

CHAPTER 5

THIS IMAGE MAY CONTAIN... : A VISUAL AND AURAL ARTICULATION OF RESEARCH INTO NOTIONS OF SPECULATIVE INDIGENEITIES

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter is built in three parts. In the first part, a rationale of sorts, my aim is to briefly share context: of myself, my journey to where I find myself currently and what nurtures my research interests. In the second part, I share an overview of my doctoral research. The third part is reflective. Given the benefit of hindsight, my aim is to think back on what led to the making of the installation that became the final chapter of my PhD. This third section is supported by a short film and an audio piece and aims to offer some insight into the process leading up to the making of the installation and some detail of the various parts. Key to this section will be addressing a range of quandaries around how decisions were made to extend what was intended as a textual analysis of an event to include a set of arts practices: installation, video and sound art and poster design. These three sections are bookended by this introduction and a conclusion.

A RATIONALE OF SORTS

I have never really thought of myself as an artist, if I am honest. My work and interests, however, have allowed me to meander through various supporting roles ranging from scaffold monkey to production manager, to curator to documentary filmmaker and much of the minutiae in between. Of late I have been playing across a range of academic domains – urban studies, architecture, sociology and fine art – satiating my curiosity of the outer edges of academic things, exploring the peripheries and beyond of the constructs of knowledge-making. What drives these explorations has been a recent, albeit fragmentary, interest in unpacking the value of dissonance – not knowing – as a strategy to unsettle age-old normative constructs. These troublings, as it were, align with my interest in projects that extend thinking and doing beyond the now-familiar ubiquitousities of ‘radical thinking’. In the same way that creativity became *the* panacea to catapult thinking out of a wide range of challenges facing social science research, radical thinking, from what I have witnessed across the disciplines I engage in, has found a similar groove. Its, arguably, wide-ranging purchase has rendered it palatable, familiar, banal even. This main-streaming of the left-field/ blue-sky/ out-the-box interventions is understandable in view of the increasingly complex problems we are facing – climate change, epistemic injustices, social tensions and increased political incompetence to name a few.

More recently, a growing strategy to organise and (re)act towards these conundrums has recommended a dash towards speculative processes as a means to satiate the urgent need for immediate solutions. However, and not to undermine the well-meaning suggestions that have emerged through somewhat perplexingly conventional processes of *radical* thinking, evidence of these forays into speculative terrains points to a numbing of the inherent potential to think audaciously, unreasonably even, in favour of the demand for chronically comprehensible and well-meaning propositions. In response to these observations, my work endeavours to confront these banal radicalities in playful and perhaps raucous ways, in order to propose a turn towards the outrageous. Bolstered by this rationale, I lean into my experiences in the curatorial space, shepherding ideas into spaces: conceptual, theoretical, sometimes actual, to understand and articulate what emerges from their juxtaposition. The licence to play in these spaces has grown exponentially since I qualified. Now, with the privilege of hindsight, I understand that these particular experiments found a useful and valuable rehearsal during my doctoral research.

AN OVERVIEW OF MY RESEARCH FOCUS

The starting point of my doctoral research study began with a broad and unwieldy question – *what would Zimbabwe look like if colonisation didn't happen?* This question arose with regard to the launch of the Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment Act (IEEA) in 2007. This act was designed to legislate who could claim the title of indigenous in Zimbabwe. Being a second generation immigrant to the country, I felt compelled to build an understanding of the mechanisms of indigeneity in Zimbabwe as a form of place-making. More specifically, what did (or, still does) it mean to *be* indigenous in present-day Zimbabwe? I chose to centre my inquiry around the conceptual and theoretical constructs of indigenosity as it related to processes of indigenisation that were laid out in the IEEA (2007). I began my investigation with a broad historical, anthropological and etymological survey of the term 'indigenous' as a means to understand how it was interwoven, contextually, with Zimbabwe and its socio-political lifespan. Methodologically, my approach was designed as an interdisciplinary and experimental research inquiry that processed the range of ontological debates that emerged in relation to the term's politically manipulated elasticity. In recognising this malleability, my aim was to propose an expansion of the probabilities of 'indigenities' within the range of existing socio-political, economic and historical analyses of indigenosity and indigenisation in Zimbabwe.

The primary site of my investigation was the independence-day ceremony that took place at the National Sports Stadium in Harare, Zimbabwe on the 18th of April 2017. This focus was motivated by two distinctive elements at this event – a banner that declared “ZIMBABWE WILL NEVER BE A COLONY AGAIN” and a fragment from the president's speech that asserted, “we can now call ourselves full masters of our destiny” (Mugabe, 2017). This particular event stood as a crucial nexus for the debates and questions that my research endeavoured to pose regarding notions of indigenisation, indigenosity and any evident registers of indigeneity. Socio-political analyses (Raftopoulos & Mlambo, 2009; Mlambo, 2013; Monda, 2016; Ndlovu-Gatheni, 2009; Muchemwa, 2010; Willems, 2013) of this annual ritual tower above the lacuna of analysis

of its performance logics. Recognising this as an opportunity, I honed in on a performance-specific inquiry, both as a means to contribute new thinking, as well as a way to make evident my penchant for dissonance and peripheral inquiry. My aim with this specificity was to bring a sharp focus on the performative elements of the ceremony. With this I recast the independence-day ceremony through the logics of a show and doing so rummaged through a range of as yet untouched minutiae – what was the script? Who directed the staging? What do the performers' costumes tell us? What informed the set design and the props? By posing these questions of this event, what I uncovered were layers of intrigue, confusion and productive contradictions.

Speculative research processes were finding active purchase across various academic domains in 2017-2018, serendipitously around the mid-point of my research process. Looking at the information I'd garnered from the performance analyses, I set about asking a set of 'what-if' questions of the paradoxes I'd discovered (Savransky et al, 2017; Dunne & Raby, 2013). What materialised from this abstraction was a kind of hyper-proliferation of the possibilities with which to read the ceremony – both critically as well as with a measure of notional generosity. For the penultimate chapter of the dissertation, I then enacted a conceptual rehearsal of all the matter generated through an expanded understanding of queer theory. With this turn (Rogoff, 2008), I drew on queer theory's championing of multiplicities as a strategy to dislodge what I uncovered as, perhaps surreptitious, though, clearly evident logics of monolithic normativity that were being manipulated to legislate rubrics of indigeneity in contemporary Zimbabwe. Having reached this stage, I found myself facing a conundrum. The question that I found myself asking was: is it enough to land at this stage? Put another way, were the textual analyses adequate as the unique contribution to the academic canon required of a doctoral-level research project? The written arguments made were, judging by supervisory approval, sufficient. The question arose as to what kinds of possibilities were there to go beyond the written word?

A key push-factor, for me, was a kind of raucous aspiration¹⁶ to "unsettl[e] the present" (Dunne & Raby, 2013:88), academically, that is. At the time I was writing the dissertation, in 2018, the notion of experiment had gained noteworthy traction. Posited as one of a range of interventions that could respond to growing calls to decolonialise institutions, curricula and various problematic societal constructs, devising experiments had become useful mechanisms to test the limitations of the norm. In my case, the evidence that I had at hand from the performance analysis of the independence-day event made clear a set of 'norms' – elements that had gone unchanged or fixed since the event's inception – bordering on the notion of ritual even. The 2017 event marked the 37th iteration of the same set of actions. This was remarkable especially with regard to the energy created by the launch of the IEEA a decade earlier. What was still being performed made no sense – politically, sociologically and performatively – given what was being proposed within the detail and aspirations of the indigenisation act. Additionally, 2017 marked the last year of the decades-long reign of

16 The launch of the IEEA (2007) caused such great upheaval in the lives of many Zimbabweans causing all manner of confusion and collapse. While there are ample analyses that are both supportive and critical, the reality has resulted in an overall downturn in community relations in Zimbabwe. This was significant for me and many people I know. This was a significant driving force for my doctoral research.

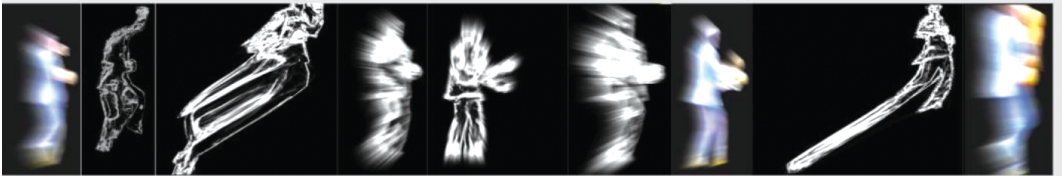
the then ruler of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe.¹⁷ This was significant since he was credited as both the architect and the champion of all matters indigenous in Zimbabwe and elsewhere. So, the grounds to experiment were bounteous and flourishing.

(Before reading further, it would be helpful to watch the film and listen to the audio piece that accompany this chapter)



Video 5.1: *this image may contain* - [here](#). Video artwork by heeten bhagat.

Audio 5.2: *this image may contain* soundscape - [here](#). Sound artwork by heeten bhagat.



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a visual articulation of research into notions of speculative indigeneities

Figure 5.1: Fragment of the poster designed for the installation. Artwork by heeten bhagat.

17 In November 2017, Mugabe resigned as president of ZANU-PF and of the country. Or, as he and others would see it, he was ousted. Furthermore, some analyses suggested an illegal coup d'état (Mackintosh, 2017; Cotterill, 2017), others thought it was more like a soft coup (Pilling, 2017; Chikiwore and Davis, 2017). Nonetheless, the military took over, temporarily, for about a week, to restore order. Dubbed "Operation Restore Legacy" (Mandaza and Reeler, 2018; Mnangagwa, 2017; International Crisis Group, 2017), this transition, led by Emmerson Mnangagwa, the former vice-president that Mugabe had recently fired, and Constantino Chiwenga, the general of the armed forces taking over. They are still in power today.

THE EXPERIMENT(S)

What I had in mind was a subject-in-formation, on the one hand far too ambitious and on the other far too personally motivated, and these seemed respectively unachievable and unavoidable, given the intellectual tools and models of analysis and the modes of writing I had at my disposal. (Rogoff 2000: 1)

In this final section, I will reflect on the reasonings and methods that led to the production of a multi-media installation that synthesises various aural and visual elements from the 2017 independence-day event to simultaneously expose a range of instabilities that materialised from a close reading of the event, in order to strengthen the case for the concluding proposition of my research as well as to push the limits of traditional scholarly outputs beyond the written word. What I already had in hand at the penultimate stage of my research study was theoretically and conceptually adequate and yet still wanting of some further synthesis. This posed a distinct challenge – my having to contend with my limited skills as a writer. As mentioned earlier, there was a consensus from the supervisors that the textual analyses up to this stage of research was sound. Nevertheless, there still was potential to push the project further. Furthermore, there was space for a concluding chapter, of sorts.

Conversations with supervisors and colleagues shifted into the territory of practice, as both a worthy space for trial as well as a suitably risky manoeuvre to warrant the elusive ‘original contribution’ that is the basis of a successful doctoral research study. So began the quest for the final chapter of my doctoral research study. The steps leading up to the experiments were in themselves frantic and yet, overall, surprisingly efficient. Discussions with my supervisors revolved around the possibilities of extending academic prose into the realm of conceptual poetry. The conceptual landscape of the latter was invigorating. Having developed a sturdy yet eclectic conceptual and theoretical foundation (i.e. the preceding chapters of the dissertation) offered a lavish resource from which to both explore and experiment. The various experiments shown in the short film (that accompanies this chapter) are the elements that I am putting forward as evidence of a turn through the methodology of PaR.

An integral element of the research study involved examining several hours of footage, from multiple sources, detailing the independence-day 2017 event. This was extremely useful for the purposes of generating the performance analyses. Looking back with another lens into the material for this final stage was pretty taxing, as I remember. Pouring over the elements to develop pages and pages of textual description had excavated the footage of any visual curiosity. From this side of the project, I can only speculate that having declared this as a barren landscape, visually that is, allowed for a distinct and opportune surprise. Another round of detailed scrutiny of the event for evidence of indigenouness/ indigeneities yielded a gem. Lurking in the minutiae was a single character through whom I could make productive a speculative projection of an overlooked, undiscovered even, register of indigeneity. I could also stretch this further, conceptually, to present his performance as a device that could expose the persistent



Figure 5.2: Compilation of images taken from screenshots of *Mr Hoshō's* performance. Compiled by heeten bhagat.

colonial register of the performative elements as well as suggest that he be a unicorn of sorts – that element that could unsettle the colonial fixity of the entire ceremony. Bolstered by this impetus, his performance became the site of a slew of experimenting.

This character, from the independence-day ceremony, known popularly as *Mr Hoshō* (Masau, 2013), was (and still is) a member of the police marching brass band. His instruments – a pair of hand-held maranka gourd-shaped shakers, known locally (in Zimbabwe) as *hoshō* – explained his moniker. The police brass band that he is a part of, with its colonially regimented uniform, dark green suits embellished with gold braids and tassels, topped with a stiff peaked cap hark back to an era that, visually at least, challenges the tenets of post-colonial independence. Added to this, their routine, replete with parade-marching styles and glistening brass instruments, actively confounded notions of localness, exposing a misguided if not surreal claim of cultural independence associated with post-colonial freedoms. (This dilemma is productively nourished by their annually persistent presence in this concert a full 37 years after the advent of independence!). Embedded in the hours of footage I had reviewed lay a 20-second clip that visually and aurally platformed *Mr Hoshō's* unique performance style. As you will notice in the short film (that accompanies this chapter), his energetic and liberated choreography clearly stands at odds with the rest of his band mates. As a matter of fact, looking through footage of previous independence-day ceremonies and other official events at which the police band performs, his style, as much as theirs, is unchanging. His routine morphed in my mind into a kind of visual scream – akin to an urgent insistence to shift our attention to a conveniently forgotten past encased in a rigid colonial mould.

There was an entire world of possibilities that had begun to proliferate. Each time I watched his act more detail surfaced – choreographically, geographically, sociologically and speculatively. The 20-second clip grew richer and its potential the more intriguing. For me, it truly began to disrupt the rest of the independence-day ceremony in a wonderfully perplexing and confounding manner – divisive, queer, jester-like – strategically “janus-faced” (Bhabha 1990:6), “at once menace as it is resemblance” (Bhabha 1994:86). This clip generated a bounty of visual, textual and aural prototypes that formed the basis of the various elements for the installation. This turn to practise, with this new material, found a logical and thankfully opportune justification.

The installation comprised four main components – two video elements, a sound piece and a stack of takeaway posters. The timing of the event also had a particular significance. It was staged for 6 hours, beginning at 6.00 pm and ending at midnight. For this once-only event, I drew a connection to the very first independence-day ceremony that took place

on the evening of the 17th of April 1980, as a moment, perhaps a gateway that could offer a portal to a present that has yet to surface. Each of the four components held a microcosm of details that worked to connect them to various elements of my research study. As time has passed since the staging, revisiting the body of the work has allowed each component to flourish in meaning. These articulations were not fully available at the time.

Of the video elements, one was projected onto a splintered mirrored surface that resulted in a fractured rendition of *Mr. Hoshō's* unique performance. This rendering multiplied his presence as if he could have been the entire band. This extraction from the band, celebrating his singularity, was imagined as curiously introspective as much as it was also a satirical provocation. Aimed to align with Bakhtin's treatise on the carnival and the carnivalesque, this extraction from the band and multiplication of *Mr Hoshō's* performance, argued for a conception of the carnival as a particularly cathartic moment of unrestricted freedom that aligns with notions of liberation, freedom and independence – “the world on its head” (1984:150). This intervention involved a range of practices: video enhancing and editing software, sculptural thinking and doing, and processes of video art and projection mechanics.

The second video was more contained. Held within a kaleidoscopic cone-like sculpture, the device was designed to multiply clips from the independence-day routine – *Mr. Hoshō* and the band he marches with – in another way. With this experiment I was playing with the possibilities of extending theoretical constructs of ‘triangulation’ towards a notion of “crystallization as dendritic, an ongoing and dispersed process of making meaning through multiple epistemologies and genres, constituted in a series of separate but related representations based on a data set” (Ellingson, 2011:124).

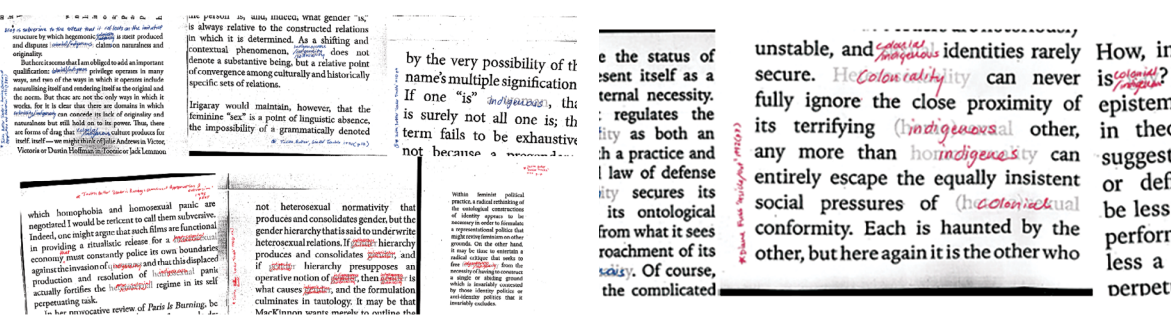
The sound piece emerged from another data set at play. There were key moments from the president's speech that, when juxtaposed with *Mr Hoshō's* routine, generated a conceptual troubling that was really astonishing and challenging to describe in words. As with the manipulation of the video footage, there was the potential to produce a more complex texture from the various snippets of audio available, namely: the president's speech, the music of the band, the *hoshōs* and also the underlying and often overlooked tones, knocks, clicks and burrs embedded in footage of public events. When I listened more closely a sort of orchestra of sound materialised. Registers of the operatic as much as the interstitial were apparent. The former, operatic, worked to provoke the inherent conceit of the independence-day concert; the latter endeavoured to platform the overlooked minutiae that became vital in the conceptual undoing of the ceremony. On various visits to the site of the installation, I was aware of its actual physical limitations. Working with this and not wanting to defer to compromise, the sound piece was designed not only to support the video elements but also to distort the physical setting of the installation site. The overall intention was to create a soundscape that could transcend the actual location of the installation and suggest another time, to dislocate any direct relation to the event whilst still working with elements from it. This all was imagined through the peripheral mechanisms that speculative and queer processes allowed.

The takeaway posters drew on passages from two important queer theorists to play out a visual and thought experiment. In my thesis, I made an argument to align heteronormatively imposed binaries of female/male gendering with those of indigenous and colonial framings.

In doing so, I proposed a reading of both the conceptual framing of terms and of the theoretical rendering of the text using a drag sensibility. This experiment was inspired by the film *Paris is Burning* (Livingstone, 1992), and a particular feature in events known as drag balls. 'Reading' or 'being read' indicates a situation in which contestants are assessed to gauge a measure of their "[r]ealness" (Butler, 1993:387). In his analysis of the film, *Paris is Burning*, Gregory suggests that 'reading' is "one of the primary ways in which the performers in the drag ball scene flex their intellectual muscle" (1998:19). The provocation suggested here was that it could be designed to deliver a sharp satirical 'reading' of coloniality. The strategic twist was to conceive of an alternative narrative of the criticism of the persistence of colonial registers within post-colonial performances (Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Muzondidya, 2011; Mbembe, 2001). The passages, drawn from Judith Butler's *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* (1990) and Diane Fuss's *Inside/out: lesbian theories, gay theories* (1991), were reproduced to mimic appropriated book texts with certain words faded and replaced with 'hand written' provocations.

READING/BEING READ AS METHOD

In this method Heeten bhagat proposes applying the drag ball practice of 'reading' to the context of coloniality. 'Reading' or 'being read' indicates a situation in which drag contestants are assessed to gauge a measure of their "[r]ealness" (Butler, 1993:387). Heeten proposes that in the way that 'reading' is a critique that troubles the oppressive hegemony of gender binaries with deft intellectual wit, oppressive colonial impositions on indigeneity might be similarly troubled through this queer critical and rhetorical form.



Figures 5.3 and 5.4: Selection of the posters. Artwork by Francis Burger.

Overall, what I was aiming for with the installation was to draw these complex and perhaps disconnected elements into a space to see what transpired from their juxtaposition. Theoretically, this was underpinned by Hans Ulrich Obrist's understanding of Damisch's suggestion of "installation as a network ... [that breaks] away from a continuous, linear practice ... [to explore] other possible dimensions" (2001:95). The actual staging, in space: the ontological being of the things, was more momentous than I'd expected. There was a

majesty that, in its physical existence, for me at least, *matched* the ceremonial grandeur of the original independence-day celebration on the 17th of April 1980. An audacious claim no doubt, but I am making it. I must admit, having to use words, now, to rationalise the choices I made is akin to explaining the punch line of an abstract joke. In developing the text for this chapter, however, the limitations of my experiment have emerged – as is the convention of hindsight. Taking full cognisance of the restraints imposed by a work of academic rigor, I have come to see these observations, these post-experiment gaps as opportunities to extend the work, to play some more.

Human capacity is, in reverse, a definition of the impossible that incredibly surrounds us. We are what we are not, is the paradox of fiction. What is not observed, sharply observes that which is. What is not said qualifies all that is said. (Marechera 1990:32)

CONCLUSION

Looking at this project from this end of the timeline, the one thing I can be truly thankful for was the freedom to experiment. What is kind of unsettling, though, is having to put it forward as a set of linear steps, knowing it was not so. As artists of various mediums know all too well, the work they (we?) make is often driven by a deep sense of curiosity. The result of which, equally often, does not always align with their original intention. As I embarked on the set of experiments to extend the textual analyses I had at hand, what I had in mind was a somewhat embarrassingly grandiose ambition to somehow expand *Mr Hoshō's* performance to offer a set of "...speculative propositions [that would]... infect the very manner in which the world 'goes on'" (Savransky, 2017:35). Where it landed is understandably subjective. More so, writing this chapter has given me a chance to think through the various elements. Making sense of the process, with the benefit of hindsight, is both useful and a glorious conceit.

Ultimately, I was driven by my inability to find words that could accurately express where I found myself in relation to the bodies of knowledge I needed to cohere to frame my evolving research capacities. This was further exacerbated by needing to extend into another realm – not to solve anything, but rather to, as queer(ing) does and advocates, invite more complexity to seemingly wicked problems.

And now, I have more words that were not available to me then, almost definitely a sign of my nascence.

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