door of Abahlali baseMjondolo's boardroom. Photo taken with permission.*

The authorless page is an affirmative reminder to the reader (members/leaders of Abahlali) that their thoughts, struggles, experiences and knowledges are valid. The points gesture to the multiplicity of ways of knowing, stressing these are engineered and reproduced by humans and no single knowledge system is accurate or the truth. This quotidian piece of office décor echoes the sentiments shared by Abahlali that although they are poor in life, they are not poor in mind (Zikode 2005).

The work of this chapter, and thesis is to align to AbM's politics of knowledge and take seriously shack-dwellers' intellectualism. Ubuhlalism is Abahlali's ideology and philosophy that informs their worldview. Thus, I seek to situate my research praxis within Ubuhlalism on Abahlali's own terms. To do so, I will outline how research can be problematic, highlighting the prevailing myths about knowledge production according to South African feminist scholar Zuleika Bibi Sheik (2022). To remedy these pitfalls, I turn to Sheik's notion of knowledge cultivation and Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's (2013) refusing research.[10] To investigate Ubuhlalism as an entry point to a situated feminist research praxis, I look at AbM's idiom. I scrutinise AbM's history with academics/academia as well when Abahlali members engage as academics themselves. Taking Abahlali's self-knowledge as a starting point, I outline how this thesis engages with AbM's own theorisations. I explain my encounters, interactions and ongoing relationship with AbM, some of the issues I/we faced and attempt to document a praxis that is always-becoming. Just as Ubuntu relies on "the African conception of the person [as] a social being who is always becoming" (Chigumadzi 2021), so does the praxis I develop rely on always-becoming.

## 2.1 Dirty Research

Members of Abahlali and Rural Network (an organisation that fights for the struggles of the poor in rural areas) note "education is a dangerous game, it's biased and as dirty as politics" (Figlan et al. 2009, 45).[11] Education is intertwined with research, which could equally be called biased and dirty. Research has been

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[10] Tuck is a feminist Unangax̂ Indigenous scholar and Yang is an Ethnic Studies professor and community organiser.

[11] Figlan et al. (2009) are members of Abahlali and Rural Network who have published a booklet on a collaborative learning project, *Living Learning*. Thus, *Living Learning* is authored by themselves. Citing their knowledges for my praxis is not only a political act that deems it as sufficiently academic, but also a way of grounding my work within the movement(s).

a tool of colonisation and dispossession and remains imbued with both (see Tuck 2009; Tuck and Yang 2013; Sheik 2022; Simpson 2007). Sheik (2022) outlines and refutes three prevailing myths surrounding research. Namely, research is about acquiring new knowledge, improving the human condition and sharing bodies of knowledge (91). Her work shows research tends to create a (grand) narrative about the Other, one that suits the colonizer/oppressor. Sheik (2022) raises questions about the commodification and production of knowledge, stating:

> To produce knowledge in academia is to treat knowledge first as an external entity and as a commodity that can be traded, exchanged, sold, and consumed. This is evidenced in contemporary debates on "research on" versus "research with" people, without addressing the underlying presumption in knowledge production that necessitates the question while at the same time debasing the privilege which is inherent in the choice. What then does it mean to refuse to "produce" knowledge in the context of the racialized, gendered, colonial, neoliberal university? (100)

Sheik explains how knowledge in academia is considered a product and attempts to de-commodify knowledge have been relatively shallow when they address semantics and not underlying power dynamics. As opposed to knowledge creation, Sheik proposes Robbie Shilliam's (2015) term "knowledge cultivation" that recognises the circular natures of knowledges (that cannot be limited to disciplines) and emphasises "[coming] into deep relation" (Sheik 2022, 102). Knowledge cultivation requires a mode of relation where "the practitioner enfolds her/him[/them]self in the communal matter of her/his[/their] inquiry" (Shilliam 2015, 24-25 quoted in Sheik 2022, 101). Knowledge cultivation requires unlearning, listening, receiving and communal healing. Sheik's (2023a) mode of deep relation is one echoed by Abahlali's politics of Ubuhlalism that demands a communal worldview and as she is a decolonial feminist scholar writing from a Black South African positionality, I find particular resonance in her work.

### 2.1.1 Refusing Research

Tuck and Yang (2013) scrutinise the power dynamics of research, from its settler-colonial legacy to contemporary issues of ethics and positionality. They see the object that must be decolonised as not research itself but the researcher. Tuck and Yang use the concept of refusal as an intervention in research whereby settler colonial epistemologies are challenged and "communities of overstudied Others" are no longer used as sites for extraction (223). Instead, a mode of refusal is used to conduct alternative research or limit research altogether. Tuck and Yang expand refusal to not simply mean 'no'. Rather, they use refusal as an opening in research encounters that can be used to turn the object of enquiry into the researcher and

academy, instead of the Other. Refusing research, according to Tuck and Yang (2013), has three additional orientations: refusal is expansive and desires multiplicity of representation; refusal rejects research's "circular self-defining ethics" in favour of epistemic disobedience and honours lived ways of knowing; refusal is "both method and theory" (242).

Refusing research is also about analysing socio-political structures as opposed to spectacular events. For example, analysing the processes that criminalise poverty instead of a single instance of police violence against the poor. Tuck and Yang (2013) ask how researchers, as listeners, decide what stories to tell and what they refuse to document and publish. The gaze of the researcher, and those consuming the research produced, is questioned in terms of insatiable hunger for spectacles and chronicles of im/material scars and wounds, which they term pain narratives. Specifically, they critique the way pain narratives have been commodified for academic gain and clout, such as researchers who gain prestige and financial reward while leaving informants with no benefit to their participation (232-233).

Tuck and Yang (2013, 229) explain how "in settler colonial logic, pain is more compelling than privilege, scars more enthralling than the body unmarked by experience". When this thesis is committed to honouring Abahlali's own narratives, using these as theory, recounting narratives of oppression may fall into the territory of propagating pain narratives. Thinking with Abahlali, the notion of pain narratives is complicated. AbM does indeed chronicle the struggles they have faced, however, their recounting of these painful narratives has multiple meanings. Abahlali document abuses strategically to gain media attention, which they use to put pressure on the state and elite. Their recounting of painful narratives also aligns to Ubuntu practices of acknowledging the living and the dead. In Ubuntu, there is the acceptance of inherent uncertainty in life, including the reality of death and dying (Mawere and Mubaya 2016). Ubuntu is inextricable from African belief systems that have their own perspective on death. Munyaradzi Mawere and Tapuwa R. Mubaya, citing Savage and Sonkosi (2002) and Ramose (2002), explain:

> Death does not mean the disappearance of the dead from beingness. Africans believe that the dead continue to exist in a spirit form and as such they are recognised as the "living-dead" or ancestors. African philosophy holds that the "living-dead" can, when called upon by the living, intercede and advise them in certain circumstances. [...] In addition to the "living-dead," there are also the "un-born" who are recognised to exist in the future. As such the living are required to ensure that the un-born are brought into the world and

> provided for. Thus, the transformation of the living from the un-born and the living to the "living-dead" occupy a continuous space. (103-104)[12]

This quote gestures towards the temporality of Ubuntu where time is continuous, cyclical and circular, in contrast to Western notions of linear time. The past and future are a part of the present in Ubuntu temporality. Indeed, at Abahlali's 2023 General Assembly, there will be a candlelight ceremony to welcome spirits to the meeting (Aadnesgaard 2023). Therefore, when what could be called pain narratives are read within the context of Ubuhlalism, they are shown to be practices that honour the (living-) dead. Aligning to AbM's own practice, this thesis will recount Abahlali's own stories, however, by focussing on the narratives propagated by AbM, I aim to do this in a manner that honours Ubuhlalism and refuses academic economies of pain narratives.

The definition of pain narratives also relies on who is doing the speaking about whom, how and for what purpose. Tuck and Yang (2013) intervene at the tension of avoiding pain narratives and honouring a community's own narratives with a desire-centred approach. They write:

> Desire-centered research does not deny the experience of tragedy, trauma, and pain, but positions the knowing derived from such experiences as wise. This is not about seeing the bright side of hard times, or even believing that everything happens for a reason. Utilizing a desire-based framework is about working inside a more complex and dynamic understanding of what one, or a community, comes to know in (a) lived life. Logics of pain focus on events, sometimes hiding structure. (31)

Further, a desire-centred approach is outlined by Tuck (2009) in an earlier work where she explains desire is an epistemological shift that refuses to frame a community as damaged or broken and rather sees communities as complex, contradictory and self-determined (416). Tuck acknowledges herein lies a paradox, "to refute [damage], we need to say it aloud" (417), although these analyses of damage need to be situated in socio-political and historical processes as well as juxtaposed with "wisdom and hope" (416). My reading of Tuck (2009) and Tuck and Yang (2013) and how their thinking applies to an Ubuhlalist feminist research praxis is to stay with the messiness and uncertainty of the damage caused, while placing emphasis on agency, collective power, resistance strategies and multiplicities of these communities, so as not to reduce a community to their violation. Indeed, Abahlali continuously refer to overarching systems of

[12] Mawere and Mubaya's use of "living-dead" is discrete from Achille Mbembe's (2003, 2019) use of the term. The authors use different punctuation for living-dead, alternating punctuation according to their sources. For clarity, I have altered the quote to use "living-dead" consistently.

oppression like the criminalisation of poverty and the political violence of the state, situating their struggles in local and global socio-political and economic contexts.

In refusing disciplinarity and methodology, Sheik (2023b) critiques academic disciplines for their complicity in imperialism and colonialism and their function in regulation (11). She states these issues also transfer to methodology because as a set of processes, rules and analysis, methodology governs disciplines and so is similarly inextricable from imperialism and colonialism. To avoid (and refuse) methodology, this thesis employs praxis instead. This thesis favours the practical application of knowledge gained from Abahlali, attempting to practice the theory of Ubuhlalism, over any rigid, specific and systematic approach methodology implies. As part of this praxis, I employ critical thinking and reflexivity and engage(d) in practical activities with Abahlali, both during my visit and in our ongoing relationship.

## 2.2 Abahlali's Ways of Knowing: Abahlali and I/Me/We

When looking at the core tenets of Ubuntu, its characteristics can be applied to Ubuhlalism as research praxis. Namely, placing the community over the individual; valuing oral tradition and practices; recognising the interconnectedness of the living, the living-dead (ancestors) and the un-born; and placing an emphasis on the relationship to land, to name a few (Mawere and Mubaya 2016). These values encourage a commitment to relationality, lived knowledges, non-Western temporal logics, and socio-material contexts. However, when interpreting Ubuhlalism into a research praxis, Abahlali's modes of knowing also inform my praxis. Abahlali do not subscribe to outside models or ideologies, rather they co-create their own philosophy through Ubuhlalism. Abahlali assert they can think their own politics and should be represented by themselves. I will flesh out Ubuhlalism throughout this chapter and thesis, as well as pay attention to particular practices in Chapter 4. However, in broad strokes, Ubuhlalism centres community, human dignity, provision of resources to realise/respect this dignity, solidarity with the struggles of others, lived experience and egalitarianism. Abahlali also refer to their politics of Ubuhlalism as living politics, emphasising the fact their politics is based on lived experience and is practiced in daily life.[13] AbM's living

[13] This concept of living politics is integral to AbM and used throughout their praxis. Indeed, *Living Politics* is the title of SERI's publication on Abahlali.

politics is based on the lived experience of the poor and is inseparable from quotidian life because their living politics directly impact shack-dwellers' lives. Zikode explains Abahlali's living politics as follows:

> [A] politics that . . . arises from our daily lives and the daily challenges we face. It is a politics that every ordinary person can understand. It is a politics that knows that we have no water but that in fact we all deserve water. It is a politics that everyone must have electricity because it is required by our lives. (Zikode 2009)

True to their praxis of Ubuhlalism, Abahlali's thinking of their own living politics is always a result of discussions going on within communities, reflecting that community's own experiences and dialogues. Power within AbM is decentralised and each AbM community decides for themselves what is important to them. Their political consciousness, as a movement and within individual communities, is formalised during meetings held for this purpose, showing a deliberate and methodical commitment to the politics of lived knowledges. This communally-nurtured knowledge then informs the struggles of AbM, directing leadership's activism that puts pressure on the public and the state to address change (Gibson 2008).

### 2.2.1 Abahlali and/as the Academic

In 2008, AbM and Rural Network selected some of their members to attend the University of KwaZulu Natal's (UKZN) course, a Certificate in Education (Participatory Development) (CEPD). These were Lindela Figlan, Rev. Mavuso, Busi Ngema, Zodwa Nsibande, Sihle Sibisi and S'bu Zikode (2009). The members were democratically elected by their communities and they participated in monthly gatherings throughout 2008 to talk about the course, their lives and what connections could be made. They called these sessions Living Learning and later published a booklet on this experience with the same name. Explaining their Living Learning sessions, they said:

> The main idea behind these discussions was to expand space for careful and critical reflection, and to explore the connections between the experience of being a militant, faced with real threats of landlessness and repression and abuse by authorities, on the one hand, with that of being an academic student engaging other written experiences from a range of contexts. This connection is vital because any serious and concrete project of transformation must begin and remain in popular grassroots struggles. (Figlan et al. 2009, 5)

The authors also asked trusted academics to respond to the material collected in *Living Learning* and published the academics' response at the end of the booklet. These academics defined Living Learning (as a practice) as "a space for reflecting on what it means to be part of two realities that are separate and often opposed" (Gibson, Harley and Pithouse in Figlan et al. 2009, 71). At the Living Learning discussions, activists were not only performing their roles from within their movements, but also their roles as students engaging with academic literature. Each group meeting was organised around the following framework: the agenda would be defined collectively at the start of the meeting and not be predefined by any outside party; these points would then be discussed among participants; these discussions were noted down by a scribe who then disseminated them back to participants for accuracy.

The participants' primary concern was how to take the knowledge they had gained back to the communities who had mandated their participation because "as socialists, [they] must be sharing everything" (Figlan et al. 2009, 14). They also committed to remaining accountable for this process and exchange. One of their solutions was to publish the booklet *Living Learning*. Another theme present throughout the publication was the internalised criminalisation of poverty by some shack-dwellers whereby they deemed their situation to be "somehow natural… God planned it" and not a result of socio-political and historical factors (Figlan et al. 2009, 35). Figlan et al. saw the publication of the booklet as a way to challenge this thinking because *Living Learning* pointed out socio-political factors and by publishing the poor's thoughts, insisted they can think for themselves.

AbM have had relationships with academics since their inception. They have been criticised for having white academics around and told this means Abahlali is "not a real movement" (Mohapi 2023a). Some academics, like Richard Pithouse, Nigel Gibson, Anne Harley and Jared Sacks, have earned the title of being comrades through genuine solidarity with AbM, while others become anecdotes of clueless academics who presume they know more about the struggle of the poor than the poor do themselves. Despite a litany of such researchers before me, I am still given the tentative opportunity to prove myself when first encountering Abahlali leadership. However, my warm welcome should not be mistaken for unfettered access, for academics always have chaperones from the organisation when visiting settlements,

until they have shown they can perform research respectfully.[14] Throughout Abahlali's counter-archive and my time with AbM, members emphasise it is imperative everyone understands at the same level in their own language. My understanding is that all information and decisions should be understood by all members, to the highest possible degree, and this level of understanding necessitates the sharing of knowledge in people's native languages. Just as Abahlali insists on everyone within their movement understanding at the same level in their own language, so are these values espoused for academic research. Former Secretary General of Abahlali, Bandile Mdlalose, remarked to Gerard Gill (2014) that a way academics also position themselves as knowing more about the poor than the poor is by using jargon and vocabulary that is not grounded in the struggle nor the activists within it, thus entrenching their privilege. Instead, recognising the dignity and voices of the poor is best achieved by using terms they can understand and relate to.[15] As Gill (2014) notes, Mdlalose was also:

> critical of academics that do not get involved, engage, experience: "Academics who sit behind a desk are no better than the government who breeds poverty, who criticises the people on the ground, who think that we are poor because we make ourselves poor, who have not gone down to the people and realised what is really really happening to the people on the ground." (216)

Nevertheless, Abahlali do see researchers as possible resources, especially in their ability to gain media coverage and legitimise AbM.[16] AbM has also recognised the importance of a dialogue with academia, not only because they are an often-researched group, but because they see potential for learning from and with academia as well. Referencing Paulo Freire, members of Abahlali and Rural Network state "[they] do not allow academics and professionals to be on top, but rather to be *on tap*" (Figlan et al. 2009, 61 emphasis added).

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[14] For example, introducing themselves to the community and explaining why they are there, asking for permission to take photographs and explaining where these images will be used, and general respect for proceedings where they are not automatically granted access to through their status as researcher.

[15] My use of the term voice does not prescribe to problematic notions of 'giving a voice' to others but is rather a reflection of Abahlali's own terms (see Tuck and Yang 2013).

[16] By legitimise here I mean that due to poor people not generally being seen as the experts on themselves, when researchers amplify Abahlali's own messages, this can be a way for the poor's voices to be validated.

### 2.2.2 The Idiom of Abahlali

In *Living Learning*, Abahlali's counter-archive and my interactions with AbM, four key concepts are redefined by Abahlali (and Rural Network): freedom, leadership, education and the university. Freedom is an oft-used term in South Africa's political and social spaces. Those born in 1994 and later are called freedom babies because we are supposedly born-free from Apartheid. Every year on the anniversary of our first democratic election, there is a country-wide public holiday, Freedom Day, to commemorate this event. However, the poor recognise the freedom being sold to them by the government and media is not what they are experiencing because "they say we are free but it cannot be true when evictions and hunger continue. […] freedom from poverty seems a freedom too far" (Figlan et al. 2009, 25).

Figlan et al. (2009) note how often their struggle is trivialised into service delivery protests when in actuality their notions of freedom are around being recognised as human beings and treated with dignity. Instead, Figlan et al.'s definition is that "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" (2009, 29). Figlan et al. show how freedom is not a fact but an experience, it must be felt in everyday encounters of the poor's lives. Freedom is refusing the criminalisation of poverty by the state and elite. Freedom is rejecting the notion to be poor and live in a shack is to accept dehumanising living conditions. Freedom is the poor seen as experts on their own lives, as well as the historical processes that have led to, and maintain, poverty. Freedom is allowing the poor to be active participants in the transformation of the status quo. In 2011, Abahlali's KZN branch reiterate and expand on these points and write:

> We want to be very clear that freedom is not only a question of service delivery and budget constraints. It is a question of our full participation in all discussions and decisions about the future of our own communities and our country. It is a question of honesty, respect and dignity for the poor. It is a question of full recognition that the poor count in our society. (Abahlali baseMjondolo 2011)

Thus, Abahlali's concept of freedom emerges as reclaiming what is denied to shack-dwellers. Namely, their rejection from the city, the denial of their human dignity and the associated basic services, and the refusal of their participation in processes that affect them (like settlement relocations and upgrading). Abahlali insist on retelling history in a manner that more accurately reflects the memories and lived experiences of AbM, being seen as experts on themselves, and recognising the agency of the poor in their own upliftment.

Unfreedom is a central concept for Abahlali who hold counter-events on Freedom Day where they instead protest under the banner of unfreedom. Since their founding, Abahlali has hosted Unfreedom Day and in 2006, they said this was "to share a day of music, dance, theatre and poetry to highlight the lack of democracy and freedom for poor people in South Africa" (Masiangoako 2022, 16). Unfreedom Day is also a day of mourning lost comrades. In 2023, the primary issues of redress were state repression, assassinations of activists, delivery of basic services, as well as land and housing redress. See one of the flyers promoting Unfreedom Day below (Figure 3).

*Figure 3. This is one of the posters Abahlali published to promote their Unfreedom Day march in Durban. Abahlali provided all of the wording, in both English and isiZulu, and I was able to assist with the poster design.*

At the Unfreedom Day March in Durban, Abahlali presented a memorandum of sixteen demands addressed to President Cyril Ramaphosa, including job creation and respect for taxi workers' rights (Peoples Dispatch 2023). They also demanded the end of harassment of street traders, xenophobia, discrimination of gender identities and discrimination based on sexuality. As part of their Living Learning and living politics, Abahlali's idiom goes beyond categorising freedom as unfreedom and extends to leadership, education and the university.

Leadership is reconfigured in *Living Learning* to be a mode of listening as opposed to control or technocracy (Figlan et al. 2009). This is mirrored in the daily practices of office life and movement activities where listening is paramount. Figlan et al. point out no one should be born a leader, but rather be taught

how to lead by their own community. Ultimately, according to Figlan et al. (2009), leadership and communication come down to listening, both the importance of listening and being listened to, to ensure mutual understanding and empathy. At another Abahlali meeting in the same period of *Living Learning*, when describing leaders, participants said "they must feel what we feel… and only those who feel must lead" (quoted in Nimmagudda 2008). My understanding of Abahlali's mode of listening is there is power in being listened to by your own community and those outside of it.

Figlan et al.'s (2009) definitions of education and the university are also intertwined. Firstly, this involves recognising "education is never neutral!" (14) and secondly "the prescribed curriculum has the intention of control built deeply into it" (27). The type of education the government and NGO sector deem appropriate for Abahlali is limited to fire safety, hygiene and how much 'progress' has been made since Apartheid, and the intellectualism of the poor is not taken seriously.[17] Abahlali and Rural Network recognise due to the constant undermining of their own Living Learning and living politics, they must be a threat to state and elite actors. They also refer to Living Learning as life-long learning, a "a learning that helps [them] become questioning people – to the powerful, [they] become suspicious, [they] become trouble-makers" (22). As a result, they question the definition of education and ask:

> How you can identify a 'well educated' person? Is it about good English? Good isiZulu? Not breaking the rules of grammar? Having lots of degrees and qualifications? The answer we came to was actually it's 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, 50)

Their definition of education emphasises positionality and lived experience, as well as leadership as a mode of listening. They also challenged notions of traditionally Western university educations being superior to the university of experience. Part of this deconstruction of the traditional university was to compare their experience of academia within UKZN to the intellectualism of the poor. They "[were] trying to combine the two universities – the one of experience and the one of academics" (7), noting for these universities to meet, particular attention needed to be paid to interpretation and translation. This resulted in the concept of the "'Universal University' – *invading* the academic one in order for it to benefit the people" (9, emphasis my own). Here, Abahlali are taking on the category of invader prescribed to them by dominant discourse (see

[17] For example, the authors make reference to government spokesperson Lennox Mabaso who wanted AbM's president to "educate his community on fire safety instead of talking the whole time" (Daily News 17 July cited in Figlan et al. 2009).

Luvhengo 2022; Roberts 2023). However, they own this designation in relationship to the university, a colonial institution, and not land, which they see as rightfully theirs and inseparable from their constitutional right to housing.

Abahlali also refer to the university of experience as the University of Abahlali baseMjondolo, a common term both in conversation and on placards in protests.[18] This strategy recognises poverty is financial and social, not intellectual. AbM refuse dominant epistemologies that proclaim traditional universities and education as the only producers and grantors of knowledge and instead posit their own experiences as tools of study. This politics of study emphasises continual communal learning and humility and can be seen throughout AbM. The University of Abahlali is an ongoing process of mutuality, communal development and agency building. By characterising their social movement as a university they are also making specific claims about what a university is, what it does, for whom, and when. Thus, the university defined by Abahlali is sharing knowledge in a way everyone can understand, at the same level, in their own language. Their notion of the university also emphasises togetherness and ensuring everyone's thoughts and opinions are heard. This mode of the university is for all, without applications, acceptance, fees or credits. This university is always. It is happening in the boardroom, bus stop and talent show rehearsal.

### 2.2.3 Abahlali as Plural

AbM's relational worldview and communal living politics does not erase of the notion of individuality. To use the terms of Gill (2014), the ideology of Ubuhlalism "[encompasses] a complex interplay between the universal and the particular" (212) through dual sensitivity to the needs of the community and the agency and freedom of the individual.[19] This emphasis on community is both social and material. Not only does the density of shacks in informal settlements necessitate residents live communally, but this commitment is a social one that seeks to unify the poor. In contrast, a sense of community is something Zikode notes the elite lack when they live in gated estates, divorced from a life lived in community and often not knowing their neighbours (quoted in Gill 2014, 218).

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[18] I will examine the University of AbM more closely in Chapter 4 The Politics of Ubuhlalism.

[19] Gill mistakenly refers to Ubuhlalism as 'Abahlalism'.

Figlan et al. (2009) state "there are some very western ways of focussing on the individual and this can be a selfish, I-centred, approach – but African ways of thinking about these things can be better" (21). Citing Figlan et al. and other African thinkers, Gertjan van Stam (2019), in the context of conducting research on/with/in African communities, proposes the concept of living research, which operates from a We-paradigm.[20] He says "in living research, the researcher is an integral member of the community and visible as such, being a participant in interactions that affect embodied knowledge" (van Stam 2019, section 5, para. 5). In the We-paradigm, reality is based on the relationships within a community (to im/material and non/living actors) and "life unfolds itself as a holistic *doing through being*, with knowing being part of community engagement, conversation, and representation" (section 3, para. 4). Here, van Stam advocates for becoming a part of the community where research is occurring and for the role of researcher to be a vocation within that community that is both requested by and in service to the community.[21] He also acknowledges:

> The communal inclusion of the researcher in a community is an act of communal grace. … Grace unsettles oriental, imperial, and colonial frames. Living research, therefore, acts within the parameters of the grace received from a community based upon a confession of character. Such grace is remarkable as it is not necessary for a community to enable a researcher to be part of communal life. (citing van Stam 2014, 2015 in van Stam 2019, section 5, para. 5)

The notion of communal grace tentatively answers questions of how outsiders, like myself in the context of doing research with Abahlali, can participate in a community without *becoming*/*being members* of that community. By participate I mean join communal activities and daily life in a genuine manner without claiming to be a member nor knowing the community better than it knows itself. Communal grace allows for a community to include outsiders like researchers in their community without necessarily absorbing them. Further, communal grace points to the power dynamics of the encounter where a community recognises the researcher's outsider status (and the coloniality of that position) and yet chooses to include the researcher in communal life. This communal grace is another mode of coming into deep relation that can heal the wounds of coloniality by relating across difference. Here, space is created where research can

[20] van Stam is a Dutch scholar living in Zimbabwe.

[21] van Stam is also careful to differentiate living research from autoethnography, which instead operates from an I-paradigm.

be in service to a community, where research aligns with the community's needs, and is carried out in a way that reflects that community's practices.

## 2.3 Research as Service

Tuck (2009), Tuck and Yang (2013) and Sheik (2023a) make convincing arguments that research is not always the most generative mode of engaging with a community, and when research is pursued it should always be mutually beneficial. Members of Abahlali emphasise "experience is a good teacher …but it is also true that 'service' is a good teacher: through our service to the communities we are also learning from them" (Figlan et al. 2009, 50). Thus, I argue for situated feminist research to be a service.

As pointed out to me by Abahlali and in the work of researchers who have worked with AbM before me (see Nimmagudda 2008), I can confidently posit one of the best ways to do research with AbM is to participate in their communities, whether through volunteering or becoming embedded within an informal settlement (Mohapi 2023a). However the scope of this thesis and my limited resources did not allow for extended time to be spent with Abahlali beyond my March 2023 visit and so I theorise from within this limitation while advocating for, and wanting, more time. Researchers can, and should, be in service to a community, either by participating in it or conducting research that is on a topic requested by that community. During my time with Abahlali, Mohapi (2023a) recommended two research needs of AbM. Namely, investigations into the criminalisation of poverty and the importance of international solidarity. I take these needs seriously and have attempted to cover the criminalisation of poverty in-depth in Chapter 2. However, due to the scope of this thesis, I have not been able to fully investigate Abahlali's international solidarity networks beyond a limited section in Chapter 4. Further, throughout my time with Abahlali I spoke to members about my goals of pursuing a PhD on a topic that is beneficial for AbM and gave my contact details to anyone who was interested, so they can follow up with me should additional topics come to light. I also explained my visit in plain language with a handout, and the feedback I received was positive in that it was easily understandable and the only term needing clarification was thesis. See this handout below. (Figure 4)

My name is Helen Aadnesgaard and I am a Gender Studies Master's student from Utrecht University in the Netherlands. I am visiting Abahlali baseMjondolo in March of 2023 to introduce myself to the movement and build relationships so that I can do future research with the community.

Right now, I am working on the thesis for my Master's and it is about the future of Abahlali. I am interested in how the movement plans for and works towards the future when so often the poor, and especially the Black poor, are written out of futures. By written out of futures I mean examples like government policies that aim to 'eradicate all shacks' and unfairly distributed resources which leave people in shacks with less than everyone else, meaning they cannot plan for the future the same way that others can. I am also aware that Abahlali's main struggle is to be treated with human dignity and recognised as human beings. I realise that when someone is not treated as a human being, this is also a way they are written out of the future. Despite being written out of multiple futures, Abahlali shows a radical commitment to the future with their (your) struggle such as farming projects, land occupation, talent shows, political schools and more. This is what my current thesis is about, the tension between Abahlali's investment in the future and those who write Abahlali out of the future. At the moment, I am using knowledge from Abahlali (like the website) and other researchers who have worked with Abahlali. I am not conducting my own research and will not be interviewing anyone or doing surveys etc. I am most interested in meeting people within the movement and attending events and meetings to learn about how Abahlali organises their communities and daily life.

In the future, I would like to do my PhD. I will be applying for PhD positions from 2024. For my PhD, I would like to work with Abahlali on research which benefits the movement. It is my hope that from my visit in March 2023 I can get a better understanding of the issues faced by the movement and together we can find a research area which I can contribute to with my PhD. I am also invested in creating a research method which is in collaboration with Abahlali which honours Ubuhlalism and a communal way of life. I think this is a feminist way of researching and with Abahlali I want to propose a new method of doing research that is not based on colonial traditions.

If you want to contact me about anything, you can find me at

Cell: 082 674 1378
WhatsApp: +31 633 44 7295
Email: h.m.aadnesgaard@students.uu.nl

If you have any comments or complaints about my visit and the work I am doing you can also talk to my supervisor, Dr Mikki Stelder.

Email: m.l.stelder@uu.nl

*Figure 4. This is the handout I gave to people I met during my visit with Abahlali in March, 2023.*

In the future, I will ensure I also have isiZulu and isiXhosa translations of my work to make it more accessible.[22] Further, I am still figuring out how to do research in a more accessible way, one that uses less jargon and inaccessible theoretical engagements.

[22] In my childhood, I was fluent in isiZulu, however that is no longer the case. I am a speaker of isiZulu and isiXhosa but not at a level of proficiency that would allow me to explain my research in them. Thus, to ensure future interlocuters understand my work, I plan to have isiZulu and isiXhosa translations of similar handouts.

Part of approaching research as a service has led me to follow Tuck's (2009) recommendations that there should be a strengthening of community human research ethic guidelines. I have begun to outline and work collaboratively with Abahlali to create such a guideline for research with their communities. The project of co-creating these guidelines has been approved by Abahlali leadership and is ongoing. Further, future research should have a primary objective of locating and generating an ultimate benefit for AbM.

### 2.3.1 Hanging out with Abahlali

My time with Abahlali can broadly be described as hanging out. María Lugones (2003), an Argentine feminist philosopher and activist defines hangouts as:

> highly fluid, worldly, nonsanctioned, communicative, occupations of space, contestatory retreats for the passing of knowledge, for the tactical-strategic fashioning of multivocal sense, of enigmatic vocabularies and gestures, for the development of keen commentaries on structural pressures and gaps, spaces of complex and open ended recognition. Hangouts are spaces that cannot be kept captive by the private/public split. They are worldly, contestatory concrete spaces within geographies sieged by and in defiance of logics and structures of domination. (168)

Lugones shows how hangouts can be subversive uses of space and modes of encounter rich with resistance to dominant structures of oppression. The hangout opens up space for dismantling dichotomies of the researcher/researched and theory/practice divides and seeks to go beyond individualistic thinking-doing to a more relational perspective (161). As Lugones notes, hangouts nurture listening, learning, sharing, participation and multiple interpretations (161). Admittedly, I came to Lugones' theorising many months after my visit with Abahlali, but the generative commonalities and coalitions between my practice and her theorising remain. The non-coincidence of my practice and Lugones' theorisation shows how feminist approaches are often intuitive and exploratory, based on a collective (global) sense of what it means to live a feminist life. These feminist intuitions are woven through encounters even when we do not pause to explicitly name them feminist and so the lack of categorising something, someone or some doing-being as feminist should not erase its/their feminist influence and potential.

From the outset, my approach was to attempt to reduce any pressure put on AbM by traditional researcher-researched dynamics that demand communities give up their time and energy to accommodate researchers. Naturally, I cannot claim my presence did not draw on members' time or energy, but my intention was to limit this where possible. I contacted Abahlali and explained I had researched AbM for approximately nine months (via secondary sources) during my Master's and I would like to spend time

with them to learn more. I described my thesis project as being concerned with the politics of Ubuhlalism and how Abahlali invest in their futures against the backdrop of state repression and expressed a desire to find out about the research needs of AbM. Before I reached out to Abahlali, I contacted scholars worked previously with AbM. I asked these scholars for their personal reflections on my ethical considerations. Ethically, I was concerned with being yet another researcher engaging with AbM without having anything concrete to offer Abahlali in return. By contacting other scholars first, I attempted to get feedback on these questions without burdening AbM as I was open to possible feedback that discouraged in-person engagement.[23] Ultimately, I decided to pursue an in-person engagement with Abahlali and the organisation was welcoming of my presence.

I tried to fit into the daily life of the organisation without making my own demands. I did not request interviews or tours of settlements and instead asked if I could join any meetings or excursions that were already happening and I would be welcome at. I kept digital and material journals of my interactions, personal reflections and recorded written notes of meetings I was invited to. I did not record any audio and only took photos of the walls in their offices and administrative documents, such as membership forms, with permission. However, as part of my time with Abahlali, Mohapi and other members of AbM requested I take photographs and videos of movement activities for their own records (partially because my smartphone had a good camera) and shared these files with them.

My aim was to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of Abahlali's world-making practices and living politics through spending time with AbM. I also hoped to get a richer sense of Ubuhlalism to inform my own situated feminist research praxis. My time with Abahlali did not need interviews to achieve this and so I threw myself into hanging out. I spent most of my time in Abahlali's offices, either attending meetings or working on this thesis project in the boardroom and administration office. On my first day, I visited the eNkanini settlement with Mohapi as he was facilitating interviews with residents and Canadian journalists about the uses/issues of water in the settlement. Later that day, we visited eKhenana settlement during a solidarity tour for groundWork, a non-profit environmental justice service and developmental organization that also produces news. Another day, I visited the Pietermaritzburg Magistrates Court to sit-

[23] Two academics replied and engaged with me, namely, Rajendra Chetty and Richard Pithouse. Chetty was enthusiastic over email and did not express any reservations for my thesis project, Pithouse echoed the same. Pithouse and I spoke at length over videocall to discuss his previous work with AbM and my reservations.

in on one of Abahlali's cases and the following week I attended the two-day Asivikelane workshop (*Asivikelane* means let's protect one another in isiZulu). Over time, I was able to contribute to AbM through some of my skills and social connections. Namely, designing posters for their events (because of my background working in advertising), publishing media articles and acquiring maps and land-owner information for ongoing court proceedings (because my mother is in property).[24] I am still engaging digitally with Abahlali and assisting with their requests, while also double-checking information and permissions.

My praxis and explanation thereof is/was, of course, imperfect. In their theorisations on refusing research, Tuck and Yang (2013) do not address the expectations of those being researched. When some groups are "overstudied Others" (223) the perpetual stream of researchers can mean members become well-versed in the rhythms of research and expect certain modes of encounter such as the interview, survey and workshop. Indeed, during my time with Abahlali I was given unrequested opportunities to ask informal settlement residents questions and there was an expectation I was to perform some sort of interview function. I was also offered these encounters as opportunities to take photographs, which I declined. The awkwardness of not wanting to perform traditional research, while also not disappointing the expectations of potential interlocutors who had made themselves available to me becomes generative in this regard and points to the messiness of refusing research and the specificity of each encounter where there cannot be a generalised script. I have reflected on this further in subsection 2.3.3 Reflexivity.

### 2.3.2 Reflexivity

Using my experience with Abahlali, both in-person and engaging with their counter-archive, I have attempted to use Ubuhlalism as an entry-point to a situated feminist research praxis. My understanding of Ubuhlalism is that of an outsider and I look forward to being corrected by Abahlali in my theorisations of it. To meaningfully situate myself in my praxis, I will start with a vignette of my encounters with Abahlali and reflect on these.

[24] I have also created guides for the work I have done so that, should AbM no longer wish to use my skills, these can still be fostered within AbM.

> Sweat dampens the pages of *Black Skin, White Masks* as I sit reading in the offices of Abahlali baseMjondolo. I am waiting. Waiting for something to happen, for someone to call me, for anything. I am not good at waiting yet, but I will practice it during meetings that seem to last forever in the sweltering Durban heat, at workshops in network dead zones where my phone and laptop are reduced to aesthetic accessories, sitting outside a courtroom anxiously searching for red shirts and faces I know.
>
> I wait stinking of whiteness. People switch from isiZulu to English when they notice me waiting in the corner. Their gesture of respect makes my skin burn. I desperately claw at the Zulu native to my childhood, but my tongue is out of rhythm. My parents own land. A lot of it. My larger family owns even more. This is a new way of 'coming out' for me. I do it again and again.
>
> There is no schedule. No plan. No guideline. I wait and I hope. My waiting pays off. I am upgraded from the administrative office to the boardroom. I play musical chairs. More waiting but also now doing. I've found ways to be useful.
>
> I am corrected. Corrected on my Zulu, corrected on my error of not greeting everyone present. Corrected on my assumptions that other people's conversations about *umlungu*, isiZulu for white person, are about me. Corrected that I am not a viewer but a participant. As a participant, I am offered food. For my body and my research.

Abahlali assert AbM is not about race and I will flesh this out in Chapter 2. Despite this assertion, I have been unable to ignore my whiteness. Sarah Ahmed (2007) approaches whiteness as an orientation because whiteness notices the arrival of some bodies over others and is thus directed towards some subjects more than others, while occupying a particular time and space. Ahmed points out how whiteness also gains its power from going unnoticed as it often assumes the default position. Thus, I would like to take notice of my own whiteness without centring it. Viewing my whiteness as a smell wafting off of me has generativity because it is something I cannot hide and there is an unavoidable sense of shame. Without dwelling on my whiteness too much, and thereby centring it, its stench is no doubt apparent, intangible yet sensorial.

Despite my smelliness, my mistakes and misconceptions, I experienced overwhelming communal grace (van Stam 2019). Through this grace, I was able to get a glimpse of what radical participation may look like, one that includes the researcher as a participant. Being a fly on the wall, although intended to be a mode of non-disruption, does not align with Ubuntu. To understand Ubuhlalism is to live Ubuhlalism, that is why it is a *living* politics and *Living* Learning—they must be undertaken to be understood. To be able to conduct Ubuhlalist research would mean to become well-versed in the skills of radical participation, communal decision-making and listening. Thus, the first step of Ubuhlalism as a situated feminist research praxis is to learn how to be in community. Only then does the possibility for Ubuhlalist research emerge. Realising Ubuhlalism is of course not guaranteed and so a future research project would benefit from prioritising embodying Ubuhlalism, and only stay open to the potential of practicing it through further research.

Abahlali emphasise how everyone should help *in their own way* (Mohapi 2023a). Their emphasis on solidarity is also to avoid spectatorship, their struggle is a struggle for all. From this I wonder what ways an academic can contribute to AbM *in their own way* outside of conducting research on topics that are requested by Abahlali. I see possibilities for academic skills to benefit those within AbM who are undertaking university courses and may benefit from help with applications, essays and proposals. This is not to say shack-dwellers do not have the capacity to carry out these activities themselves, rather these are skills a researcher may directly be able to pass on to a community who are often first-generation students.

Is the hangout still research? If traditional research barely obscures its colonial undertones, then what generativity can be found in avoiding research? If Ubuhlalism is about a communal orientation, then how can one attempt to use Ubuhlalism as an entry-point into research, a too-often individual pursuit? When my praxis involves hanging out, showing up and helping, I am not convinced this should fall under the banner of research. These activities within my praxis may benefit from refusing the categorisation of research that can be limiting and anti-participatory. Feminist Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Gatenby and Humphries 2000) has worthwhile commitments to liberationist movements; honouring the lived experience and knowledge of participants; genuine collaboration; and staying true to the political implications of knowledge production. As do autoethnographic approaches in that they remain humane, emotional, empathetic, therapeutic and personally/socially conscious (Jain 2017). Further, John Talmage (2012) also has relevant notions of active listening that consider the material context where participants feel the most comfortable as well as the social context. However, I am still troubled by the coloniality of

research as a category and wonder if one of the possibilities of destabilising this activity is to avoid it. Further, the abovementioned methods do not capture the praxis of being implicated in the work as Abahlali are/have inviting/invited me to be and instead tend to entrench the researcher/researched divide.

Avoiding traditional research is troubling. In my own experience with Abahlali, there was significant embodied affect when attempting to avoid research methods such as the interview. No doubt also linked to my positionality as a settler colonial body, there is high vulnerability in entering into relationships and encounters where I had no control. As mentioned prior, coming to Abahlali as a researcher also meant I was expected to conduct typical research activities. Declining these opportunities produced anxiety because I did not want to reject what was being offered. Despite Abahlali's desensitivity to these activities, I could not escape the relationships between photography and spectacle and recording and interviews, and so I refused. However, members of Abahlali recorded multiple encounters themselves. Thus, my own anxieties about these activities also deserves further examination and points to a misconception that these activities have irredeemable qualities. I wonder what my refusals actually achieve when Abahlali expect this of me as a researcher participating in their activities? Possibly, I am over-correcting in these encounters when I seek to avoid these typical activities (photography and video recording), and projecting power dynamics onto Abahlali who do not experience the researcher-researched dynamic as such.

The sharing of meals was a critical encounter. Meals I refused due to being a vegetarian reinstated my position as an outsider; meals I avoided because I did not want to take resources away from others were imposed upon me—someone would bring a plate and instruct me to eat. Here I felt reminded that non-participation can be a form of pity and pity is refused in Abahlali (something I will expand on in Chapter 4). I am drawn to thinking about Ubuhlalism as a form of sharing food because it has implications for togetherness, making and enjoying. Eating must also be undertaken multiple times a day, requires time and gives sustenance.

## 2.4 Conclusion

This thesis is concerned with investigating the world-making practices of Abahlali and how their living politics insists on a futurity that resists public and academic discourse that relegates them to the status of

less-than-human, *living dead* and poor in mind. To embark upon these questions, I use Ubuhlalism, as practiced by AbM, as an entry-point to a situated feminist research praxis. In this chapter, I have outlined some of the issues I locate in research, such as the prevailing myths about research as production of new knowledge and the associated implications of academic economies of knowledge; research as improving the human condition yet being extractive and complicit in oppression; and research as sharing knowledge yet remaining problematically individualistic. To counteract some of these issues I turn instead to knowledge cultivation that requires a mode of relation centred on unlearning, listening and coming into community (Shilliam 2015, cited in Sheik 2022). I also employ refusal in my praxis, whereby I refuse traditional subject-object dynamics in research, propagating pain narratives, the spectacularising of the researched and traditional research methodology (Tuck 2009; Tuck and Yang 2013). To avoid reproducing pain narratives, I have stayed close to Abahlali's own account of themselves that recognises the presence of the living-dead. Leaning heavily on their counter-archive, I mirror the narratives from within AbM with a desire-centred approach. Remaining vigilant of my position as an outsider, I have not made claims about any knowledge not substantiated by Abahlali themselves. Part of Ubuhlalism as research praxis is to enter into the communal worldview of Ubuntu and Ubuhlalism. To attempt this perspective, I have investigated Abahlali's living politics that insists on thinking that is situated within the concerns, experiences and dialogues of a community.

I have taken Abahlali's intellectualism seriously through sustained attention to their own knowledges, such as *Living Learning* and their counter-archive. Within AbM's knowledge system, I have highlighted their values of sharing gained knowledge with the community who mandated it. Resisting the internalisation of the criminalisation of poverty, Abahlali insists they are experts on themselves. I have also briefly investigated AbM's history and engagement with scholars and researchers, drawing attention to issues of accessibility when academics use terms that do not relate to AbM's own narratives. The idiom of AbM is broad and complex, and I have investigated the limited list of (un)freedom, leadership, education and the university. Here I have shown how Abahlali reject the notion they experience freedom and instead categorise their experience as unfreedom. Leadership in Ubuhlalism is a mode of listening and education is a result of lived experience and not academic accreditation. The University of AbM is a political statement and material praxis that honours the intellectualism of the poor, requires continual communal learning and is aligned to the mission of agency-building. Listening is a core component of Ubuhlalism and future research should be done, possibly alongside the needs of Abahlali or at their bequest, that investigates the

power and mode of listening in Ubuhlalism and how it functions within the community as well as between the researcher-as-community and community.

The relational worldview of Ubuhlalism requires radical participation in communal life, which includes the researcher as participant. To achieve this participation, a researcher (like myself) is in debt to communal grace (van Stam 2019). Further, radical participation is practiced by Abahlali through mass, sometimes informal, democratic processes that require cooperation, accountability, mutual learning and time. In this communally-orientated approach, I also argue for situated research to be a mode of service to a community, through participation and conducting research on needs requested by that community.

I also explained how my praxis during in-person engagement consisted mainly of hanging out with Abahlali and the political implications/potentials and personal intentions of this mode (Lugones 2003). I outlined my engagement with AbM, including my interactions with other scholars and AbM itself while also highlighting some of the issues I faced in avoiding research when this did not align with my interlocuters' expectations. Part of my praxis is accountability and reflexivity and I have attempted to give insight into my own positionality as a white outsider-come-participant without dwelling on it too much. In my reflections I have also meditated on the role of the researcher in helping *in their own way* (Mohapi 2023a) and troubled the notion and premise of research, unsure whether this category belongs in an Ubuhlalist praxis.

In this chapter, I have argued for a situated feminist (research) praxis that engages Abahlali on their own terms, using Ubuhlalism as an entry-point. The success of this can only be determined by Abahlali themselves and I can only take our ongoing relationship as encouragement that in some ways, I am walking their/our paths of desire.

# 3. Living (Dead) Futures

When you live in a shack in this country…

Your life does not count as a human life.

—Abahlali baseMjondolo

Who counts as a human, and to whom, is heavily contested for shack-dwellers in South Africa. For Abahlali, the matter of their humanity is not an abstract issue. Throughout AbM's history they have emphasised the importance of their right to, and struggle for, dignity and to be recognised as human beings. Humanness is key to understanding the power relations in South Africa because we can see those who are deemed human are protected more than those who are not. In this chapter, I will address the criminalisation of poverty in South Africa, a critical issue for Abahlali (Mohapi 2023a; Figlan et al. 2009). AbM engage in multiple and varied world-making practices that insist on their humanity, dignity, political agency and intellectualism. These practices are rehearsals of and for the future, they are AbM's futurity. However, the state and elite continue to oppress the poor, working towards inhibiting and diminishing Abahlali's alternate versions of the future. I will explore how AbM are received in South Africa and the theoretical frameworks that propose to understand the country's socio-political context and how these frameworks are limiting.

I will begin by highlighting how Achille Mbembe's (2003, 2019) necropolitics has been taken up by various scholars, particularly the categorisation of *living dead*, to emphasise how these frameworks obscure the lived realities of groups they are ascribed to (see Chakraborty 2021; Varga et al. 2023; Quinan and Thiele 2020; Mavengano and Nkamta 2022; Estévez 2014; Puar 2017). Thereafter, I will ground Mbembe's (2003, 2019) theorisation of necropolitics in biopolitics (Foucault 2003), racialisation and social death (Patterson 1982). I will expand on the ways necropower relies on and reproduces racialisation, dehumanisation and the criminalisation of poverty; territorialisation; and infrastructural warfare. Using Abahlali's treatment by the state and elite to work through these concepts, I will show how theoretical frameworks that categorise shack-dwellers as disposable, *living dead*, socially dead and sub-human fail in encompassing Abahlali's radical world-making practices such as self-connections and rebuilding as resistance. This critique will also be in dialogue with (mostly) feminist interventions.

Aligned to my situated feminist research praxis, I stay close to Abahlali's own conception of themselves and their relationship with the state and elite through AbM's counter-archive. I also attempt to listen closely to Abahlali's narratives and show how these insist on alternate futurities to those of the state and elite. While chronicling the state and elite's abuses, I aim to use a desire-centred approach whereby Ubuhlalism demands a recognition of the living-dead, one that attempts to avoid academic propagation of pain narratives (Tuck 2009; Tuck and Yang 2013).[25]

## 3.1 The Living (Dead)

In seeking to understand modern power formations, Mbembe (2003, 2019) theorises necropolitics, the political systems of governance that shape, produce and regulate death. Mbembe shows how in contemporary times, many states and actors use violence and the threat of violence to maintain control. Mbembe calls this form of power, necropower. In these systems of governance, which are not solely state-run, necropower normalises the right to kill. To do this, necropower continually refers to, appeals to and reproduces the state of exception, state of emergency and fantasy of enmity. Mbembe calls necropolitical systems that have become highly efficient in the killing and maiming of certain bodies (both physically and socially) *death-worlds* (2003; Quinan and Thiele 2020). In these *death-worlds*, whole populations have had "[conferred] upon them the status of *living dead*" (Mbembe 2003, 40). The *living dead* is a term that signifies these groups' close proximity to death, both socially and materially.

Although Mbembe only uses the term *living dead* once in his 2003 paper (40) and once again in his 2019 book (92), the term has been picked up by other scholars (see Chakraborty 2021; Varga et al. 2023; Quinan and Thiele 2020; Mavengano and Nkamta 2022; Estévez 2014; Puar 2017).[26] The quote that houses the term, "conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (Mbembe 2003, 40), is featured in 599 results on Google Scholar, only two are Mbembe's original works. I am curious how the concept of necropolitics has become inextricable from the category of *living dead* and how narratives reproduce this term when writing

[25] As previously mentioned, Mawere and Mubaya (2016) note the Ubuntu practice of recognising the dead as part of life and denote this category as living-dead. This is not the same as Mbembe's category of *living dead*. To make these categories distinct and discrete, I use Ubuhlalist notions as living-dead (with a hyphen, non-italicised) and Mbembe's category as *living dead* (no hyphen, italicised).

[26] The chapter in which he uses *living dead* is a republication of his former essay.

about those most vulnerable within necropolitical systems. *Living dead* indicates a paradoxical category whereby those who are attributed this status are both simultaneously living and dead. However, the juxtaposition of living and dead, in that order, places an emphasis on dead. Although the term is meant to critique the necropolitical system that normalises these modes of oppression, I argue that by using this term, scholars are theorising subjects' proximity to death as having already arrived. Thus, this theoretical framework becomes complicit in those very same systems they seek to analyse. *Living dead* conjures imaginaries of constantly dying populations. These groups become characterised within an ongoing cycle of death, denying their futurity. How much living can a dead body do? The status of *living dead* erases the heterogeneity of these populations and works to invisiblize daily acts of resistance through reducing marginalised groups to their marginalisation. Theoretical frameworks that homogenise the experiences of these groups become complicit in erasing agency and autonomy from these subject positions. Although not all theory participates in this essentialization, many theories do, and the prolific use of the term to describe oppressed groups is unsettling.

In addition, when groups like Abahlali participate in their own theorisation, like that of Living Learning and living politics, yet the state and elite diminish AbM to mere service delivery protests, we can see a similar configuration of essentialisation. Indeed, Figlan et al. (2009) recognise that due to the constant undermining of their own Living Learning and living politics, these knowledges and practices must be a threat to these state and elite actors (26, 45, 47). Abahlali insist on a more nuanced view of AbM, one that incorporates their own idiom. Thus, (academic) theoretical frameworks that reduce Abahlali's subject position to *living dead* have problematic similarities with the crude reductionist narratives of the state and elite. The state and elite diminish AbM to mere service delivery protests, erasing Abahlali's assertion that AbM is about recognising human dignity. Therefore, when the category of *living dead* reduces Abahlali to their marginalisation, this is all too similar to the motives of and denigration by the state/elite.

Despite the problematic use of *living dead*, necropolitics does provide insight into the processes that shape Abahlali's status and reception in South Africa. To elucidate these insights, I will now outline the context necropolitics is theorised from.

### 3.1.1 Biopower and Blackness

Necropolitics coined by Mbembe (2003, 2019) and biopolitics by Michel Foucault (2003) have both become widely used, canonical frameworks to describe and analyse various power formations. Power is a form of relationality that is both productive and oppressive, and this (re)productive function is what Foucault calls biopower (2003).[27] In Europe, during the late 18th century, a new form of power emerged that penetrated, and became embedded into, existing disciplinary technologies: biopower. Disciplinary power, according to Foucault, is power that is a regulatory form of power that uses normalisation to control bodies. Biopower exerts control through biopolitics, the management and administration of "[humans]-as-species" to promote (re)production and consumption (Foucault 2003, 243). Simply, biopower is how bodies are made to live. The regulatory mechanisms of biopolitics control populations by increasing/decreasing births and deaths, producing non-disabled citizens as well as promoting longevity for a select few. Part of how biopower functions, similarly to disciplinary power, is through its classifications of bodies into categories. This administration can be clearly seen in constructs such as race, dis/ability and gender. These categories are then used to administer biopolitical functions that are life- or death-affirming.

Alexander Weheliye (2014), following the work of Black feminists theorists such as Hortense Spillers (1987) and Sylvia Wynter, makes critical interventions into the biopolitics and necropolitics debate. He highlights the paradox of the homo sacer (a figure ascribed bare/naked life), which Giorgio Agamben categorises as sub-human. He also shows how this is the subject position most stripped of humanity yet at the same time the most central figure of bio/necropolitics—the subject position that the system most relies on to function. Weheliye critique's Agamben's notion of bare life and asks:

> If bare life embodies a potential dimension of contemporary politics as such … then, why [are] certain subjects … structurally more susceptible to personifying its actualization … especially considering that most instantiations of bare life do not necessarily entail physical mortality per se but other forms of political death. (2014, 35)

Here, he signals the importance of what he calls racializing assemblages and decentres European imaginaries that focus on the Nazi concentration camp as *the* point of departure for discourse on modern power and terror. Instead he considers what potentials come from theorising from alternate histories such

[27] I use (re)productive to signify production's inextricable relation to reproduction, as well as to make reference to the long invisiblized social reproductive care/labour (Bhattacharya and Vogel 2017).

as racial slavery and the Middle Passage.[28] Weheliye posits "a thick historical relation" between colonial practises and the Holocaust (2014, 36). Weheliye (2014) also criticises Foucault's lack of attention to racism and racializing assemblages as constituting forces of modern life and power formations—outside of Foucault's lectures in *Society Must Be Defended* (1975-76).

In one of his *Society Must Be Defended* lectures, Foucault (2003) questions how disciplinary power and biopower, so concerned with making live, function in relation to death. Here, he argues is where racism comes into play. Foucault posits the argument of racism to be similar to that of war: the other must die for the self to live because they represent a biological threat, often to the so-called 'purity' of whiteness. He states how racism "is the pre-condition for exercising the right to kill" (Foucault 2003, 256). Indeed, shack-dwellers are criminalised/racialised in particular ways that categorise their lives as disposable, shack-dwellers must die in order for the other to live.

Biopower also alters the temporality of power whereby it no longer functions as an event and is evident in patterns that can be identified over time. Biopower is not discrete to disciplinary power and instead has areas of overlap and happens at the same time. Bodies are made to incorporate and perform biopower and disciplinary power themselves, ultimately with the aims of health and longevity so that certain subjects stay alive—in order to work and participate in (re)production and consumption.[29] Thus, biopolitics explains specific strategies and mechanisms of how biopower is implemented and bodies are governed, thereby approaching human *populations* as a scientific and political project. The project of population-as-species (Foucault 2003) is evident in the South African Apartheid regime where in the 20th century, bodies were controlled through their classification into racial groups and their administration differed along these lines.[30] Biopower is inherently racialised. The population of South Africa was separated into discrete racial categories that were used as reasoning to provide or limit access to rights and life.

[28] Weheliye's definition of racializing assemblages is that the idea "construes race not as a biological or cultural classification but as a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans" (2014, 4).

[29] Health is a political term in that is contested. The scope of this thesis does not allow for a critical interrogation into health and healthiness and instead uses these terms for the sake of clarity and not to conform nor agree with such conceptions of the ideal, ableist body.

[30] To be clear, Apartheid reasoning deemed race to be a biological classification, and these views do not reflect my own.

Today, informal settlements like Abahlali's represent a threat to biopower through their unregulated expansions and autonomous planning; they refuse biopolitical control.

When biopower functions spatially, in that the layouts of cities, towns, buildings and homes become regulatory techniques and architecture produces the subject it claims to house (Foucault 2003; Preciado 2017), this begs the question of what subject is produced by the informal settlement? Abahlali use the confines of the informal settlement to build, and come into, community as "shacks are homes to millions of people in this country. […] This is where people fall in love, raise children, find ways to make a living and just live their lives" (Mohapi 2023b). However, in popular discourse, informal settlements are described as spaces of lawlessness, disorder and abject poverty. As Paula Meth (2016) notes, "[shack] settlements are often criminalized spaces, and their residents often criminalized by association. By definition, most are or were illegal in both the occupation of land and the formation of non-standard structures" (407). The state and elite use this popular discourse to dehumanise the shack-dweller, blaming the poor for the circumstances that they live in. An AbM representative states how the African National Congress (ANC), South Africa's ruling party since they won the first democratic elections in 1994, presents itself in parliament and the media as proactive about land reform "while violently evicting black people in the cities, like the apartheid government did. They do not recognise our humanity. We are treated like animals" (2018a quoted in Chetty 2019, 200). This statement shows how the poor body is articulated as sub-human (animals) by the state.

Blackness in South Africa, and in the quote above, is both a racial category and a political one. Politically, Blackness refers to those who cannot conform to whiteness and recognises that, for example, Indian and Coloured people are fighting the same fight as Black people when it comes to dismantling white domination. I believe this political Blackness is what Abahlali refers to when making statements about Black people as AbM is not a racially Black movement and instead posits their movement is for all, regardless of racial classification.[31]

In South Africa, the government, South African National Defence Force (SANDF) and police force have Black leaders and their members are predominantly Black, as is the majority of the population (The Department of Labour 2021). The majority of Abahlali are also Black. Therefore, the social and political

[31] To denote the difference between politically Black and Black as a racial category I will use politically Black and Black respectively.

exclusion and state violence experienced by poor, Black shack-dwellers cannot be explained merely by traditional racial divides of Black/white, nor Apartheid's legacy where white rulers subjugated non-white residents. Poor people who live in shacks, the majority are Black, are differentially racialised to non-poor Black people. However, this is not to make the case for income or class to precede race as an assemblage (Puar 2012; Weheliye 2014). Poverty is indeed racialised. Due to South Africa's history of colonisation and Apartheid, and the Black consciousness movement at the time (that referred to political Blackness), Steve Biko said "the poor have always been black" (2005/1978, 91).[32] Racially and politically, this remains true today. However, the ruling class is no longer the white coloniser or settler, but now the Black elite (Chetty 2019). Thus, AbM troubles traditional notions of racialisation where the Black poor are being subjugated by the Black state and elite, pointing towards the differentiated racialisation of the Black poor in the South African context.

In his acceptance speech after receiving the Per Anger Prize, Zikode (2021b) refers to AbM as "a movement of the poor, of people living in shacks. … the majority are women. Membership and leadership are open to all without regard to ethnicity or national origin" (Zikode 2021a). AbM has a women majority not only because Abahlali centre women in their politics, but also because many households in informal settlements comprise only of women (and children). In Zikode's statement, there is no mention of Blackness and he makes clear that AbM does not exclude along racial or nationalist lines. This emphasis can be seen throughout Abahlali's counter-archive and more generally across their activism. However, racialisation continues to be a significant issue in South African society. Colloquial terms like Black diamond, denoting the Black middle-class (Ballard 2015), simultaneously show rejection of the co-constitution of race and class, while also highlighting the very same assumptions—because the diamond must be named as Black, and the Black person must be articulated as a diamond.[33] South Africa also has many residents who are not South African. Among other reasons, citizens from neighbouring countries come to South Africa for work and a better life. These im/migrants do so legally and illegally, both are commonplace. These im/migrants are also predominantly Black, however they are differentiated along lines of citizenship and tribal affiliation. As representatives of the poor, Abahlali do not discriminate along nationalist lines and anyone who meets the requirements of their movement may join, including il/legal

[32] Biko is one of Abahlali's intellectual inspirations and was an Apartheid freedom fighter.

[33] Although not initially intended to be so, Black diamond is now a pejorative term.

im/migrants. Informal settlements similarly are made up of South Africans and im/migrants alike, with some settlements being more inclusive/exclusive than others.

"Fight poverty, not the poor" is a rallying cry for AbM (Mohapi 2023b). To honour AbM's self-conception, this thesis will refer to Abahlali as the poor and not the Black poor (the subject-position I have used in previous work). AbM's leaders have explained to me that although my understanding of the racialisation of poverty, something they refer to as the "criminalisation of poverty", is accurate, AbM is committed to not excluding the poor who are white or Indian, nor current and potential allies who are white (Mohapi 2023a).[34] Despite this, my argument about the criminalisation/racialisation of poverty should not erase the Blackness (political and racial) of AbM. To be clear, race/racism is still happening, but it is not a primary concern or focus of AbM.[35]

The state and elite further criminalise poverty by blaming the poor for being poor. The poor receive constant messages about their worthlessness and laziness (Smith 2008 in Chetty 2019, 200). The squalor they are often forced to live in, due to withholding of services, is used to naturalize their designation as sub-human. Common narratives include suggestions that shack-dwellers must 'go home' due to a social imagination where shack-dwellers have rural farms they can return to, further exemplifying their status as perpetual outsiders.[36] However, some families have lived in the same settlement for generations and others have nowhere else to live.

### 3.1.2 Social Death and Necropolitics

"Social death", a term used by Orlando Patterson (1982) to describe the condition of the enslaved, articulates the disposable, sub-human status of the racialised other. Although the criminalisation/racialisation of poverty should not be confused with racial slavery, the term is useful for understanding the multiple ways of dying that go beyond the physical death of a person. Subjects can be

[34] The Coloured subject position was not mentioned in our discussions but this is most likely because we were in Kwa-Zulu Natal, where there is not a big Coloured community.

[35] I use race as something that happens to signify racialisation as a set of processes and not a biological fact.

[36] There is a commonly held misconception in South Africa that shack-dwellers have rural land which they can return to after being rejected from the city. In actuality, their evictions simply lead to homelessness.

relegated to other types of death such as being stripped of rights, denied citizenship and dehumanized. Social death is the denial of political subjectivity, humanity and individuality. These formations can be seen in the subjection of the poor in South Africa who are seen as ontologically poor, "a mindless, instinctual, antisocial mass, a formless 'sack of potatoes' incapable of acting as social individuals" (Gibson 2008, 700). Indeed, in South Africa, "things that can no longer be publicly said about black people can be said about the poor" (Pithouse, 2008 quoted in Gibson 2008, 703). The prejudicial views about Black and Brown people under Apartheid are no longer socially acceptable under our new "rainbow nation" democracy, a term popularised by Archbishop Desmond Tutu when proposing a non-racial post-Apartheid South Africa. However, these same views have merely been displaced and applied to the poor—and are now acceptable.

Building on Foucault (2003) and Agamben, Mbembe argues that biopower is *not* "sufficient to account for the contemporary ways in which the political … makes the murder of the enemy its primary and absolute objective" (2003, 12). Biopower is primarily preoccupied with life and making live, therefore, Mbembe (2003, 2019) seeks to complicate this thinking with renewed recognition of modern power's role in death and dying, both materially and immaterially.

Mbembe draws on biopower and its relation to sovereignty and the state of exception, using Agamben's example of the Nazi concentration camp as the ultimate *bare life*, noting how the rule of law is not merely temporally suspended but rather how the spatiality of the camp makes this alternate state of law permanent (Agamben 1995 cited in Mbembe 2003). Mbembe states that in the colony and under Apartheid the "the most original feature of this terror formation is its concatenation of biopower, the state of exception, and the state of siege. Crucial to this concatenation is, once again, race" (2003, 22). Mbembe agrees with Foucault (2003) and Weheliye (2014) that racialisation is what allows necropower to regulate and distribute death. Necropower dehumanises groups through racialisation. As these groups are deemed less-than-human, the necropolitical system treats them as disposable.

The South African state and elite categorise shack-dwellers as sub-human through various strategies such as subjecting them to dehumanising conditions and exposing them to death. This dehumanisation allows the structural and direct violence against the poor to be unremarkable to the elite and these "[lives do] not count in the eyes of the state" (AbM 2022). Twenty-four members of Abahlali have been murdered by the state and elite during their struggle and countless lives are lost every year due to fires, illness and dangerous living conditions in informal settlements. Of these twenty-four murders, justice has only been reached for one comrade (Suttner 2022). Fourteen were political assassinations by state

representatives like ward councillors who saw Abahlali's organisation outside of formal politics and vocal critique of government officials as a threat. The other ten deaths are attributed to police and private militia violence, such as dying while in custody, or deaths during evictions. These deaths usually do not make headlines nor leading stories outside of the country's left-wing news producers, namely, the *Daily Maverick* or the now defunct *New Frame* (see Mafolo 2021; Ward 2022; Sikhakhane 2021). When these acts of direct, personal violence go largely unaddressed in the media, this further entrenches AbM's social position of sub-human. They are erased specifically as citizens and more generally as human. There are countless other instances of violence, from being illegally detained and imprisoned on bogus charges, to activists being denied healthcare while in police custody (Pikoli 2022).

Not only are Abahlali's symbolic futures denied by the state and elite, but the high possibility of death and injury mean any future is not guaranteed. Indeed, Abahlali's elected president Zikode remarks, "when you are in the space of social justice, you don't really expect any compensation, remuneration or any sort of prize. … and the only prize that [seems] feasible for the struggle [is] death" Zikode (quoted in Sikhakhane 2021). Considering Zikode's statement and Abahlali's rallying cry of *umhlaba noma ukufa* (land or death), death emerges as a particular resistance strategy that has symbolic and material consequences. Symbolically, when Abahlali state the only alternative to not reaching their goals is death, they are highlighting the importance of their cause because without it, life is not worth living. Similarly, when Zikode sees the reward of his/their work as ultimately resulting in death, he is referring to the material realities of being targeted by the state and elite who see his/their life/lives as disposable. Although Abahlali's deaths largely go uncounted by the state and elite, local and international solidarity networks (and Abahlali themselves) use these deaths to create awareness and support for AbM's struggle. When members accept death as a possible (and probable) outcome, they are not only dedicating their lives to the cause, but are also asserting their own agency in death and dying. Death is no longer something Abahlali are subjected to by the state and elite, but a sacrifice Abahlali make of their own will.

One of the state's calculated tactics to disparage Abahlali is through the unwarranted arrests of Abahlali in their homes, during protests and when collecting witness statements, a clear disregard for their civil rights (Masiangoako 2022, 89). These are strategic actions that serve to intimidate Abahlali and flex the inflated authority the South African Police Service (SAPS) operates under. These arrests often result in prolonged spells in jail and denied bail. Many charges are eventually dropped, either by SAPS themselves or forced by the courts who find the state witnesses to be unreliable and state evidence to be fabricated.

Nevertheless, members continue to experience unrelenting harassment by SAPS. The possibility of arrest within Abahlali is high, adding to the stresses and fears of shack living, discouraging new and ongoing members' participation, and discrediting AbM as a whole. As SERI notes, "such arrests divert much-needed energy and resources away from the work that Abahlali does and they place a great deal of strain on those arrested, their loved ones and the movement" (Masiangoako 2022, 89). Here the criminalisation of poverty becomes especially visible when the poor are seen as de facto criminals and their civil rights are erased in favour of state authority. In the informal settlement, the public/private divide is collapsed and so SAPS do not perceive shacks as private homes and do not deem warrants necessary. Intelligence officers harass Abahlali activists who are routinely arrested, brought in for questioning and followed—they are treated like a criminal organisation. Other repression tactics used by the state include: mass arrests of peaceful protesters, assaulting members while in police custody, police beatings, and settlement entrances blocked by police using rubber bullets, stun grenades, teargas and live ammunition. SAPS has also occupied settlements with helicopters and armoured vehicles, raiding residents' homes and assaulting them within.

Shack-dwellers in South Africa face relentless evictions, police violence, bull-dozing, arson attacks, poor (and often withheld) service delivery and withheld emergency services—to name a few (see eNCA 2018). Lindokuhle Mnguni, chairperson of the eKhenana AbM branch, reported seven attempted evictions and demolitions in 2020's Covid-19 pandemic, three were successful (quoted in Majola 2020). This was despite the fact that a moratorium on evictions was ordered by the Disaster Management Act Regulations (No. 57 of 2002) that same year (Ndhlovu 2022). Evictions are brutal, leaving many people injured and their homes decimated. The emotional toll of those who face evictions is also a considerable result as they often feel powerless, humiliated and in despair (Ndhlovu 2022, 29). Shack-dwellers' homes are treated as disposable and the associated violence (physical, social, political and emotional) is seen as an acceptable measures of force.

As Abahlali's president, Zikode has been continuously harassed by police, arrested on bogus charges, assaulted in custody, had his home burnt down, and gone into hiding multiple times (see Sikhakhane 2021). Although these examples show a specific individual's experience, not only is Zikode a representative of Abahlali but his experiences are representative to a large degree—the poor are treated as disposable.

The state is not the only aggressor in evictions and intimidation as private actors have taken up this role too. Indeed, when discussing contemporary African states, Mbembe comments how states are no

longer the sole dispensers of violence and coercion for, among others, "private security firms, and state armies all claim the right to exercise violence or to kill" (2003, 32). Johannesburg's 'Red Ants' (known for their red regalia) are a private security firm that assist the Johannesburg Metro Police Department (JMPD) with evictions (see Bornman and Nyoka 2020).[37] They are led by armed commanders and use tools such as sticks and crowbars. Hundreds of Red Ants will be unleashed onto a single settlement, leaving disaster in their wake. In these raids the JMPD, who collaborate with the Red Ants, also use rubber bullets (and sometimes live ammunition) on shack-dwellers, inflicting severe wounds and injuries. Residents are shot at close range, often while inside their houses and medical attention is refused. Their homes are demolished, with the building materials confiscated, and residents also face arrest.

### 3.1.3 The Spatiality and Infrastructure of Informal Settlements

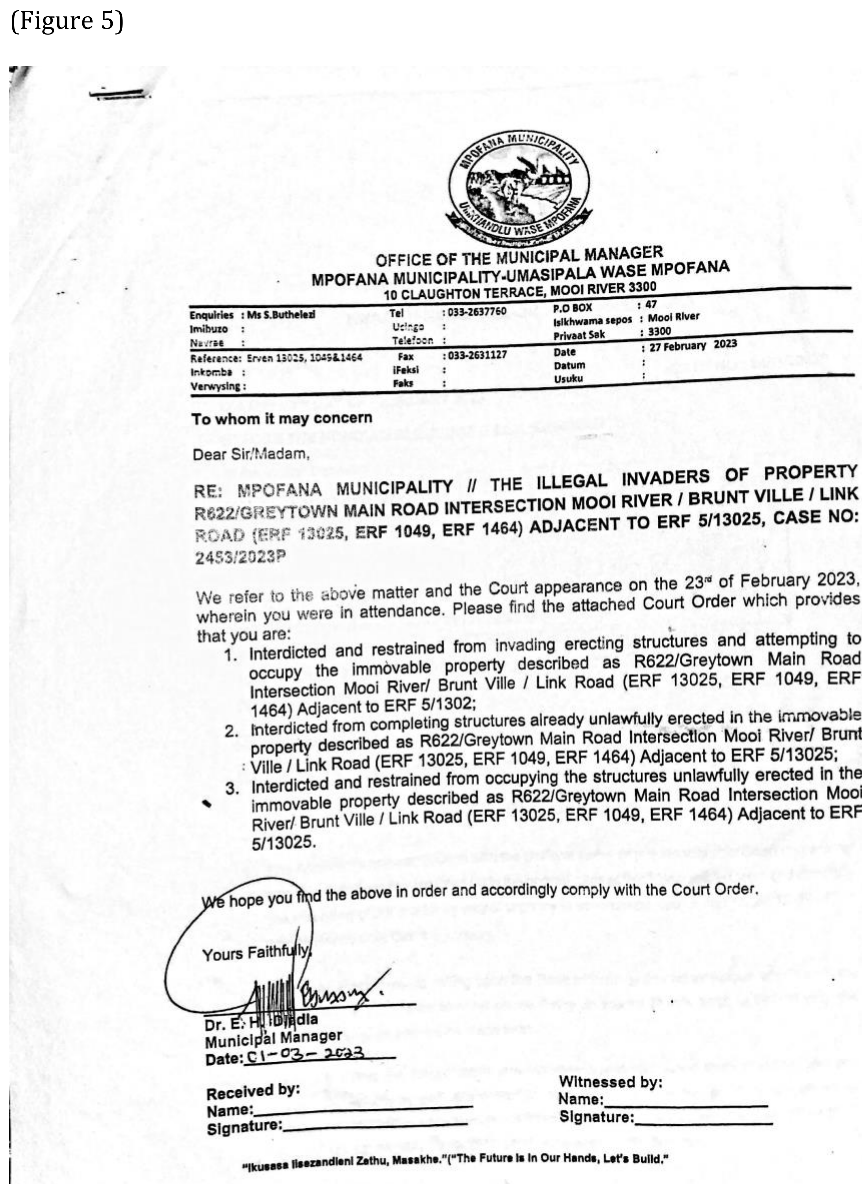
For Mbembe (2003, 2019), territorialisation is a key characteristic of necropower. He describes how necropower rewrites spatial relations through the making of boundaries and borders, which represent material manifestations of ideological categories and hierarchies (2003, 25-26). These are fuelled by an excess of racialised cultural fantasies and anxieties that are produced to subvert pre-existing arrangements, allow resource extraction and produce the disposable other. Mbembe calls this territorial fragmentation and its associated technologies that are modelled on South Africa's system of Apartheid, "*infrastructural warfare"* (29). When combining material conditions of violent evictions, withheld emergency services, and denial of basic services like water and electricity, coupled with the territorial fragmentation of the informal settlement's exclusion from the city, indeed a sense of warfare emerges—one played along infrastructural battlefields. The city becomes a territory that must be defended at all costs against the criminalised/racialised other. Abahlali are acutely aware of their vulnerability to state-sanctioned violence. Chairperson of the Women's League MaZandile Nsibande says that "police brutality is like a pandemic within the movement" (quoted in Masiangoako 2022, 88).

Abahlali, and shack-dwellers as a whole, are categorized as "land invaders" by the media, elite and state because they occupy land that does not belong to them (see Luvhengo 2022; Roberts 2023). Indeed, this category is reproduced by the state, as can be seen in court documents that name shack-dwellers as

[37] The JMPD is a municipal body while SAPS is a national body.

"illegal invaders" (see Figure 5 below). The category of invader signals a dangerous, predatory and unjustifiable force. Other terminology now synonymous with shack-dwellers is the "mushrooming of shacks", which infers unfettered, unwanted expansion (Mohapi 2023b). Colonial racialised myths of overpopulation similarly remain in South African imaginaries. These signifiers conceal the heterogeneity of land occupations and the multiple individual lives that are lived there. Indeed, Abahlali's legal representatives, SERI, prefer the language of land "occupation" as opposed to invasion, that "paves the way for a more explicit recognition … of the history of land dispossession and forced removals of black people, a legacy which is compounded by the workings of the private property market" (Masiangoako 2022, 8).

(Figure 5)



OFFICE OF THE MUNICIPAL MANAGER
MPOFANA MUNICIPALITY-UMASIPALA WASE MPOFANA
10 CLAUGHTON TERRACE, MOOI RIVER 3300

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|---|---|---|
| Enquiries : Ms S.Buthelezi | Tel : 033-2637760 | P.O BOX : 47 |
| Imibuzo : | Ucingo : | Isikhwama sepos : Mooi River |
| Navrae : | Telefoon : | Privaat Sak : 3300 |
| Reference: Erven 13025, 1049&1464 | Fax : 033-2631127 | Date : 27 February 2023 |
| Inkomba : | iFeksi : | Datum : |
| Verwysing : | Faks : | Usuku : |

**To whom it may concern**

Dear Sir/Madam,

**RE: MPOFANA MUNICIPALITY // THE ILLEGAL INVADERS OF PROPERTY R622/GREYTOWN MAIN ROAD INTERSECTION MOOI RIVER / BRUNT VILLE / LINK ROAD (ERF 13025, ERF 1049, ERF 1464) ADJACENT TO ERF 5/13025, CASE NO: 2453/2023P**

We refer to the above matter and the Court appearance on the 23rd of February 2023, wherein you were in attendance. Please find the attached Court Order which provides that you are:

1. Interdicted and restrained from invading erecting structures and attempting to occupy the immovable property described as R622/Greytown Main Road Intersection Mooi River/ Brunt Ville / Link Road (ERF 13025, ERF 1049, ERF 1464) Adjacent to ERF 5/1302;
2. Interdicted from completing structures already unlawfully erected in the immovable property described as R622/Greytown Main Road Intersection Mooi River/ Brunt Ville / Link Road (ERF 13025, ERF 1049, ERF 1464) Adjacent to ERF 5/13025;
3. Interdicted and restrained from occupying the structures unlawfully erected in the immovable property described as R622/Greytown Main Road Intersection Mooi River/ Brunt Ville / Link Road (ERF 13025, ERF 1049, ERF 1464) Adjacent to ERF 5/13025.

We hope you find the above in order and accordingly comply with the Court Order.

Yours Faithfully,

Dr. E. H. [illegible]
Municipal Manager
Date: 01-03-2023

Received by:
Name:
Signature:

Witnessed by:
Name:
Signature:

"Ikusasa lisezandleni Zethu, Masakhe."("The Future is in Our Hands, Let's Build."

*Figure 5. This scanned page is from a court case where Abahlali are representing the Cuba Townview settlement in Mooi River, Kwa-Zulu Natal. At time of writing, Abahlali's lawyers, the Socio-economic Rights Institute (SERI) have successfully requested time for the movement to respond as the interdict was served in their absence.*

The City of Johannesburg's website states that "the recent upsurge in the number of illegal land invasions has prompted the City and the Gauteng Provincial Government to launch an anti-land invasion unit to stem the tide" (City of Johannesburg 2020). The Executive Mayor of Johannesburg, Geoff Makhubo is quoted saying "[he is] glad that [they] are working together with the Gauteng province to push back these land-grabbing syndicates" and he also displays anxiety about "land grabs…imploding in our City". The urbanisation of the poor is seen as a direct threat to the city and positioned as the enemy of the urban. The category of illegal invader further works to vilify and criminalise shack-dwellers as part of the project to make their oppression acceptable.

The current spatial segregation of informal settlements is in part due to the Apartheid system. Apartheid's racial reasoning entrenched the notion that South African society was made up of four distinct races: whites, Coloureds, Indians and Africans (Posel 2001).[38] Physical characteristics, ancestry, and social acceptance within particular racial communities served as the main criteria for racial classification. Land was central to colonisation and Apartheid. The 1950 Group Areas Act (GAA) gave the government control of who occupied properties and interracial property transactions. The GAA formalised racial segregation whereby whites had unfettered access to the city and non-whites were assigned racial enclaves on the urban perimeter and in rural areas (South African Institute for Race Relations and Horrell cited in SAHO n.d.). Although a multiplicity of racial categories existed, whites were most anxious about *die swart gevaar*, Afrikaans for the black danger, which was used to denote Black urbanisation. Even though the GAA was repealed in 1991 by the Abolition of Racially Based Land Measures Act, in South Africa today, social imaginaries are still embedded with anxiety in relation to Blackness in the city.

[38] Under Apartheid, and arguably for many South Africans still today, Black, African and native are interchangeable to denote the same racial category. My use of the races as plural (Coloureds instead of Coloured people) denotes the language of the time (and the source used). Chinese residents of South Africa were classified as Coloured or sometimes Asians, which was also used to denote Indian South Africans. My use of Black, Indian and Coloured mirrors overarching discourse surrounding Apartheid and is not intended to erase Chinese, and other racial groups.

Ostensibly in favour of separate development, the GAA displaced hundreds of thousands of people and its infrastructure and impacts continue to reverberate today. Land remains a contentious issue in the country and is central to Apartheid's redress (Chetty 2019, 26). In 2018, the government reported that 72% of farms and agricultural holdings were still held by white people, albeit these government departments are not best placed to report on themselves (Rural Development & Land Reform). However, the majority of the land in South Africa is still owned by white people—a racial minority—and although the middle classes and elite (of all racial groups) have access to the city, and to a limited extent land, the poor do not (Clark 2018). Further, due to so-called separate development, infrastructure outside of the city was severely neglected and this pattern remains. Hence, moving to urban areas is one of the only ways poor people can access necessities such as education, job opportunities and healthcare. Further, urban land has symbolic meaning for Black, Indian and Coloured communities because they were systemically denied access to it under Apartheid.

During Apartheid, and continuing today, Black people (racially and politically) (and now the poor) access/ed the city through the township, "a sociopolitical, cultural, and economic formation … a peculiar spatial institution scientifically planned for the purposes of control" (Mbembe 2003, 26). Here, Mbembe is referring to the spatial layout of townships that were previously engineered under Apartheid architecture. Townships of relocated groups on the urban perimeter were engineered to so-called 'purify' the now white centres, while ensuring those displaced were forced to start new, highly segregated lives against a backdrop wiped of any previous cultures or traditions (Wainwright 2014). The townships were modelled on military barracks-style housing where strict grids, fencing and limited entries and exits allowed for easy surveillance and high control.

Townships today are highly variable and they range from formalised housing to informal settlements. Informal settlements occupy state or private land and they have little to no sanitation (running water, working toilets, sewerage systems), electricity, refuse collection, and adequate roads. These factors result in precarious and dangerous living conditions. Inadequate roads allegedly prevent emergency services from delivering their services. However, it is contested whether the roads are truly inaccessible for their vehicles or if this is used as an excuse. Nevertheless, the roads are unsafe, and shack-dwellers also campaign for the paving of settlement roads. These withheld emergency services articulate shack-dwellers as non-citizens, surplus populations who deserve no help and are left to die.

Around or through some settlements, like Siyanda in KwaMashu, eMmaus and Motala Heights in Durban, and Khayelitsha in Cape Town, the state and private property owners have built fences in an attempt to contain informal settlements and shack-dwellers. These borders are sometimes electrified and mostly made of concrete. These material borders are symbolic for how AbM settlements are not seen as part of the City and instead are the social-come-material skin that both marks the end of the city and the beginning of the stranger (Ahmed 2000). Abahlali state "it is time to ask serious questions about why it is that money and rich people can move freely around the world while everywhere the poor must confront razor wire, corrupt and violent police, queues and relocation or deportation" (AbM quoted in Gibson 2008, 705-706). Although informal settlements are geographically located in order to give their residents access to the city, and all of the benefits it represents, the city retreats from the skin of the township by building barriers-come-borders that mark the settlements as non-city. As soon as shack-dwellers occupy urban land, that space becomes non-urban due to the coding of the poor as anti-social, primitive animals (Baderoon 2017; Gibson 2008). Further, due to the city's withdrawal from the settlement, surrounding land is not developed and vegetation becomes overgrown. These spaces become key sites of direct, personal violence such as muggings, rapes and assaults, which disproportionately impact women (Meth 2016). Abahlali take the added vulnerability of women seriously and AbM's demands to end to GBV reflect this feminist commitment (see Peoples Dispatch 2023).

Informal settlements, and the homes within, are incredibly varied in nature. However, the most common form of shacks is one-roomed homes (Stats SA 2019). These are usually constructed with single doors and small or no windows (for security and cost purposes). Some homes are (even more) temporary structures made out of sticks, tarpaulins and recycled materials like cardboard, whereas others have thrown slabs of concrete for flooring, sometimes tiled or covered in linoleum, with corrugated iron walls. The former type of structures are often utilised in new land occupations, or during emergencies like Durban's 2022 flooding.[39] This is a strategy to get as many people occupying the land in as short amount of time as possible as this creates a stronger community to fight evictions. Once settlements have become

[39] During April 2022, the coastal region of KZN (encompassing Durban) experienced exceptionally heavy rainfall within a twenty-four-hour period. This resulted in catastrophic flooding, causing 459 deaths, with 88 people still unaccounted for. The devastating impact of the floods included the destruction of over 4000 residences, leaving 40,000 people without homes (Wits University 2023).

more established, sometimes through court-ordered recognition, those who can afford it upgrade their homes and build more rigorous structures. However, the precarious nature of shacks remain.

### 3.1.4 The Violence of Essentialisation

In biopolitical and necropolitical systems, the fantasy of enmity dictates that for the self to survive the other must die. Biopolitical functions differentiate populations by selecting what kinds of lives are worthy of attention and how their problems become administrative concerns of the state and other actors (Knutsson 2020). In the same breath, necropower deems certain groups as disposable and thereby governs them through their exposure to death and dying—physically and socially. In South Africa, this differentiated administration can be seen in how refuse collection is prioritised in the suburbs for the middle and upper classes of all races, although the suburbs remain a space to access whiteness and a space more easily accessed by white people. In informal settlements such as Abahlali's, communities continue to fight for these basic services to be delivered consistently or at all. Without standard services like refuse collection, communities are forced to dump and burn trash, which poses significant health and safety risks. The denial of basic services severely threatens lives. Shack-dwellers' life-affirming biopolitical concerns are ignored by the state due to the shack-dweller's material-discursive category of sub-human. Instead, shack-dwellers are relegated to disposability. When the state and elite frame the poor as 'illegal invaders' and reproduce conditions that ensure the poor are "forced to live like pigs in the mud… sentenced to die in the fires", this ultimately means the lives of shack-dwellers "[do] not count as human [lives]" (AbM 2018). The poor are seen as sub-human and this sub-human status relegates Abahlali to social, political and physical proximity to death. "Infrastructural warfare" (Mbembe 2003, 29) is a helpful term to analyse the conditions Abahlali are subjected to, however AbM resist infrastructural warfare with "urban planning from below" (Zikode quoted in Peoples Dispatch 2023).

Necropolitics and biopolitics both seek to capture configurations of oppression through their frameworks, however, neither allow for significant space that reveals the resistance strategies and tactics coming from oppressed groups. By essentialising oppressed groups to their oppression, individual and heterogenous lives are obscured, acts of resistance are largely ignored and collective participation in alternative world-making activities go uncounted. Abahlali are continuously exposed to death, however, they also continuously participate in and propose radical, life-affirming acts and politics. Even though the

state and elite attempt to diminish Abahlali to sub-human status, Abahlali reject this positionality and insist on their humanity and dignity. Thus, theoretical frameworks that participate in essentialisation become complicit in the power formations they attempt to critique by allowing acts of resistance to go unnoticed.

Where the state and elite withhold basic services, Abahlali work towards providing their own. A central issue in the informal settlement is lack of access to sanitation, in other words toilets. This issue's importance to residents cannot be overstated. Indeed, access to ablutions is a key factor to being treated with human dignity. A press statement from AbM reads:

> Toilets are an important political issue. They are a matter of dignity, health and safety. When our movement was formed in 2005 the issues of toilets was a key issue in the Kennedy Road settlement. Children were dying of diarrhoea due to unhealthy conditions. Toilets were also an urgent women's issue because it was very dangerous for women to find a private place to relieve themselves, especially at night.
> Everyone should have a right to safe, hygienic and dignified sanitation. Pit Latrines are not the answer. It is well known that children have drowned in these toilets after falling into them. They are dangerous and highly undignified. Despite promises to eradicate them they are being used more and more, including in schools. (AbM 2021)

In the absence of suitable ablutions, residents are forced to use nearby brush or trash sites. State interventions include portable or pit latrines and these are not only ill-suited and underdelivered, but they create increased vulnerability for women and girls who must leave their homes with only candlelight at night to access these basic necessities. Ironically, the state's most common intervention is Ventilated Improved Pit Latrines (VIP), which are known as VIP toilets. In light of the state's failures, some settlements, like eNkanini in Durban, have raised funds to build their own toilets (individual and communal) that they maintain and have self-connected to the city's sewerage system. This self-provision of services is a political act, Abahlali are asserting their right to dignity and positioning themselves as citizens who deserve basic services. Further, sanitation is a feminist issue that Abahlali recognizes is deeply important for their members and in their advocacy, AbM continually refer to the added vulnerability women face when accessing this basic necessity.

Self-connections more generally are also a vital strategy of resistance for Abahlali. They are self-made, unauthorised connections to municipal resources like water and electricity, which are technically illegal. Through self-connections, Abahlali fill the gaps of government failures to supply basic services by creating self-provisions of water, electricity, sanitation and refuse removal. Within AbM, these are known as Operation *Khanyisa* (let there be light), and Operation *Donsamanzi* (draw water) (Masiangoako 2022, 78). The state and elite have often used shack fires as anti-shack reasoning, blaming the poor that fires are a result of either alcohol abuse, poor education or hazardous self-connections. However, as Abahlali have

pointed out, if the state supplied electricity to these informal settlements, none of these factors would be an issue. Further, municipal-supplied stand pipes for water are usually inadequate for the number of dwellings as well as issues with water pressure and reliability. As a result, communities have established their own self-connections to municipal water pipes to bring this basic service to their communities. This self-provision refuses the state's inadequacies and affirms the poor's ability to participate in their own upliftment. As Zikode notes, "when the state is busy connecting water and electricity for the rich… when it starts from the wealthy areas, [Abahlali] start from the poorest of the poor areas and we will meet halfway, and that is called urban planning from below" (quoted in Peoples Dispatch 2023). Abahlali take on government tasks like urban planning and ensure these accommodate the poor.

## 3.2 Modes of Resistance

Other scholars have contributed to a broader understanding of the biopolitical and necropolitical systems the world now finds itself in. Lauren Berlant (2007) and Rob Nixon (2011) call for particular attention to slow death and slow violence respectively. Berlant is a feminist scholar and Nixon is an environmentalist. Although both of their theories should not be conflated, they each pay attention to violence that happens over time like environmental degradation, poverty and chronic illness. Both necessitate renewed scrutiny on temporally dispersed and continuous forms of social injustice, as opposed to the spectacular events that have a higher propensity to hold the public's shortening attention. In their theorisation of slow death, Berlant (2007) draws particular attention to the agency of those who are medicalised (776) and Nixon (2011) continually refers to the environmentalism of the poor.[40] Both scholars frame their critique of im/material violence within resistance strategies.

Judith Butler (2006) critiques Agamben's notion of bare life, particularly because it does not recognise the affirmations of living in daily life. Thus the notion of bare life erases the agency and individuality of the groups it is ascribed to. Butler also points out how bare life fails to address processes of racialisation (Butler 2006, 68). Butler's critique of bare life is continued throughout much of their work and they "[insist] that we use language that recognizes the agency of those bodies exposed to violence and

[40] Berlant used them/them pronouns.

harm and their potential to produce political space through assembly and networks of support and solidarity" (Butler 2015 cited in Landesman 2016).[41] Butler similarly points out that those ascribed bare life still have possibilities of agency and resistance that is concealed by the category of bare life that reduces them to passivity. Indeed, Butler seems to see such categorisations, even that of the human, inherently unstable and when speaking about themselves, says "[they are] not at all sure we can identify a human form, nor do [they] think we need to" (Butler 2009, 52).

I also follow the position of Weheliye (2014) who states, "Agamben's theorization of bare life leaves no room for alternate forms of life that elude the law's violent embrace. What seems to have vanished from this description is the *life* in the *bare life* compound" (131). He goes on to explain how *bare life* subjectivity literally and symbolically divests one of the qualities of aliveness. Here I am also in agreement with feminist scholar Rosi Braidotti (2007, 2010) who prefers an emphasis on life instead of death—from a particular posthuman and post-anthropocentric worldview. As she states, "[centring life] dislocates but also redefines the relationship between self and other by shifting the traditional axes of difference - genderization, racialization and naturalization - away from a binary opposition into a more complex and less oppositional mode of interaction" (Braidotti 2007, 4). Braidotti argues for a more complex approach to difference that avoids dualistic thinking and instead opens up possibilities for seeing beyond unstable categories and instead recognising nuances and heterogeneity.

I have highlighted these (feminist and environmentalist) interventions to show how they open up space in their theorisations to include the agency and self-determination of oppressed groups by paying attention to the world-making activities therein. These theorisations have all been critiqued for their various shortcomings, however in relation to necropolitics and biopolitics, they point to alternative modes of theorising that resist the homogenisation of those oppressed.

### 3.2.1 Rebuilding as/and Resistance

It is my understanding that Abahlali is primarily a non-violent movement, however people do physically defend themselves and their homes against attacks. Indeed, their president said:

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[41] Butler uses they/them pronouns.

> We are prepared to talk but if that doesn't work we are prepared to use our strength. We will do whatever it costs us to get what we need to live safely. We have learnt from our experience that when you want to achieve what you want, when you want to achieve what is legitimate by peaceful negotiations, by humbleness, by respecting those in authority your plea becomes criminal. You will be deceived for more than ten years, you will be fooled and undermined. This is why we have resorted to the streets. When we stand there in our thousands we are taken seriously. (Zikode 2005)

Evictions are arguably the number one threat facing Abahlali. To resist evictions, Abahlali immediately rebuild demolished homes, fight for their right to occupy land in the courts, document and broadcast the abusive nature of evictions and physically resist evictions through non-compliance and road-blockades (Masiangoako 2022, 67). The defence of current land occupations is as critical for Abahlali as the occupation of new land. Both of these carry high risks to Abahlali whose most reliable resource is their own bodies, whether mobilised *en masse* for demonstrations or as individuals who seek to defend their homes from violent and illegal evictions. This is also where the tactic of rebuilding comes in as an eviction strategy. Immediately after an eviction and demolishment, Abahlali rebuild their homes. This creates continuity for their claim to the land (Masiangoako 2022, 69) and right to the city.

Abahlali also make use of legal action to resist evictions and defend occupations (Masiangoako 2022, 70). They primarily use litigation in two ways: interdictions on municipalities after a series of violent evictions, and strategic interventions in legal matters that will directly impact shack-dwellers such as new government policies and laws. The most notable case of this, as discussed previously, was their successful opposition to the Slums Act. This victory was highly significant for Abahlali as it proved that shack-dwellers, once organised and mobilised, were a force that could change the law and the country.

When we understand social death as being stripped of rights, citizenship and political personhood, we can see that Abahlali are not completely relegated to social death as they have found recognition in the courts. This argument also applies to necropolitical frameworks that designate Abahlali as disposable, yet AbM have won legal victories. Abahlali leader Melita Ngcobo was arrested while attempting to resist the demolition of her home and later won civil proceedings (including being paid damages) against the Minister of Police for her wrongful arrest and detention (SERI 2023). Abahlali have won a few cases like Ngcobo's, however the same violations keep happening. Additionally, where shack-dwellers have fought the state in the courts, the state has retaliated by withholding basic services (Mohapi 2023a). Largely, Abahlali's rights are not recognised until official court interventions and these outcomes are often punished by the state—but this should not diminish AbM's landmark legal victories. The essentialist categorisation of social death and "human bodies deemed either in excess, unwanted, illegal, dispensable, or superfluous"

(Mbembe 2019, 96) obscures the nuanced reality of Abahlali's resistance strategies and victories within oppressive systems.

Despite the state and elite's efforts to curtail Abahlali's futurity, Abahlali have persisted. For every il/legal eviction, AbM attempt to use the courts to secure land occupation. In the face of prolific police and private militia violence, Abahlali take to the streets in their hundreds (and sometimes thousands) to fight for their rights to human dignity and housing. Undeterred by continual demolishing and shack fires, shack-dwellers rebuild their homes on land they insist belongs to the people. This is not to romanticise AbM, but to point out the radical world-making practices of Abahlali that insist on futurity that are not captured by necropolitical frameworks that would categorise shack-dwellers as *living dead*.

## 3.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have problematised scholars' use of *living dead* when seeking to analyse modern power formations. Using examples from South Africa, I have explained how biopower regulates populations and necropower governs through exposing racialised groups to death. In this analysis, I have focussed on spatiality and territorialisation, processes of dehumanisation and the criminalisation/racialisation of poverty and state-sanctioned in/direct violence. I also looked at social death and how this lens can be applied to Abahlali, yet fails to capture what is happening on the ground. My analysis also listened closely to Abahlali's narratives about their relationship to death and dying and showed how AbM reconceive of death as a possible act of resistance. In the same vein, Abahlali counter oppressive state and social systems with their own world-making practices of self-provision of services, political land occupation, legal recourse and continual rebuilding. Through these examples, I have shown how necropolitical frameworks and categorisations participate in essentialisation that obscures the living politics of Ubuhlalism. The focus of this chapter has been to interrogate systems of oppression that subjugate Abahlali, and so I am at risk of being complicit in this essentialisation when I dwell on them too long. However, these narratives are a necessary foundation to highlight the radical world-making practices of AbM that I unfold in the following chapter.

In conclusion, theoretical frameworks such as necropolitics can help us understand systems of oppression, but at what cost? Where do we draw the line between analysis and complicity? Taking my cue

from Abahlali, I posit that theoretical frameworks should seek to work within the idioms of groups facing oppression and pay close attention to nuance, heterogeneity and narratives coming from the ground.

# 4. Ubuhlalism and The Undercommons

I don't need your help.

I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you,

too,

however much more softly,

you stupid motherfucker, you know?

—Fred Moten

Since 2005, Abahlali have been called the Third Force by the state and elite. This is due to the misguided belief that Abahlali are puppets of a (usually white) group seeking to undermine South Africa's young democracy.[42] The myth of the Third Force has prevailed since the end of Apartheid when conspiracy theories spread rumours that renegade Apartheid security personnel were attempting to disrupt the country's transition to a peaceful democracy. In response to being called the Third Force, Abahlali's president wrote a press release titled *We are the Third Force,* which was published across South Africa in newspapers, magazines, left publications and academic journals. It was also translated into Afrikaans, isiXhosa and isiZulu. Referencing the anxieties proclaimed by the state and those anti-poor he explains:

> The shack dwellers' movement that has given hope to thousands of people in Durban is always being accused of being part of the Third Force. In newspapers and in all kinds of meetings this is said over and over again. They even waste money investigating the Third Force. We need to address this question of the Third Force so that people don't become confused.
> I must warn those comrades, government officials, politicians and intellectuals who speak about the Third Force that they have no idea what they are talking about. They are too high to really feel what we feel. They always want to talk for us and about us but they must allow us to talk about our lives and our struggles.
> We need to get things clear. There definitely is a Third Force. The question is what is it and who is part of the Third Force? Well, I am Third Force myself. The Third Force is all the pain and the suffering that the poor are subjected to every second in our lives. […]
> We are driven by the Third Force, the suffering of the poor. Our betrayers are the Second Force. The First Force was our struggle against apartheid. The Third Force will stop when the Fourth Force comes. The Fourth Force is land, housing, water, electricity, health care, education and work. We are only asking what is basic – not what is luxurious. This is the struggle of the poor. (Zikode 2005)

[42] This white group have not been named outright but the prevailing notion is that there is a "white agitator as the sinister Svengali manipulating ordinarily deferent people into rebellion" (Pithouse 2012). Svengali being someone who manipulates and controls others through sinister influence. This Third Force is also imagined to be white due to the infantilization of the poor who are seen as unable to organise, or think for, themselves.

The Second Force is the ANC government and South African elite who have failed in substantially changing the lives of the poor in the 'new' South Africa. In his statement, Zikode makes clear that the state/elite are clueless about the struggle of the poor and he also recommends that anyone who seeks to make decisions for and about the poor should spend a week living in a shack (*mjondolo*) to truly understand their circumstances. In his article, Zikode (2005) emphasises that the poor can think and speak for themselves and that the role of the state/elite should be to listen. Zikode also clearly outlines the parameters of their struggle for basic necessities, an outcome only reached when shack-dwellers are treated with human dignity, and that AbM will not stop until these goals are realised.

In the previous chapter, I critiqued theoretical frameworks that diminish the agency, reality of aliveness and investments in futurity of/from Abahlali by reducing shack-dwellers to the status of *living dead* (Mbembe 2003, 2019). In this chapter, I will gesture towards more generative possibilities of reading and analysing AbM, which move away from the violence of essentialisation. Just as Abahlali reclaim the positionality of the Third Force, so do I seek to (re)position AbM's narrative in a manner that affirms their agency, politics and self-conception. To do so, I will look at the world-making practices of Abahlali and the praxis of the Third Force of Ubuhlalism, including Abahlali's politics of refusal, intellectualism and memory/memorial practices. I will put these investments in futurity in dialogue with Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's (2013) notion of the Undercommons, paying close attention to their conceptions of the surround, refusal and study. My intention of bringing these seemingly disparate modes of theorising together (Harney and Moten are American academics) is to see how the Undercommons can be taken as a point of departure regarding Abahlali's insistence on futurity. In other words, how can Abahlali's world-making practices be read differently in dialogue with the Undercommons? In my situated feminist research praxis I commit to stay close to AbM's own conception of themselves and so to use the Undercommons should not be mistaken for erasing Abahlali's own idiom or narrative, but rather to find alternate ways of listening.

## 4.1 The Undercommons and Ubuhlalism

Harney and Moten (2013) ask "what are the politics of being ready to die and what have they to do with the scandal of enjoyment?" (51). They pose this question in their theorisation of the Undercommons, which

is a vehicle for thinking resistance and freedom within systems of oppression. The Undercommons describes marginal spaces and relationships that challenge the status quo. Harney and Moten emphasise the power of relationships, ideas, alternative narratives and creativity for their potential to work against marginalisation. The Undercommons is both a site of resistance and mode of relation in that norms are questioned (and rejected) in favour of collaborative liberatory politics.

Although not an explicitly feminist text, rather aligning themselves to the Black radical tradition, *The Undercommons* is feminist in its critique of capitalism, heteronormativity and hierarchy (Harney and Moten 2013). Harney and Moten make reference to feminist thinkers like Sara Ahmed and Judith Butler and in this sense their feminist commitments always seem to be on the tip of the tongue. *The Undercommons*, as a material theoretical text, is open access and free for anyone who wants to read it and pass it on, aligning to Abahlali's notion of "copyleft" instead of copyright (Abahlali n.d.). *The Undercommons* (Harney and Moten 2013) is not what many would see as a standard academic text, but it is written by academics and is discussed in academic settings such as summer schools and workshops.

From critique of the critical intellectual to spirals on debt and credit, the reader of *The Undercommons* is never told in a straightforward manner what Harney and Moten (2013) mean. As a result, and due to the mode of resistance discussed in the text, *The Undercommons* is unsettling to read. They use this unsettling to ultimately invite the reader to restructure (or tear down and build anew) their world. The Undercommons is very queer in this sense when it is always against normativity just as "'queer' refers not to LGBT, but to whatever subverts, resists, or creates alternatives to various forms of normativity" (Amin 2020, 21). Thus, I position The Undercommons as a feminist and queer text.

Harney and Moten argue for "not so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society" (2013, 42). Abolition is not merely the ending of something, but the fundamental restructuring of society where current norms are unthinkable. This is the politics of Abahlali's refusals and insistences: there is the possibility of a radically different future, and Abahlali are working to realise it. Just as the Undercommons represents current and potential ruptures in society, so do Abahlali seek to create and nurture these ruptures. I find generativity in AbM's similarities, solidarities and coalitions with Harney and Moten's Undercommons in that both speak to agency, resistance and alternate modes of relation, disparate from notions that oppressed groups are *living dead* and the individualist, neoliberal status quo.

Harney and Moten's (2013) question on the relationship between readiness to die and the scandal of enjoyment is one I would answer with the politics of Ubuhlalism whereby Abahlali recognise their proximity to death and yet insist on radical futurity through their projects of political land occupation, political education, communal gardening practices and practices of remembrance. The scandal of enjoyment juxtaposed with readiness to die is indeed AbM's position on death as a mode of resistance in that they willingly face death for their cause, while also finding joy, pleasure and freedom in despite of oppressive systems. This is not to idealise AbM's resistance, but rather to highlight its multiplicities. Popular discourse assumes shack-dwellers live in self-made squalor yet Abahlali are meticulous in tending to communal areas, building schools, libraries and crèches (Abahlali 2010). The informal settlement is presumed to be an anti-social space of lawlessness (see Meth 2016; Gibson 2008), however, in Abahlali's communities, talent shows, choirs and plays are participated in communally (see Xolo 2022). In the informal settlement, alongside fear, grief and precarity lives trust, hope and community.

Despite this generativity, the Undercommons and Ubuhlalism should not be conflated to mean the same thing. However, in the same way that Harney and Moten (2013) never seem to pin down exactly what the Undercommons is, because it is "the nonplace that must be thought outside to be sensed inside" (39), the same can be said for Ubuhlalism. During a journalistic interview (for another project) with Thozama Mazwi, a resident of eKhenana, she said "Ubuhlalism is something you can't touch, you can't see, but you can practice it. […] It is something inside you" (WhatsApp voice note to author, June 11, 2023).[43] If we read Ubuhlalism as a form of Undercommoning, its intangibility surfaces as a form of resistance because what can be felt cannot die, the struggle lives on.

#### 4.1.1 The Surround of the City/Social/Political

Harney and Moten's (2013) concept of the Undercommons is not a static one, but rather a form of relationality, spatiality and temporality that is active and doing-being. Undercommons is a verb, it is something you *do*. Nodding to the fugitivity of Blackness, both historical and global, "the undercommons, its maroons, are *always* at war, *always* in hiding" (emphasis added, 30). My reading of *The Undercommons*

[43] Part of my situated feminist research praxis has been to offer my professional services as a writer to Abahlali. To contribute to media coverage on AbM, I am writing an article for African Arguments. For this article, I interviewed Mazwi over WhatsApp voice note (due to connectivity issues) and am using her quotes in this thesis with her expressed permission.

is that it is an ode to outsiders, paying homage to pockets of resistance that go unnoticed in theoretical frameworks that categorise marginalised groups as socially dead (Patterson 1982) and *living dead* (Mbembe 2003, 2019). The Undercommons (Harney and Moten 2013) celebrates those who fall outside of normativity and instead choose wayward paths (Hartman 2019). The Undercommons is also about race, both as a category and political position: the fugitivity of Blackness and the project of white supremacy. However, it is not limited to Black and Brown racialised bodies but includes those seek to resist oppressive systems of control from various positionalities.

The Undercommons is also what Harney and Moten (2013) term the surrounds. Using the idea of the surrounds as what is surrounding normative society, those able to comply with heteronormativity, whiteness, ableism, legal employment, and state-documented citizenship, Harney and Moten theorise the surrounds as a positionality conducive to resistance. They use the example of popular culture's propagated imagery of colonial occupation where the white settler is surrounded by the native other to foreground their use of the term surrounded (17). Although no longer always the explicit native other, those in the Undercommons present a similar threat to the projects of governance where they fall outside of governmentality yet their presence is close enough to represent a threat. Indeed this is the liberal subject's anxiety about the informal settlement: that *their* cities are becoming *surrounded* by sprawling zones of poverty, one they would rather keep at bay *over there*, not have *here*. *Here* belongs to the (usually white) middle-to-upper class citizen with gainful employment, legal documentation, a non-disabled body, and heteronormative compliance. This zone of 'here', the city, is seen as a site that needs to not only be protected, but defended against—at any cost to the poor.

Harney and Moten's (2013) notion of the surround provides insight to AbM's urban planning from below (Zikode quoted in Peoples Dispatch 2023). As Abahlali are literally and figuratively rejected from the urban, their world-making practices of self-provision and rebuilding are the material spaces and political practices of generative subversion. Through self-connections, AbM pose a threat to the state's claim to provide basic services. Through occupation and rebuilding after evictions, Abahlali continually reinstate their claim to land and housing. AbM's informal settlements are revolutionary in their insistence of belonging in the city and building their own radically democratic, mass participatory communities. This is the surround, that what surrounds what is refused (the city and human dignity) and creates ruptures to steal it back (self-provision and rebuilding), and make it better (Ubuhlalism). Abahlali's world-making practices disrupt the city's project of governance, refusing to be docile and compliant.

### 4.1.2 Ubuhlalism as Praxis

Abahlali practice Ubuhlalism, their homegrown philosophy and political praxis based on their interpretation of Ubuntu. Although it is a philosophy, Ubuhlalism is strongly linked to material realities and the work AbM does on the ground. Ubuhlalism not only dictates that Abahlali conduct themselves relationally and communally, but also that AbM is committed to helping members meet basic needs (Masiangoako 2022, 68). Once land has been occupied, the next immediate priority is securing access to water and electricity. Abahlali is actively and purposefully remedying the state's failures and refusals to meet the needs of urbanisation. They do this from below, from the surround. maZandile Nzimande explains that this is:

> because we promote Ubuntu, Humanity, Socialism. I can't sleep when I got [sic] food and your children don't have food. I can't sleep when your children don't have shoes to go to school and my child has three pairs of school shoes. That is the spirit of Ubuntu. When you are a widow, we used to [sic] visit and see what are you eating, are your children going to school and we even intervene if there are children that are being chased out of school because they don't have school fees. (quoted in Masiangoako 2022, 65)

Ubuhlalism also means that one person's struggle has collective importance. When members are arrested, Abahlali organises mass outpourings of support where bail money is collectively raised, legal support is attained, and each proceeding, whether at a police station or court, is attended by multiple other members in solidarity and support. This is performed without exception and is also true for evictions where the community will gather to help individuals rebuild their demolished homes. A communal worldview and solidarity with the struggle of others is essential to Ubuhlalism. Abahlali's interpretation of Ubuntu as living communally is in direct contradiction to state and elite's views that it is 'their turn to eat'. 'My turn to eat' is an expression that references corrupt politicians' belief that it is their turn to benefit from state resources (after the Apartheid government's turn of benefitting from the Apartheid system) regardless of how this impacts the poor.

Abahlali's living politics (Ubuhlalism) is based on the everyday experiences of shack-dwellers. As Zikode puts it, "ours is a politics of the poor – a homemade politics that everyone can understand and find in a home" (quoted in Masiangoako 2022, 66-67). As discussed previously, the notion of everyone understanding is emphasised throughout AbM, particularly that this understanding is gained in their own

language. Not only is this a reference to the multiple languages in South Africa, but also that the language of the poor when talking about themselves is respected—echoing Zikode's statements in *The Third Force*.

Living in community, in plurality, is no accident of the spatiality of crowded informal settlements. Rather, Abahlali is rigorous in maintaining their communal worldview through radical (democratic) participation. Each informal settlement community elects its own AbM representatives, sometimes as frequently as per meeting, and this is also how representatives to the media are selected. Each meeting with Abahlali leadership, other AbM communities or engagement with the media, is then reported back to the community and discussed, pointing to a circular economy of knowledge production, knowledge distribution and decision-making, while also displaying a high level of individual and communal accountability. This is a way of life. Communally practiced living is also communally practiced learning, and so when living is continuous, so is learning. (Re)negotiation of what is important, and what should be done about it, is always possible and always at stake. A necessity of living in plurality is time. Practicing Abahlali's values requires highly time-consuming, continual (re)negotiation—some meetings will go on all night and into the next morning. Further, because AbM is committed to organising in a manner where members are able to attend meetings, these are often scheduled at night or on weekends.

One of AbM's core tenets is to work *with* the poor and not *for* them. Their radically democratic politics demands "mass participation in decision making" that can only be achieved through a commitment to flexibility and cooperation (Pithouse 2005 quoted in Gill 2014). To be able to take into account everyone's thoughts and opinions, Abahlali continually practice flexibility because agendas, discussions and outcomes are always up for debate. This flexibility is also realised through intensive cooperation where members must work together to achieve (and define) common goals. I saw these practices in action during my visit, both at Abahlali's offices and the Asivikelane workshop.

On the 15th and 16th of March 2023, I joined Abahlali in attending a workshop by Asivikelane, one of Abahlali's NGO partners. Asivikelane amplifies the lived experiences of informal settlement residents who face severe basic service shortages by collecting data from the communities, which they use for advocacy to municipalities. I read Asivikelane's mission as closely aligned to living politics and Living Learning in their commitment to lived knowledges and material outcomes. One of the members in the workshop said "there is no department of community participation, we need to do it ourselves" (Workshop Participant 2023), emphasising Abahlali's dedication to urban planning, community development and radical participation from below. The workshop was conducted in English, isiZulu and isiXhosa, the latter

two took priority. The aim of the workshop was to empower attendees with knowledge of how municipal budgets work so that they can fight for their communities' allocations. The emphasis was on the people who live in shacks to be able to represent themselves in matters that concern them. Those invited included activists and partner organisations like Abahlali, who could then invite their members who live in informal settlements. Proceedings were highly respectful, with each person who wanted to contribute being heard, a difficult task with over sixty attendees. *Madala*, the elders, were given additional respect with the invitation to be served tea and lunch first. During the workshop, members constantly reminded each other to pay attention to other members who were talking and for everyone who wanted to speak to be given the platform. Similarly, to ensure everyone was heard on a matter, Abahlali's office meetings that I attended could take over five hours. This commitment to continuously creating space for everyone to speak and be heard shows how AbM's values are realised communally through reinforcing them when it seems they may be overlooked.

The second day of the Asivikelane workshop was started by prayers to bless the proceedings and when confronted by the lack of air-conditioning and sweltering heat of Durban and the associated lethargy, Abahlali members roused other participants with singing struggle songs, which included clapping, dancing and call-and-response chants—a scandalous scene should it have been in the traditional, hierarchical workshop format. The songs revolved around issues of basic services like water, electricity and toilets—what it is like to live in an *mjondolo* (shack). In South Africa, a common protest chant is *Amandla! Awethu!* meaning Power! It's ours! in isiZulu. However at Abahlali, and during the Asivikelane workshop, we chanted *Amandla! Awethu ngenkani!* meaning Power! It's ours by force!. This force means a powerful determination and that this work is not done by anyone else except 'us'. *Ngenkani* also denotes conscious resilience and striving that is particularly imbued with AbM's intellectualism, which defines their lived experience as knowledge.

## 4.2 Refusal/s

Refusal is prominent throughout the Undercommons, which is a place of indecision and negligence (Harney and Moten 2013). Negligence meaning the rejection of dominant forms of regulation, both institutional and internalised because "the path to the wild beyond is paved with refusal" (Halberstam in Harney and Moten

2013, 8). The wild beyond is liberation and refusal is being difficult to control through rejecting power that is imposed on us from within (self-discipline) and without (social rules/expectations). Abahlali's refusals (dys)function similarly whereby multiple norms are refused, both materially and theoretically. For Harney and Moten (2013), indecision is a tool of resistance within systems of power where agitators can refuse traditional decision-making processes that reinforce hierarchies and control. Indecision subverts dominant systems by refusing to conform to predetermined options and binarity. Indecision is a mode of refusal that struggles for nuance, agency and contextualisation.

Abahlali has a strong politics of refusal. They refuse being relegated to social death or *living dead*. They refuse indignity. AbM refuse the commercial value of land and insist on its social value. They activate communities and individuals to become instigators of social upheaval through self-reliance. They refuse the state/elite who claim to make decisions on their behalf. When Abahlali refuse the status quo through their world-making practices, they are insisting on a different present, one that informs alternative futures. Like Harney and Moten (2013) show, refusal can be a powerful tool to resist control and reinforce agency. Thus, paying attention to Abahlali's refusals is a way to read their praxis of Ubuhlalism as a mode of resistance.

Ubuntu informs Abahlali's non-hierarchical organisation of the social. All members of Abahlali are treated equally and AbM is committed to highlighting the voices of women and the youth to ensure these often-marginalised groups do not remain in the margins of Abahlali. Women are seen as equals, intellectually and socially and the AbM Women's League does conscious work to empower women to participate in spite of wider (Western and colonial) social norms that deem women should be less vocal and passive. Abahlali's office security was headed by a (sometimes armed) woman. When organisations prioritise the voices of the youth, this can lead to overlooking older members. However, maZandile Nsibande remarked that "Abahlali listens to the grannies" (2023. Conversation with author, March 16).[44] A few months shy of becoming a pensioner, she felt like she was even more excluded from normative social and economic life by her status of being an aging woman. However, at Abahlali she felt heard and believed this sentiment was shared among her peers.

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[44] Used with express permission.

When Abahlali refuse normative hierarchies of men/women and youth/elderly, they are operating within a subversive form of indecision that refuses binarity (Harney and Moten 2013). Decisions are made communally and it is emphasised that it is leadership's responsibility to carry these out. Thus, Harney and Moten's (2013) notion of indecision reveals Abahlali's horizontal power distribution as a form of resistance to social norms.

### 4.2.1 Refusing Political Affiliation: "The ANC is killing us"

AbM has no partnership with any political party. This is a precarious position in South Africa where party affiliation is ingrained in neoliberal conceptions of political agency, both from global trends of political polarity and our democracy's short history. Thus, when Abahlali refuse association with political parties this is not a neutral standpoint but actually denotes an anti-party stance, rejecting those in power and their influence. Abahlali's president explains:

> It must be clear that this [AbM] is not a political game. This movement is a kind of social tool by which the community hopes to get quicker results. This has nothing to do with politics or parties. Our members are part of every political organisation that you may think of. This is a non-political movement. […] It is enough for us to be united until our people have achieved what is wanted – which is basic. […]
> The community has realised that voting for parties has not brought any change to us – especially at the level of local government elections. […] Whoever wins the elections will be challenged by us. We have been betrayed by our own elected councillor. We have decided not to vote. The campaign that has begun – 'No Land, No House, No Vote', is a campaign that has been agreed upon in all 14 settlements. (Zikode 2005)

The campaign No Land, No House, No Vote was launched in the year of Abahlali's inception and has been consistent throughout. Before the end of Apartheid, voting was largely restricted to white people and with democracy, the right to vote was an important transformation. Thus, it is radical position for Abahlali to not only refuse political affiliation, but to refuse to participate in voting. Abahlali recognises that politicians keep the poor poor to use them as a voting bank during elections, as they are seen as easy targets to get votes from (due to post-Apartheid allegiance to the Apartheid struggle) and Abahlali refuse to participate in this political economy.

### 4.2.2 Refusing Pity: "Nothing about us without us"

The poor do not want our pity (Mohapi 2023a). Part of Abahlali's fight to be recognised with human dignity is to be involved in the decisions that impact them, they do not want to be 'saved'. Within Abahlali settlements, the employed contribute funds and the unemployed contribute manual labour. Residents who have plumbing and electrical skills responsible for the maintenance of the settlements' self-connections. Abahlali's case is that if the state cannot provide housing, they should provide land so that shack-dwellers can build their own homes. When Abahlali refuse pity, they are refusing control, conformity and the diminishing of their agency.

Abahlali refuse NGOs. Early in their history, AbM realised NGOs were accepting money on Abahlali's behalf without distributing the funds (Mohapi 2023a). Early NGO relationships revealed NGOs did not want to support the poor in their own cause, but rather perform saviourism and instruct AbM how to lead their own movement.[45] Members of Abahlali explain:

> Most [NGOs] want to educate us all the time. They have no money to help us with the practical things we need – like money for bail when comrades are arrested, phone bills for organising, banners and T-shirts for protest actions. Instead they assume they know better what we need – and it's always some kind of 'education'! But we who have the experience, know that they are the ones who need an education. (Figlan et al. 2009, 46-47)

However, AbM do have partners who are NGOs such as SERI and Asivikelane and so their refusal is not indiscriminate. Abahlali reject NGOs wishing to control them in favour of genuine partnerships of mutual benefit. Abahlali refuse relationships that expect they be passive recipients. Thus, their refusal emerges as resistance to top-down management and manipulation.

Instead of pity, Abahlali seek solidarity. Abahlali's solidarity is intertwined with Ubuhlalism in that it is a worldview and material practice.[46] Abahlali see their struggle as globally connected to fighting against oppressive structures that see the Other as disposable. AbM's interpretation of Ubuntu is borderless and recognises the intrinsic humanity and dignity all. Abahlali's solidarity with local and international networks recognises that the issues of land(lessness), poverty and inequality are global in nature even when they occur locally and contextually. Shack-dwellers care deeply about the problems of other communities. When

[45] By saviourism I mean help that is extended in a self-serving manner with an agenda that goes beyond actually providing help.

[46] For example, AbM is in solidarity with Palestine and in 2021, on the same day that over five hundred members showed their support at the bail hearings of Abahlali's leaders, they supported a picket at Durban's docks that refused to offload a ship owned by the Israeli state-owned company Zim Lines (Masiangoako 2022, 75). This act of solidarity shows a non-hierarchical approach, where local concerns and international solidarity are seen as interconnected struggles of the poor.

reading AbM's solidarity with *The Undercommons* (Harney and Moten 2013), their solidarity emerges as a strategy that resists systems of oppression that segregate and separate the Other.

## 4.3 Study as Resistance/Refusal

Study in the Undercommons is "a mode of thinking with others separate from the thinking that the institution requires of you" (Halberstam in Harney and Moten 2013, 11). Study is collaborative, questioning and outside of dominant forms of education like the traditional university. Study is also a way to avoid knowledge production (12) and avoid capitalism (62). Study has no end point and what is studied is decided upon by those participating in it (as opposed to regulatory authorities). There is no curriculum for study and Moten explains that:

> study is what you do with other people. It's talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice. […] The point of calling it 'study' is to mark that the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities is already present. […] To do these things is to be involved in a kind of common intellectual practice. (in Harney and Moten 2013, 110)

Moten highlights lived experience as theory while also showing how study is a collaborative activity. Study also often uses public space in an improper way through loitering and exchanging ideas.[47] Study recognises "the outcast mass intellectuality of the undercommons" (Harney and Moten 2013, 33) in other words, the intellectualism of the poor.

AbM's (mis)use of public space, in their political occupation of unused municipal land, is a form of study. Not least because AbM members are seen as "public violence" (Mohapi 2023a) when the state and elite deem shack-dwellers should not be in public (particularly in the city), but because the practice of land occupation is an intellectual practice involving negotiation, planning (from below), and radical participation. When we take Harney and Moten (2013) seriously and take study as a form of theorising, this creates space for Abahlali's practices to be interpreted as world-making, as insisting on a particular futurity. "Moten and Harney propose that we prepare now for what will come by entering into *study*"

[47] To use my own experience, study is the smoke-breaks in the non-smoking zones of the university where feminists talk about porn, sex and identity without needing to cite other scholars or have their arguments graded and feelings make sense.

(Halberstam in Harney and Moten 2013, 11) and so study emerges as a preparatory activity that rehearses the future (Muñoz 2019). To interpret Abahlali's land occupations, self-connections and rebuilding as forms of study is to firstly, reject popular discourse's categorisations of shack-dwellers as unthinking and non-political, as well as refusing theoretical frameworks that relegate AbM to social death or *living dead*. Secondly, seeing Abahlali's practices as study is an insistence that recognises these acts as world-making.

#### 4.3.1 The University of Abahlali

The University of Abahlali is a political statement that recognises the poor can think for themselves, an activity that rehearses future worlds, as well as a commitment to practical skills building and education. Examples of sharing practical political education include posters by SERI on *How To Resist An Eviction* on Abahlali's office walls and events such as their annual political consciousness-raising Thuli Ndlovu lecture—named after their comrade and former leader who was killed in 2014. However, I would not limit resisting evictions and political consciousness discussions to their practicality as they are also forms of study. AbM's emphasis on political consciousness operates as a politics (and study) from below that rejects the political discourse of politicians and political education in state curriculums in favour of a popular politics that is grounded in the lives of the poor. I also read Abahlali's political consciousness as linked to death-as-resistance in that the deaths of shack-dwellers are contextualised for their political nature and when leaders who hold political knowledge are killed, their shared knowledges live on.

In the context of Figlan et al.'s (2009) critique of "well educated" (50) and Harney and Moten's notion of study, which lies outside the traditional education of the university, education becomes a problematic category. Within the University of AbM, there is education and study. Their education is practical, often skills-based, but their study is Living Learning and living politics. Abahlali's study has no curriculum and is instead directed by lived experience and continuous (re)negotiation. AbM's study is thinking and talking about ideas that threaten the domination of the state and elite, like refusing the criminalisation of poverty and orchestrating urban planning from below.

The intellectual component of AbM cannot be overstated. Abahlali terms the practical (and political) education within AbM as "popular education" (Aadnesgaard 2023). They have skills drives such as a recent campaign where fifty activists in KZN and Mpumalanga (provinces in South Africa) were assisted in obtaining drivers licences, no small feat for those who live in poverty. A driver's licence is not

only a practical skill that engenders employment opportunities, but also a political statement of agency and citizenship. The practical and political education within AbM also helps with retention of members who initially join AbM for help with evictions, and so once their cases are resolved this education/study gives members additional reasons to stay active within AbM. Retention is critical for Abahlali who rely on solidarity and strength in numbers. Currently at 115 000 members, Abahlali is aiming for a total of one million (Aadnesgaard 2023).

Abahlali also provide education and study opportunities through their partners like SERI who have hosted a paralegal workshop on evictions and a webinar on repression (Aadnesgaard 2023). Sharing legal knowledge is an imperative within AbM and Abahlali ensure all their members have a working knowledge and understanding of the constitution and relevant laws and bills such as the PIE Act (Masiangoako 2022, 73-74). Individual legal knowledge ensures that each member is empowered to challenge officials who claim to carry out their work (such as evictions) under the authority these laws ascribe to them.

To say that the poor can think for themselves does not seem, at first glance, to be such a radical statement—but it is. Against the backdrop of a colonial history where Black people were seen as the primitive native Other, and the more recent system of Apartheid where education was segregated and similarly treated Black people as less intelligent and capable, for the Black poor to claim intellectualism is indeed a radical political act.[48] Thus, when the poor position themselves as thinkers in their own right and the experts on their own problems, they are disrupting dominant discourse.

By insisting on the intellectualism of the poor, Abahlali are saying they do not want charity that tells them what their problems are and how to solve them. Abahlali are saying they are well aware of their issues, and that socio-political conditions are what need to change, not the poor. One of Abahlali's press statements reads:

> 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 clean 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. The solution is not to educate the poor about xenophobia. The solution is to give the poor what they need to survive so that it becomes easier to be welcoming and generous. (Abahlali baseMjondolo 2008)

[48] In this sentence, I refer to Black people as a racial category and political standpoint throughout.

Abahlali refuse the infantilization of poor people as children who need to be taught better; instead they insist on structural analysis and change. The state/elite consider themselves to be the most intelligent and only valid sources of knowledge. However, Abahlali's assert that the poor are the experts on themselves and insist on advocating for themselves accordingly. Abahlali's Living Learning and living politics is a form of resistance to state/elite control because those who "speak for themselves threaten the power of those who seek to maintain their dominance over the population" (Gill 2014, 223).

Not only do Abahlali think for themselves, but they are *always* doing so. In my introduction I explained how the University of Abahlali is for all and it is always happening in every encounter, hangout and conversation. When we read these radical, world-making practices as study (Harney and Moten 2013), it allows us to align to Living Learning and living politics concerns and stay close to the lived experiences of shack-dwellers, grounding our narratives in those of Abahlali.

#### 4.3.2 The Frantz Fanon Political School

The eKhenana settlement (also known as the eKhenana Commune) occupation began in 2018 and after constant harassment and continual evictions from and by the City of eThekwini (Durban), with SERI's assistance, Abahlali successfully served the City an interdict to legalise the occupation and put an end to the City's actions. Despite their now formal status, the settlement is still under attack and as a result of multiple instances of violence and killings, the settlement is now fenced with a locked gate at the only entrance accessible by car. They also have CCTV cameras in the middle of the settlement, co-funded by Southern Defenders (a human rights organisation), which have provided critical evidence of such attacks (eKhenana Comrades 2023). Counter to state surveillance of AbM, eKhenana uses their own surveillance methods as a strategy to resist state-sanctioned violence.

The commune has a shipping container on stilts with ten solar panels. The solar power is used to boil water, charge cell phones, provide lights for meetings and, most importantly, provide lights for their poultry operation. While being interrupted by crowing roosters, eKhenana residents spoke of wanting an energy democracy and said "when we move to renewable energy, we move together. Don't leave the poor behind" (eKhenana Comrades 2023). Alongside a communal garden and cooperative poultry project with sixty chickens is the Frantz Fanon Political School. Previously, from 6:30PM until 8:00PM, residents and other comrades were invited to participate in communal study (eKhenana Comrades 2023). During my

visit, this practice was happening every day, but Thozama Mazwi has since informed me that due to the escalation of state-sanctioned violence, community members no longer feel safe gathering at night and classes have temporarily ceased (WhatsApp voice note to author, June 11, 2023). In these classes, study is centred around political consciousness. The purpose of the school is multi-fold, but the emphasis is also on collaborating on a new method of learning whereby there is no individual teacher. Information from around the world and other AbM settlements is shared and Steve Biko and Frantz Fanon are major inspirations and influences in their study because of Biko's role in the Black consciousness movement in South Africa and Fanon's work on Black liberation that inspired South Africans living in a neo-colonialist world.[49] During my visit, one of the community leaders remarked that "Steve Biko lives" (eKhenana Comrades 2023), which I read as aligning to the temporality of Ubuntu that recognises the continuity between the "living-dead", "un-born" and currently living (Mawere and Mubaya 2016, 103-104).

At the political school, and in other activities of study, Abahlali seek to understand the capitalist system and compare it to socialism to inform more egalitarian communal practices that do not subscribe to the capitalist system that is complicit in their oppression (eKhenana Comrades 2023). Indeed, AbM T-shirt slogans read "Socialism or death. The struggle continues", showing high stakes and commitment. Reading this T-shirt slogan with other AbM statements such as "land or death", we are reminded of death not only as a reality for Abahlali, but also as a resistance strategy whereby death is a willing and agential sacrifice made for their cause. "The struggle continues" also highlights AbM's insistence on futurity where AbM lives on when members are killed. In a sense, Abahlali are also pointing towards the power of the poor as a collective because AbM is not deterred when individual members die in the struggle for socialism. This is not say the deaths of shack-dwellers are not felt and grieved communally, Abahlali seem to be in a perpetual cycle of grief when one comrade is killed after another. However, this grieving does not diminish AbM's momentum, but rather propels it.

All decisions at the Frantz Fanon Political School are reached by collective consensus with an emphasis on mutual agreement and everyone having the same level of understanding. When interviewed by a reporter, leaders of the commune said "we try to conscientize everyone so they understand why we

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[49] Fanon's work on anti-colonial theory has resonated throughout South Africa, starting with young Black students in Apartheid's 'bush colleges' (Gibson 2008, 684). Abahlali reference him in speeches and plays and have a category on their website dedicated to him.

are doing what we are doing. You won't participate unless you understand what it is about. So we teach each other about history, about socialism, communism" (Erasmus 2021). Study is largely conducted in English, due to the texts and theories being discussed (although members are working on translating these texts into indigenous languages), and held at times when people are most likely available. If we read the Frantz Fanon Political School as a mode of study (Harney and Moten 2013), we can move beyond interpreting the school as a mirroring of traditional education and recognise that this practice is radical in its attention to lived experience, communal participation and liberatory politics. Further, within Abahlali's idiom of the university, we can see study as a world-making practice that insists on the intellectualism and agency of the poor, a futurity of collaborative liberatory living politics and Living Learning.

## 4.4 Planning Futurity

Planning, according to Harney and Moten (2013), is "self-sufficiency at the social level" (76). Planning resists hierarchies of control and is "the ceaseless experiment with the futurial presence of the forms of life that make such activities possible" (75). They explain how planning is not a singular event but rather an ongoing, mutual and continuous process that is invested in alternative possibilities of the future. Planning in the Undercommons is done through collectively thinking about current conditions and envisioning alternatives. Planning is about cooperatively defining goals and finding strategies to challenge existing structures. It is also form of study that involves examining existing structures and conditions through collective inquiry. However, planning differs from study because it emphasizes envisioning alternatives and taking action through planning. Planning can thus be seen as an extension of study.

When we look at the University of AbM and Abahlali's practices of urban planning from below as planning (Harney and Moten 2013), these practices emerge as going beyond the here and now and shaping the future. Abahlali critically analyse the socio-political conditions of poverty in their study and as part of their planning, engineer radically democratic and participative communities. Their world-making practices not only create alternative worlds in the present, but they actively work to destabilise the status quo and alter the future. In this sense, AbM plan for a future that is not yet here, but is happening in the pockets of these rehearsals.

#### 4.4.1 Sowing Seeds of Remembrance

The offices of Abahlali are a living archive. Their boardroom is plastered with photographs depicting AbMs' key struggles and fallen comrades and so the boardroom is a physical archive of where Abahlali come from and who is missing, one that works counter to dominant discourse. The walls also include posters of radical intellectuals.[50] These intellectuals gained their place on the walls after Abahlali was told many of their statements, slogans and rallying cries were mirrors of what previous thinkers had said (Mohapi 2023a). Abahlali shrugged their shoulders and laughed; they had never heard of them, Abahlali were simply speaking from experience. This echoes sentiments of AbM that "theory does not lead to struggle. … struggle leads to theory" (AbM n.d.).

At eKhenana, their food sovereignty garden is named after AbM activist Nkululeko Gwala who was killed in 2013 (Erasmus 2021). Their chicken farming operation is called Sifiso Ngcobo Poultry, Ngcobo was shot and killed in 2018. Before it was burnt down, the community shop that sold their produce was named after activist Senzo Gumede, who was killed during a struggle for the same land the shop stood on (Erasmus 2021). The Frantz Fanon Political School is housed in the Thuli Ndlovu Community Hall. Ndlovu, whom Abahlali's annual lecture is named after, was Abahlali's KwaNdengezi chairperson and she was shot dead in her home in 2014 after whistleblowing the corruption of eThekwini ward councillors (government representatives). These two councillors and their hired hitman have since been sentenced to life in prison after charges had initially been dropped and this is the only AbM activist murder where justice has been reached. In 2021, eKhenana residents also performed a play about the assassination of Thuli Ndlovu in their community hall (New Frame 2022). Regarding AbM's memory practices, Deputy President Mqapheli Bonono stated "when [Abahlali] are killed it is not seen as political killings, but the killing of people who are less than human… This is a way for [Abahlali] to remember those who fought for [them]" (quoted in Erasmus 2021). Indeed, in meetings held at eKhenana where members from other settlements around the province and country attend (via public transport or transport supplied by Abahlali), speakers often

[50] Such as Saida Menebhi, Emiliano Zapata, Carlos Marighella, Thomas Sankara, Ho Chi Minh, Rosa Luxemburg, Vilma Espin, Shadia Abu Ghazaleh, Lee Hae, Fidel Castro, Miriam Makeba, Kwame Nkrumah, Patrice Lumumba, Che Guevara, Madan Bhandari, and Claudia Jones.

chronicle fallen comrades (New Frame 2022). The Abahlali baseMjondolo Choir that was formed in eNkanini settlement, nearby to eKhenana, has songs that similarly narrate the long list of slain comrades.

AbM's praxis of naming places after slain activists and incorporating their memories into creative output shows an unrelenting recognition of the living-dead, separate from Mbembe's (2003, 2019) use of the term, aligning to the politics of Ubuhlalism, whereby they cannot be erased from their communities even if their deaths are neither counted by the popular media nor the state. My reading of this practice is at once both an acknowledgement of their proximity to death and refusal thereof. They know that death is a possibility, however they refuse that those deaths do not count. Further, this also points to death-as-resistance when the memories of fallen comrades fuel AbM instead of inhibiting it. In their practices of remembering, the dead continue to live, they are living-dead. In this configuration, death does not mean finality or ceasing to exist. Death is faced and accepted, death is the cost of the cause, and the cause lives on.

### 4.4.2 Sowing Seeds of Futurity

The first seeds for eKhenana's Nkululeko Gwala food sovereignty garden came from the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, Brazil's movement of the poor and landless, another example of Abahlali's strong connections and solidarity with global struggles of the poor (New Frame 2022). The garden is a source of pride for the community who take turns sowing and reaping from it. The surplus produce from the garden was sold in the Senzo Gumede shop (before it burnt down) where profits were shared. For Abahlali's killed activists who tended to the garden, its harvest is one they never saw. However, the garden is still functioning today and currently boasts an impressive crop of spinach. Thus, gardening emerges as a form of planning for the future, even if one is not alive to see it. The practice of gardening is also a political act of place-making that insists on a future harvest. By planting seeds that will only mature in weeks, months or years, Abahlali are asserting that they will be there for the garden's fruition and consider the land as belonging to them and their community in the future to come. Their poultry operation exhibits the same politics of investing in the future where each chicken is expected to lay eggs, both for community meals and hatchlings, which will increase the numbers of the farming project. In this sense, farming is a mode of planning that insists on AbM's future, one that is nurtured and cultivated daily. This future crop or hatchling, although not guaranteed, is a tentative promise of self-sustenance and possibly even abundance.

As people who live in poverty, the potential for cultivating their own resources and securing food stability is an act of self-reliance, of planning, that honours their capacity to be a part of their own solutions.

Shack-dwellers' futures are not guaranteed. They endure the constant threat of death from the state through assassinations and violent evictions. Daily realities are precarious due to withheld basic services, which further exhaust the poor and make planning for the future difficult. As mentioned previously, shack-dwellers are written out of futures by neoliberal narratives wherein stories of progress advocate for "eradicating shacks". These futures are corporeal and material, as well as futures in the sense of political horizons of change. These futures are uncertain, withheld and denied by the state and elite. Despite this, Abahlali show radical commitment to the future through material world-making practices such as cooperative farming, and the immaterial praxis of Ubuhlalism whose communal worldview shows its own investment in futurity—the future of a community.

The intellectualism of Abahlali shows a clear commitment to the future where not only can futures be more prosperous by developing employable skills, but also through a claim to knowledge production. The production and dissemination of knowledge is a world-making activity that asserts the intellectualism of the poor. Abahlali shows clear investment in their futurity through material planning of political land occupations, self-supply of basic services and the continuation of AbM as an organisation. Their reflexive practice of remembering and recounting fallen comrades is also a politics of futurity, because death (corporeal and social) no longer signifies an ending.

Thus, the work of Abahlali troubles the state and elite's notions of the future that exclude AbM, who turn out only to be *living dead*/ ascribed social death "insofar as no attention is paid to them… as such lives persist under the sign and weight of a closed question" (Harney and Moten 2013, 47-48). Paying attention to Abahlali's world-making practices reveals the multiplicity of their subject position and how categorisations of the poor (whether these are theoretical terms like *living dead* or processes like criminalisation) capture only a fragment of their lived realities.

## 4.5 Conclusion

The state and elite attempt to diminish Abahlali's world-making practices of resistance and refusal by alleging Abahlali are mere puppets of the Third Force. AbM reject the claim that the movement is not self-

determined and state that the Third Force behind AbM is the struggle of the poor. Abahlali subvert systems of domination and oppression, not only in direct action and legal representation but in their own idiom that (re)defines the world from the point of view of the poor. For Abahlali, the Third Force is not a faceless puppeteer, it is a very real movement of the organised poor, fuelled by their discontent with the status quo. As Abahlali note, "there is no doubt that the poor will rise again and again. […] The only question is what will the poor rise for? Will we rise against each other or we will rise against injustice?" (Abahlali 2010).

In this chapter, I have sought to further unpack the idiom of Abahlali through putting their world-making practices in conversation with *The Undercommons* (Harney and Moten 2013). By using the Undercommons to discuss AbM's practices, I have shown how shack-dwellers' proximity to death has been taken up as death-as-resistance and that the continuity of community and struggle outlives death as an individual event. Abahlali participate in urban planning from below, from the surround, disrupting oppressive governance, (re)claiming the city and planning for alternative futures. Ubuhlalism is central to AbM's world-making practices and informs their worldview, philosophy, politics, study, planning and praxis. Through planning, AbM generate radically participatory communities where everyone is heard and has the responsibility to listen, which is in direct contrast to the state and elite's attempt to silence, infantilise and marginalise the poor.

I have outlined Abahlali's politics of refusal, particularly refusing political affiliation, pity and NGOs. Within this mode of refusal is an insistence on solidarity, wherein AbM give and gain particular strength through international solidarity and transnational networks. I have also outlined the horizontal distribution of power in AbM, a refusal of the state and elite's top-down control, and shown how Abahlali operate within hierarchical indecision that particularly affirms the roles of women. In portraying AbM's daily activities and my personal encounters, I have also highlighted the playfulness, joy and hope embedded in AbM, which resists categorisations of social death and *living dead*.

In dialogue with The Undercommons, the University of AbM emerges as going beyond skills-based education and legal knowledge and is a form of study that insists on the validity of the poor's lived experience and critiques the socio-political context of poverty in South Africa. In their study, Abahlali rehearse for an alternative future that is radically democratic, participative and grounded in communal well-being. In line with Ubuntu temporality that recognised the interconnectedness of the unborn, living and living-dead, Abahlali honour the memories of their fallen comrades. These practices of remembrance are not only those of grieving, but rather tie into AbM's notion of death as a willing sacrifice made by people

with agency and that death does not signal an ending but rather continuity. eKhenana's garden is a manifestation of this philosophy, whereby current practices insist on a future harvest, even when the hands that sowed the seeds are not the same ones that reap the produce.

In this chapter, I sought to take the Undercommons as a point of departure to read Abahlali's world-making practices, their insistence on futurity. Using *The Undercommons* (Harney and Moten 2013) allowed me to analyse AbM's idiom in a manner that opened up the radical potential of the movement because the Undercommons theorises within this possibility. Unlike theoretical frameworks that limit marginalised groups to their marginalisation, like social death and *living dead*, the Undercommons does not categorise or essentialise the liberatory politics it refers to. Rather, the Undercommons encourages heterogeneity, nuance, contextualisation and the agency of the oppressed. The Undercommons looks at seemingly small pockets of dissidence, like the hangout, critical conversation and struggle song, and allows us to see their radical potential as world-making practices. As an unstable, subversive text, *The Undercommons* is a generative lens to view Abahlali's praxis of Ubuhlalism because it seeks to complicate our understanding of what is happening on the ground, lest we get caught up in analysing overarching systems of control at the expense of quotidian realities of aliveness. My point is that it is possible to put academic theorisation in conversation with movements like Abahlali without erasing that movement's self-conception. Following my line of desire to honour AbM's praxis through generative dialogue with academia has allowed me/us to look deeper, listen closely, and write in solidarity.

*Amandla!*

*Awethu ngenkani ngesandla esinoboya!*

Power!

It's ours, by the Third Force!

# 5. Conclusions: provocations and orientations

In this thesis, I have set out to investigate the world-making practices of Abahlali with a situated feminist research praxis based on Ubuhlalism in order to critique theorisations that reduce oppressed groups to their oppression. To do so, in Chapter 2 Walking with Abahlali: a situated feminist research praxis, I challenged traditional research methods and methodologies and favoured feminist interventions and Abahlali's knowledge practices. In the knowledge cultivation of this thesis, I have attempted to unlearn extractive modes of research and listen attentively to Abahlali's own theorising. I have tried to receive the knowledges and communal grace I have been offered and actively participate in encounters with AbM in a manner that recognises ongoing coloniality and attempts to relate across difference (Shilliam 2015 cited in Sheik 2022; van Stam 2019). Part of my praxis was to employ a politics of refusal that avoided traditional and hierarchical research norms in favour of the relational encounter of the hangout (Tuck 2009; Tuck and Yang 2013; Lugones 2003). Avoiding the spectacularising of events and pain narratives, I turned to a desire-centred approach that stayed close to Abahlali's own narratives and knowledges (Tuck 2009; Tuck and Yang 2013). I began to unpack some of Abahlali's idiom and communal worldview and used these to shape my situated feminist research praxis that takes research as a service. I described my encounters with AbM and their counter-archive and practiced self-reflexivity regarding my positionality.

From this situated feminist research praxis, in Chapter 3 Living (Dead) Futures, I turned to Achille Mbembe's (2003, 2019) necropolitics to analyse the ways AbM are received in South Africa. I critiqued necropolitics for its essentialisation of marginalised groups as well as the way the term *living dead* has been taken up by scholars. I contextualised necropolitics to Michel Foucault's (2003) biopolitics and Orlando Patterson's (1982) notion of social death, as well as addressed feminist and environmentalist interventions. I looked at the racialisation/criminalisation of poverty in South Africa, the spatiality of informal settlements and the infrastructural violence experienced by shack-dwellers and showed how these processes attempt to withhold Abahlali's futurity. I tied my critique of necropolitics to AbM and showed how theoretical frameworks become complicit in the oppressive power formations they attempt to analyse when they overlook marginalised groups' resistance strategies such as Abahlali's strategies of self-provision and rebuilding shacks after evictions.

In Chapter 4 Ubuhlalism and the Undercommons, I used Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's (2013) theorisations of resistance from the margins to respond to my critique in Chapter 3 and attempt to show how theoretical frameworks can be used to expand our understanding of marginalised groups beyond their oppression. Thinking with Harney and Moten's notions of the surround, refusal, indecision, study and planning, I listened closely to AbM's rehearsals of the future. Abahlali's living politics insist on a futurity that is highly disparate from the notion that they are *living dead*, as can be seen in their world-making practices. Ubuhlalism insists on the continuity of the community over the individual. Abahlali's mode of death-as-resistance commits to communal struggle over death as an event. In refusing political affiliation, AbM insist on their own intellectualism and agency. Through generative solidarity, hierarchical indecision, refusing pity and refusing NGOs, Abahlali affirm their autonomy, agency and collective power based on radically democratic mass participation. The University of AbM foregrounds Abahlali's daily lived experience as the primary concern of the movement. This lived experience is based on empowerment, knowledge sharing and communal upliftment through critical analysis of overarching systems of control and planning for alternative futures. Thus, *living dead* emerges as an inadequate category to define heterogenous lives and radical rehearsals of the future where shack-dwellers politically occupy land, self-provide basic services, form radically participative communities and are treated with human dignity.

Abahlali continuously refer to everyone understanding, at the same level, in their own language. Figlan et al. (2009) and AbM's former Secretary General also criticise academics for using jargon that is inaccessible and does not reflect the narratives of the movement it refers to (Mdlalose quoted in Gill 2014). In this thesis, I have attempted to respond to these concerns through using Abahlali's counter-archive and using Harney and Moten's (2013) Undercommons. Although the Undercommons is by no means an easily understandable text, the concepts of surround, study, planning and refusal engage with Abahlali on their own terms. This thesis is written for an academic audience and so I recognise my own complicity in inaccessibility. However, my hope is that through a praxis of service, I can bridge some of these gaps through alternative (non-academic) instances of writing with AbM.

### 5.1 A Future for Ubuhlalist Research

This thesis is also the springboard for my future PhD, which I aim to carry out in solidarity with Abahlali. I will now use some of the learnings outlined in this thesis to think ahead to practical guidelines for future

research projects. In orientating myself closer to the We-paradigm of Ubuhlalism, research is not necessarily about recording knowledge, but practicing it (van Stam 2019). Imagining a space-time where Ubuhlalism has been taken on by the researcher, to mirror the format of Living Learning (Figlan et al. 2009), research questions and aims should be generated by and with the community, while always being up for debate. This would allow for an evolving set of research questions and parameters that more closely recognises the needs and knowledges of the community at that time. The notes and outcomes of this research should be disseminated back to the community, in their own languages in a way that they can understand, allowing further discussion and reorientation.

Careful consideration should be applied to what research is off-limits, what is being refused by both the community and the researcher (Tuck and Yang 2013; Sheik 2023a). This is not to say the researcher is outside of, or discrete from, the community, as an Ubuhlalist praxis demands active participation. If we collapse the insider/outsider positionalities between researcher and community, generative multiplicities emerge. Refusing dualisms and dichotomies, it is possible to imagine a porous borderland between the researcher and community that allows the community to retain its integrity without entrenching difference. The pathway of the researcher coming into-community also inform a mode of solidarity that goes beyond speech-acts into research as a service. Research as a service also becomes a way to disconnect theory (the result of study) from being a product that can be bought, sold and commodified in the neoliberal university.

The individualistic nature of research, and research pathways like being a student, continue to trouble me. Unlike other (traditional, Western) universities where the individual consumes and creates knowledge, in the knowledge system of Abahlali, these activities are undertaken communally. Here I am thinking with Figlan et al. (2009) who, in the context of their future graduation from the UKZN course, muse that "thinking about the graduation ceremony (which [we] can only imagine because [we] have never been there before). How? How can we receive the certificate? Is it in the name of those who sent us? Or is it for me? If it is for me, then that is stealing from the people" (60). Figlan et al. raise important questions about institutional accreditation that individualises knowledge and expertise, one that presupposes an academic could somehow, for example, be more of an expert on poverty than the poor themselves. I wonder what university would grant me accreditation if I signed this thesis or a future PhD with the names of every participant in the project, and not just my own?

In this imagined future project, Figlan et al. (2009) have poignant reminders. When hypothesising *Living Learning* before it was published they said:

> Written stuff is powerful. Now imagine *this* [*Living Learning*] publication – even with your own photograph in it. It is an invitation to the world to 'take your time and read it', you can learn from it, it is living – not in the distant past. It can generate and provoke debate and discussion, even critique, and even among academic intellectuals. If this happens, it can only take us further. (Figlan et al. 2009, 59)

I read the authors' reference to seeing their own photographs in a publication as authors (and not as those being researched) as an insistence on their own capacity for theorising and ownership of knowledge that is produced about them. How can knowledge produced about Abahlali belong to anyone but themselves? The notion that I am the sole author of this thesis is an inaccurate and incomplete picture of a process that involves countless others, whether this is feminist knowledges or the knowledges of AbM.

In the context of academic publishing, however, I struggle to imagine a situation where members of Abahlali who are not involved in the economies of academia (through an accreditation programme) would be interested or have time to be involved in the written labours of what is necessary to produce for this thesis or a future PhD dissertation. Admittedly, my imagination is limited in no small part due to my positionality. However, this hypothesis points to the absolute necessity of alternative research outputs where some work would satisfy academic requirements and other work would be to satisfy the needs and interests of the AbM community. I have attempted to be in service to Abahlali, and will continue to do so, nevertheless, my contributions feel small compared to my own benefits.

## 5.2 Feminist Futures

Desire lines show how pedestrians, people with mobility aids, runners, dogs, cows, cats, cyclists and even insects have evaded the concrete laid out for them. These paths streak through cities and backyards, ignoring signs to keep off the grass and maps that say 'go away'. Footsteps plant desire into the soil and a wayward path is formed. Feet persist in making their own way. If we see research in academia as the street corner, what can be gained from refusing the pavement and following a line of desire? Canons, curriculums, methodologies and research questions are the concrete slabs that tell us where to walk, but what if we listen, really listen, to desire lines?

This thesis must adhere, as per the GEMMA guidelines, to writing from a feminist/gender perspective and be relevant to Women's and Gender Studies. I do not know what Women's and Gender

Studies are, but I know these fields began with issues of gender, applying a gender lens when looking at the world. Over time, Women's and Gender Studies complicated their analyses by paying attention to issues of race, sexuality, poverty, disability and an ever-increasing list of othering factors and categories. Despite having studied these fields, I am yet to encounter a suitable definition. However, I believe the consensus is that these fields are fundamentally feminist and make use of/produce feminist theory. However, as feminist scholar Sarah Ahmed (2017) asks "what is this thing called feminist theory?" (7). She goes on to explain:

> When I arrived in women's studies, I noticed how I would sometimes be recruited by the term *feminist theory*, as a different kind of feminist than other kinds of feminists, those assumed, say, to be more empirical, which seemed to be conflated with less theoretical, or less philosophical. I have always experienced this recruitment as a form of violence. (Ahmed 2017, 8)

As Ahmed points out, feminists seem to have created their own hierarchy of feminisms/feminists where feminist theory is valued more highly than feminist living—troubling when feminism claims to critique hierarchy. Many feminists have responded to the restrictive nature of separatist hierarchies by following their own lines of desire and claiming their lived experience as theory. Where academia attempts to create disciplinarity, feminists have shattered disciplinary silos in favour of global networks of interconnected thinking, doing and being-with.

Following Ahmed's advice that "to become a feminist is to stay a student" (2017, 11), this thesis takes up the notion of feminist study seriously by studying Abahlali and Ubuhlalism on their own terms. This mode of feminist study, informed by Harney and Moten (2013) and the University of AbM is a site of resistance, a way of planning to challenge the status quo, and a sustained attention to the lived experiences of others and my own. Although this thesis does not centre gender in its analysis, it is irrevocably feminist. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) highlighted the importance of intersectionality in feminism. Namely, that gender should not be seen as the primary axis of difference but rather that categories such as race, class and disability should be interwoven with gender in feminist analysis. Jasbir Puar (2012) complicates intersectional theory and makes a case for an intersectional assemblage that reconceptualises intersectionality as a complex set of processes, resisting the notion of static and stable categories. By reading intersectionality as an assemblage, Puar allows us to see these sites of difference as a co-constituting grid of moving parts. Thus, without erasing gender, this thesis focusses primarily on processes, such as racialisation, and how these processes work to withhold and deny Abahlali's futurity. By highlighting processes over categories, I aim to destabilise categories that are (still) taken for granted and

honour Abahlali's self-conceptions as a social movement that prioritises racialisation and gender but does so through centring poverty and dispossession. This thesis centres the criminalisation/racialisation of poverty in its feminist theory and analysis to open up space for how these processes can be resisted and subverted. These avenues allow this thesis to study Abahlali on their own terms without leaving feminist principles of multiplicity, radical marginality, minoritized epistemologies, communal ways of knowing, relationality, care, and personal accountability behind.

Without labelling Abahlali as feminist, as this does not align to their self-definition, I see their work and worldview as inherently feminist. In Ubuhlalism, knowledge is what a community comes to know about itself through incorporating the individual narratives of that community into a greater whole, not dissimilar to Black Feminist Epistemology that centres lived knowledges (Hill Collins 1999). Further, Abahlali have the social liberation of women built into their movement because women's concerns are foregrounded in their struggles. Feminism is also not only about women and feminism pays attention to issues of poverty and racialisation, as do Abahlali. This makes the study of AbM not only feminist, but relevant to Women's and Gender Studies.

Regarding the additional relevance of this thesis to Women's and Gender studies, I have argued for a situated feminist approach to research as a service. In academia, it is possible to believe that the results of the research we do (articles and papers) are not relevant to, nor desired by, the people and groups we do research with. But, why are we doing research if the people we are doing research with are not interested in what we produce? Feminist research as solidarity should avoid extractive research that produces knowledge circulated only in academia and attempt to be in service of our participants. In this situated feminist research praxis, I also critique the individualistic nature of knowledge production. As Ubuhlalism (and others) shows, knowledge belongs to a community and not an individual. Further, claims to knowledge through authorship obscure the reality of shared, lived knowledges. Feminist scholar María Lugones (2003) troubles the notion of research and writing as an individual activity acknowledges the collective nature of research and writing (172). Thus, how can I claim that this thesis was written by me? This thesis would not have been possible without AbM, not only due to their acceptance of me as a community participant, but the untold labour of the organisation's counter-archive. Further, how can I write a sentence without citing every feminist I have ever read and spoken to? This knowledge is ours, not mine. These knowledges are also always incomplete and the only answer I have found to my questions so far, is listening.

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