

CHAPTER 14

PRACTICE AS RESEARCH IN DEVELOPING SAAMTREKKING AS A PERFORMANCE ART PRACTICE

By Peter Andrew Hamish van Heerden

INTRODUCTION

The thrust of my performance practice as research stems from the title of my MA:

TOTANDERKUNTUIT: *hitchhiking on the ox-wagon of destiny*
VOORTREKKER – DRAADTREKKER – SAAMTREKKER

At the time of studying for my MA in 2001 and 2002, the focus of my practice evolved into me using my physical and historical whiteness, in particular the placement of my hegemonic white masculinity, into the context of South Africa's newly post-apartheid landscape. My practice used this whiteness, this masculinity as a point of departure for practice as research in the context of a South Africa that was transitioning from an apartheid state into a democratic nation that sought to redress the gross racial injustices of apartheid and colonialism.



Figure 14.1: Peter van Heerden at the National Arts Festival (2004), Makhanda, dressed in costume as a saamtrekker. Photograph by Anthony Strack van Schyndel.



Figure 14.2: Peter van Heerden, Chelvin 'Selwyn' Engelbrecht and Andrae Laubscher at the National Arts Festival (2004), Makhanda, in costume as saamtrekkers. Photograph by Anthony Strack van Schyndel.

My MA work explored what happens to white hegemonic masculinity when it is re-engendered and re-constructed into a new history. My research looked into the history of my whiteness, its change/transition into a new space, and what that might look like. The practice took the body and forced a process of cathartic re-enactment. This action created a new performative ‘history’ presented in the current moment. The practice and research sought to unpack the past within the present to enable the future. I named this evolution *saamtrekking*. *Saam* in translation from Afrikaans means together; and *trekking* in translation means pulling. History, the body’s experience, whiteness and the lived experience were pulled together in my practice and presented in a new moment in time, a new view of history. My research and practice explored this ‘pulling together’ as *saamtrekking*: the pulling together of the physical and representative self. As a performer and artist my research and practice has continued to explore my hegemonic white masculinity. Twenty years on, and now living in the United States, I continue to use *saamtrekking* as a performative act for practicing and ‘abjecting’ my white masculinity in the context of a world still fighting for a fuller realisation of democracy and suffering the consequences of long histories of systemic racism. My current work, performing for Nora Chipaumire in *Nehanda*, embodies all whiteness as I play a representation of European Empire in modern colonialism. Within the work, I play both conqueror and conquered as I ‘abject’ and reconstruct the ‘white’ Empire and its representation in a new moment. This chapter explores the process of my MA through which I first developed my practice of *saamtrekking*.



Figure 14.3: The programme and poster for the live art installation, *TOTANDERKUNTUIT*, performed at Fort Selwyn for 14 days as part of the National Arts Festival, Makhanda. Photograph by Anthony Strack van Schyndel.

INITIAL MA METHODS

Born and bred in South Africa, although a white man, I used my practice as research MA at the UCT Drama Department³⁶ to explore what my ‘whole African Identity’ might be in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. To do this I started investigating figures of tyranny, savagery, colonialism; representations of the hegemonic white masculinity, specifically those born in a South African historical context. My research started with looking into theories of space and place and specific sites of historical conflict within South Africa. I researched the Anglo-Boer War (also known as the South African War³⁷) skirmishes with the British, sites of execution of Boer commanders and then, from more recent apartheid history, sites of the execution of the Pebco Three and Cradock Four. The Pebco Three and Cradock four were both groups of young, black South African men that were abducted and killed by the security police during the height of apartheid in South Africa. The truth and details of these young men’s stories came to light during the hearings for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1996-2002).

My research looked at and exhumed the ‘executor’ at these sites: at the ‘executor’ as ‘colossus,’ as ‘tyrant’, and as ‘white African male archetype’. This archetype was defined as a white man, the body, the person or individual who stood at this site, who found himself there in this site of conflict. This research, in some manner, defined and built a character for me. Through the research, an imagined ‘man’ or ‘figure’ came into being. This ‘being’ then provided a path forward for my practice; a method for me to embody and activate this ‘figure’.



Figure 14.4: The uitspan of the ox-wagon and site of the live art installation *TOTUNDERKUNTUIT* featuring the *saamtrekkers* Peter Van Heerden, Chelvin ‘Selwyn’ Engelbrecht and Andrae Laubscher. Photograph by Philip Bolt.

36 Now the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies.

37 See SA History Online for an overview of the South African War: <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/second-anglo-boer-war-1899-1902>.

Once I had located and imagined this figure through my research, which entailed detailed mapping of these sites of conflict, site visits and research, this imagined figure would undergo a ritual of physical abjection in the studio through performance and practice, to manifest a new physical reality in the present. In the studio, through this practice, I developed a new archetype, a new performative character to bring to the stage. This new character was then placed in the new reality of my performance, and as the work unfolded so the character was presented and de-constructed to show the audience the possibility of a new reality in a new theatrical and historical moment.

This process became the pattern of my PaR. I would start with historical research (primary and secondary sources of written material), paired with site visits to the key historical locations. Alongside the historical research, I was reading space and place theory, along with critical theory more generally that might provide conceptual lenses to articulate what I was doing. Then I would work, through physical improvisation in the studio, with the factual and sensory knowledge I had gathered as well as materials (for example: soil, an ox-yoke) to develop character, landscape and ritual. This studio work was part of the abjection and re-construction ritual I was looking to enact through my practice-as-research, but it did ultimately culminate in structured performances for public audiences.



Figures 14.5 and 14.6: Images of the performance work *so is 'n os gemaak* performed nightly as part of the live art installation, *TOTUNDERKUNTUIT*, at the National Arts Festival, Makhanda. Photograph by Philip Boltz.

SOLO MA PERFORMANCE: SO IS 'N OS GEMAAK

In 2002 in the final year of my MA in Theatre and Performance at UCT, we were asked to create a solo performance work. For my project I created a work titled *so is 'n os gemaak*, which, loosely translated from Afrikaans to English, is 'this is how an ox is made'. My research for this project began with the white male Afrikaner body in the context of

the Anglo-Boer War. In essence this was a fight by the Boers for freedom from British rule of the region which was ultimately to become the state of South Africa. The Boers were the originators of the Afrikaner race that came to govern South Africa from 1910 to 1994. Descendants from colonial Europe, the Boers were formed and identified as a people through their flight from British rule in the Cape Colony. They moved north, subjugating and oppressing the southern African black peoples whose land they traversed and occupied. As Britain aspired to extend the Cape colony to include the land the Boers had claimed as their territory through the subjugation of black southern African peoples, the British and the Boers came to war.

More than the war itself, it was the way the Boers fought the war and the sacrifice of the human body that intrigued me as potentially valuable to what I was researching through my practice. I remember a specific section of Deneys Reitz's book *Commando* (2009), in which he describes the Boers being on horseback for days, their clothes in tatters and covering themselves with *mielie* sacks that froze over their bodies in the highveld air – what a picture. What was this condition like? What power did the body hold to sustain this? To place oneself on the edge of death for belief in a right to a place? My research then embraced the transition from the body to the beast, the horse and oxen that were staples of the Great Trek (the passage out of the Cape Colony by the Boers³⁸) and the Anglo-Boer War. These animals were instruments of the Boers' survival. Often the oxen fell dead for lack of water; often they pulled unimaginable weights over unpassable passes and through huge rivers. I focused my research on the power and pain of these beasts: the dirt in their hooves, the dirt of the earth, their thirst and starvation. What it meant – especially physically – for them to fight and die for a piece of earth under the burden of man, what it meant for man to fight for a piece of earth on the oxen's backs. How might this mixture of physical strength, endurance, determination (the Boers) and abjection and subjugation (the animals) be used to enact some kind of ritual as atonement for colonialism and apartheid and to initiate a reimagining of what the white Afrikaner male might be in constructively supporting a democratic South African future?

My initial totem was an ox-yoke I purchased from a vintage store. I took this object into the studio and began working and playing with it to explore its possibilities for a movement vocabulary and to find a way to encompass the ox and feel his burden. Through this work and exploration, I was able to develop a vocabulary which became the structure for my final project 'so is 'n os gemaak'. In line with this work, I was exploring historical texts and books related to the Great Trek and the Boer history in the Cape and trek beyond the Cape Colony. I researched costume, culture, ways of community, travel and all aspects of the Boer history as they headed from the Cape to the Transvaal.

Through the research of sites of historical conflict I was able to create a backdrop and type of storyboard. I developed a landscape for a character to inhabit. In these sites of historical conflict, I attended to both physical and meta-physical data, including: the smell,

38 See SA History Online for an overview of The Great Trek: <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/great-trek-1835-1846>.

the sound, the texture of the earth, topography, historical relevance. I wanted this new identity to live in a new created space; a space that had to be enacted and practiced, not a passive space. I started researching “thirdspace” by Edward Soja (1996), and Marc Augé’s theory of “non-place” (1992). These theories talk of how one needs to actively be in and move in space to create place. I created and performed this new ‘character’ in a space and developed a new place for him. A new reality was created for a new identity through my performance. The studio I worked in is housed in the old armoury for the Castle of Good Hope, a place of dense conflict and military history from the early occupation of the Cape by the Dutch. Within this site I placed the ox-yoke, a *bakkie* (truck) load of earth, a metal *trommel* (trunk) and an old South African flag. These objects together held a historical resonance within my research, and within the studio I began the process of unpacking and re-constructing their resonance in a new moment, a new space.

Through my research I realised that my body held its own history, its own narrative in relation to an African identity. My name is Peter Andrew Hamish van Heerden, but I am not an Afrikaner. I am considered a *soutpiel*, a derogatory term for ‘English’ Afrikaners, meaning in short that their ‘dicks’ are hanging in the sea as they have one foot in the UK and one foot in Africa, in a form not pure, not true. This became a point of reference for an identity in flux – an identity in motion trying to define itself.

Within my performance practice I developed mechanisms for a transformation of myself. This transformation provided for new reference points and hence a new performative practice for me as an artist. My performative practice worked to create ‘archetypes’, that existed in a new reality, a new history. They existed in this ‘non-place’ or ‘thirdspace’ I was wanting to create in my practice, a space of contradiction and change. My body became a site of practice in which performative identities and archetypes developed at the margins. The reference points for the shifting between identities became a method of practice for the formulation of new cultural identities. I conceived of this method of performative practice in terms of Julia Kristeva’s exploration of the abject as that which is “in-between, the ambiguous, the composite”, horrifying, as Kristeva argues, in “being something from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object” (1982:4). The abject became a method of practice for the dissolving of identities and archetypes, and allowed for the creation of new imagined archetypes. As a performer the act or physical enactment of abjection of my lived white masculinity, became a way to practice the identification of self, the abjection of self, and in those moments there came to life the formation of a new self, a new character or archetype. Arts reviewer, Max Rayneard, gives a good sense of how this looked in practice (and public performance) through his description of the final moment of *so is ’n os gemaak* as follows:

The final sequence of *so is ’n os gemaak* is difficult to watch. Narrating the processes involved in the castration of a bull, Van Heerden edges forward on all fours. His genitals, tied to the yoke by a thin rope, are pulled backward as he strains forward in a resonant image of the tension between tradition and

progress, between the old fashioned demands of masculinity and the necessity for painful compromise. (Rayneard, 2004)

FINAL MA PERFORMANCE: DEVELOPING THE WORK WITH OTHERS

The solo work above was developed in collaboration with other practitioners. My primary collaborator was social activist and pig farmer, Andrae Laubscher. Together we formed the *erf [81] cultural collective*. This collective was a foundational support to my PaR process and became our vehicle for a shared practice as research which followed a similar model to what I described in the previous section. We researched historical sites of conflict, physicalised this research and started to perform ritual enactments at these sites. Using my studio practice of physical improvisation to develop archetypal characters informed by South African history and then to re-imagine them through ritual processes, we created the *vrou* (Afrikaner woman), the *boer* (Afrikaner man), the beast (half man, half ox), and the ox. All of these characters were embodied and performed as fluid, merging and emerging identities. The practice became a lived experience as we would dress and act as this identity, both in performance and out – so a durational performance lifestyle was created to help develop and inform the ongoing PaR process.



Figure 14.7: The ox is born and comes to life. Images of the performance work *so is 'n os gemaak* performed nightly as part of the live art installation, *TOTUNDERKUNTUIT*, at the National Arts Festival, Makhanda. Photograph by Philip Boltz.



Figure 14.8: Images from the performance work *Flowers for my Flesh* shot at the Castle of Good Hope, Cape Town: 'the vrou and her mannetjie'. Photograph by Anthony Strack van Schyndel.

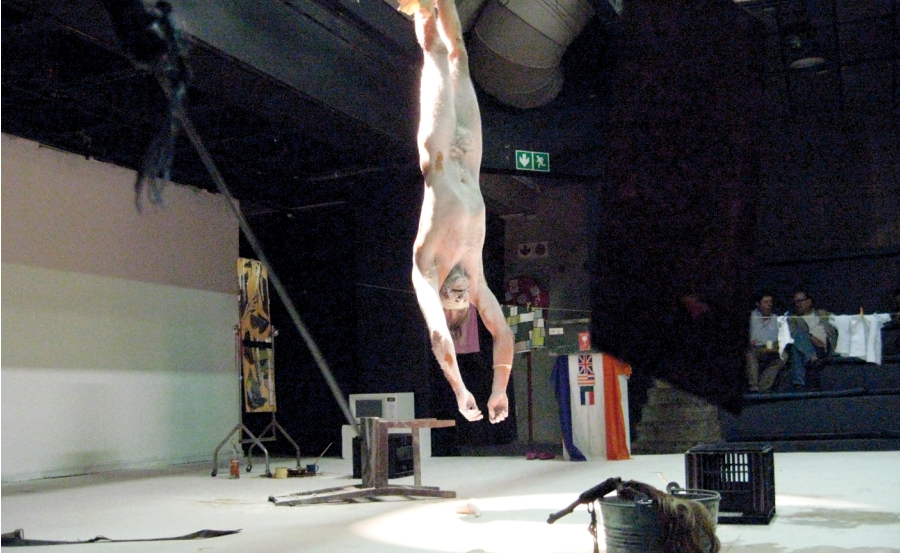


Figure 14.9: Final image of the performance work *6 Minutes* shot at the FNB Dance Umbrella in Johannesburg. Photograph by Anthony Strack van Schyndel.



Video 14.1: Edited video version of the performance work *so is 'n os gemaak* shot in Van Heerden's studio at erf 81, Tamboerskloof, Cape Town. Link to video available [here](#). Videography by Bradshaw Schaffer.

For my final MA project, for 13 days and nights, we occupied Fort Selwyn on Monument Hill in Makhandla for the National Arts Festival. When performing *saamtrekking*, we needed a specific space and construction of place to occur. Each day was dedicated to an act of performative history, past, present or future, where the historical day was deconstructed to develop a new history in that moment. As example: *Die dag van Bloed Rivier*, an infamous and terrible battle between the *amaXhosa* and the Boers, became a day to reflect on HIV and Aids. As a company we sat together and made babies out of recycled trash as a symbolic honouring of all children born HIV positive. Each day was a celebration of our lived history into the present and culminated each night in my performance work, *so is 'n os gemaak*.

The event became a reflection and contemplation on our lived history and the formation of a new history in dialogue with the festival patrons. We unpacked the past in the present in the hopes of better enabling a new future. Through this type of work, new conversations were made and history past and present was thrown into a constructive dialogue towards action for change.

CONCLUSION

My subsequent artistic work has taken numerous forms through various collaborations. However, looking back to the time of my MA, there was a clear process I went through with that work at that time: historical research, site visits and studio improvisation all leading up to moments of durational performance in sites and shorter, heightened public performances within these durational performances. What is clear to me is that, although the initial written historical source research and site visits offered the material (or research) for the improvisations and culminating durational performance and heightened, shorter performance events, the

improvisations, durational performance and heightened performance events were all also research to speak back to the written historical sources and the historical sites themselves. Myself and Andrae Laubscher in particular had certain activist intentions for the work, but we were also experimenting or asking the research question of how performance practice and our particular bodies with their identity markers as white, arguably Afrikaans men, might employ performance practice to contribute constructively to a democratic South Africa. *Saamtrekking*, pulling us together for a better world, was the performance practice that emerged and the intentions of that practice I still use today as an artist invested in defining new spaces of transformation that lead to new positive histories in the current moment.

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