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## Doing white differently? Playback Theatre and whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores how whiteness is enacted and negotiated from the perspective of a conductor in a Playback Theatre performance (PT). The article addresses how PT provides a stage for exercising opportunities for *doing white differently* in post-apartheid South Africa. It argues that *Doing white differently* takes place by recognising a distinction between the subjectivity of white individuals and the historic, colonial representations of whiteness in South Africa. Drawing on second-wave critical whiteness studies and agential realism, this article discusses the author's attempt to engage in a diffractive moment related to racial identities during a performance for university students.

### KEYWORDS

Playback Theatre; post-apartheid South Africa; whiteness; agential realism; diffractive ethnography

### Introduction

As a white Playback Theatre (PT) conductor, I am interested in investigating the ways in which PT provides a way of reimagining and practising new ways of understanding race and racial identities. The question asked is: how is whiteness intra-acted with, within a Playback Theatre Performance from a conductor perspective? This article contributes to discussions about whiteness, clearly articulated by Tanner (2016), and takes discussions in a new direction by painting a picture of whiteness enacted through a PT performance in post-apartheid South Africa. In South Africa, whiteness is not as invisible as in the United States due to whites being a minority governed by a black majority government. Yet, the scarring of whiteness due to apartheid and colonialism remains an open wound. In this environment, many white South Africans cannot avoid their whiteness so easily. Consequently, white people acknowledge they are white but often in a defensive manner that avoids conversations about whiteness and its violent impact.

I started going to school in the early nineties, which was an incredible time of change in South Africa. Apartheid was beginning to be dismantled, and for the first time in 1992, black students were admitted into government schools in the suburbs. Even though I was young, I was acutely aware of what a historically momentous moment this was. For me, this time was the beginning of forging many deep and meaningful interracial friendships which have educated and continue to educate me in multiple ways.

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I carry the experience of this with me in PT and other areas of my life which has helped me undertake the messy work of relating to whiteness, my role in it and how it plays out around me. Up until now, I have not attempted to examine and share this journey critically and so writing this piece is an effort to make some of that process transparent in the hope that other white people in South Africa and PT will be encouraged to do the same.

To do this, I examine an instance that occurred in a performance by Drama for Life Playback Theatre, a professional PT group in Johannesburg, at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in March 2019. The performance was part of an Applied Theatre Honours class, who were exploring the South African constitution within a human rights framework. Drama for Life Playback Theatre was brought in for the students to engage with what the South African constitution means in their everyday lives.

I did not come to the performance in a neutral manner. Although I had not engaged personally with this group of students, I have been part of the fabric of the Drama for Life programme since its inception. First as a scholar in 2008 and then as a sessional staff member and Artistic Director and founder of Drama for Life Playback Theatre. The debates, the challenges, the journey of this institute and university I know well. It has been the home of my professional training and upbringing. I have become an 'elder' in this space. However, I came into Drama for Life from a different perspective, as a visitor. I have been living in Norway since 2017 undertaking my PhD, and although I have been back to Drama for Life many times as part of my research, I am no longer in the daily grind of this university space. Of what it is to live in South Africa and the reality people face daily.

In the audience, there were approximately thirty students. All the students were black, and I was the only white person in the PT ensemble in the role of the conductor. In the audience sat three other white women, two staff members and one a drop-in student from another class. For those who are unfamiliar with PT, the role of the conductor simply put is to hold the overall ritual of a performance. This complex task entails being an intermediary between the PT performers and audience in encouraging and facilitating the audience to tell stories. The enactment of these stories then takes place through the performer's improvisations.

Working with PT in the context of post-apartheid South Africa for the last twelve years, I have grappled with the difficulties of how democracy is realised (or not) in everyday life. The atmosphere in PT performances is often fraught with anger, hurt and unspoken histories and is reflective of a society that has been unable to do the deep and continuous work of forging a properly embedded democracy. The performance that I examine held an undercurrent of this charged environment, which made me particularly aware of my whiteness in the setting of the PT performance.

I also feel it important to name that as a white conductor exploring the performance within this context, I found there to be challenging and ongoing tensions in reflecting on my whiteness both in the practice and in the writing of this article. It has been important to interrogate my whiteness while simultaneously negotiating my experience as embedded in specific historic and structural conditions of whiteness in South Africa. My whiteness in this article highlights another difficulty because I try and relate to this conundrum from a subjective place which is inevitably tied up in white historic privilege.

Joleen Steyn Kotze and Gary Prevost (2016) argue that South African citizens are experiencing a crisis in identity as a result of the enormous social, political and economic changes that have taken place over the last twenty-six years since the country's democratisation in 1994. Jonathan Jansen (2009) explains that these deeply contested, conflicting and emerging identities are associated with competing memories of the apartheid past on university campuses. Jansen describes this as an environment where understandings of who people think others are according to race, gender and class finds itself threatened. The experience is confounding and difficult. Frequently empathy is replaced by fury and upset, which is 'expressed in coarse and uncomfortable ways ... we have here a powerful but underexplored phenomenon' (Jansen 2009, 150). This polarisation is not unique to universities but is accentuated in this environment as young South Africans from different backgrounds engage with each other across racial and class boundaries, often for the first time. As a PT ensemble, we frequently hear stories that reflect these crises.

These tensions are emblematic of many of the issues I have confronted as a white conductor in South Africa, raising questions of how to respond sensitively and ethically when race is in the PT room. Conducting this performance, I was acutely aware of needing to hold these difficulties regarding how my whiteness is directly implicated in these problems in post-apartheid South Africa. It is not possible as a white conductor to single-handedly undo whiteness in all its forms but what is possible is attending to diffractive moments that invite opportunities for gradually sculpting different forms of whiteness. Types of whiteness that despite holding privilege, can relate in constructive ways. PT has provided a unique and humanising space for me to grapple with these paradoxical antagonisms.

I have begun by describing the PT performance contextualising it in post-apartheid South Africa through my role as a conductor in PT. Shortly, I will go into 'The moment of now' which describes the PT performance which I conducted. I specifically look at how Zanele<sup>1</sup> a teller in the performance and I may have been intra-acting with the matter around us and the affects this produced as performative agents. In the ritual of PT, the conductor invites audience members to volunteer sharing stories from their lives. An audience member who shares a story during a PT performance is referred to as a *teller*.

I focus on examining my positionality as a white South African performer in relation to the teller Zanele. Many questions may arise out of this moment, and one that is particularly pertinent is how Zanele's voice is heard and represented in the aftermath of the performance. Zanele did participate in the focus group afterwards but did not reflect on our intra-action specifically. I decided to investigate our intra-action as it was one of many contentious moments in the performance, and also because the focus group with Drama for Life Playback Theatre after the performance stimulated many questions about my position conducting the performance as a white person.

I have therefore chosen to address in detail my position as a PT conductor as a starting point and to make this process transparent. Performer identities are underexplored in PT research, where the audience is often the primary focus which deflects an investigation into performer choices. As a result, performers may avoid engaging with critical questions concerning the way their identities impact on PT, and in this instance, it concerns racial identities, and this is what I wish to address.

The perspectives of Second-Wave Critical Whiteness studies enable me to theorise my enactment of whiteness in a nuanced way and not essentialise it. I draw on Agential Realism to investigate how whiteness emerged through material-discursive practices in the PT performance. Following that, I introduce diffractive ethnography. I locate myself more deeply in this study through an auto-ethnographic narrative that informed my conductor choices. I go on to examine the selected PT moment where performative agents arose as findings as a result of my analysis of 'agential cuts' (my conductor introduction and Zanele's story).

## The moment of now

### Conductor

We open the doors to let in the audience. I have to trust the team now, to trust myself, somehow 11 years of PT knowledge needs summoning and to count for something. Full steam ahead ... conductor introduction underway and now the actors begin to introduce themselves. Now me ... personal introduction change of plan. 'My name is Kathy and ja I'm with this question a lot around, as a white South African when is my role to speak and when is my role to be quiet?'. Hmmm, I feel a bit vulnerable now, but this is my gut speaking and a disclaimer around my inner thoughts concerning my legitimacy to hold this PT space today. I feel like a rattling skeleton moving about the room.

The space begins to expand and extend, along with my slightly less rattily skeleton, but now something comes into play that I cannot escape. That is highly visible, my skin. It is white, I am Jewish, but I can no longer pull that card, not in this context anyway (Conductor journal, March 2019)

### Zanele's story

A story emerges from Zanele, a black woman about her experience of working in a corporate space in South Africa where institutional racism is rife. Zanele sums up her experience of the equality clause in the South African Constitution '... the equality clause- short story at work, everybody is equal, but with everything that happens at work some are more equal than others'. In response to Zanele's description of racial discrimination by her boss at work, I ask 'When these moments happen, what is it like for you?' She had mentioned being 'irritated' by this experience, but I wanted to open the space for the depth of the expression of this 'irritation.' I felt that there had been an outlining of the incident but a holding back of the personal impact on her. An unsaid, unfinished emotion hung in the air, and I thought it would help to name it. As I do this, I forget my whiteness, how this probing for a 'deeper' expression of feeling might come across. Even if clumsy, the specificity of this moment, this feeling seems important. Zanele exclaims; (hands up in the air) 'I did not choose to be black that is what it was like ...'. The feeling is expressed in this moment, in the way she embodies the telling. Yet, I continue with my own sense that Zanele filters the enormity of her feeling, whitewashing her telling for the benefit of the white conductor before her. I want to stand in this. I press on nervously, 'and what goes with that when you say that?' Can the veil be ripped away between Zanele and me? The ensemble the audience? Can the anger enter? Yet I cannot assume it. It is not for me to name. I am searching, searching for a room of possibility. The naming of anger, to be said aloud, to be allowed, owned. My unspoken narrative as I stand there before her, 'yes I am white, but you can say you are angry and I will not crumble or get defensive, I will listen.' Along with this, a longing to be accepted in this space with all my whiteness and privilege that I cannot escape. Finally, Zanele responds 'Anger ...'. After the enactment, there is a sigh from the audience a

release of breath, I too begin to breathe, yet there is still something, thick and sticky (Conductor journal, March 2019)

I investigate 'the moment of now' above as an agential cut. Agents are part of an entangled web of possibilities that emerge as part of material-discursive practices. Karen Barad (2007) calls these moments 'agential cuts', a term to describe 'material-discursive boundary-making practices that produce "objects" and "subjects" and other differences' (2007, 93). These temporary boundary-making differences emerge out of intra-actions that produce agents. Agential cuts momentarily stabilise agential properties that can be examined.

## Second – wave whiteness studies

Second-wave whiteness studies seeks to interpret white identities by elaborating on their intersectional complexity acknowledging whiteness and its situatedness, historically and socially, providing detailed accounts of how people's induction into whiteness varies. James C. Jupp and Timothy J. Lensmire explain that these accounts focus on white identities who 'are attempting to come to grips with their own complexity and complicity in a white-supremacist system and seeking to learn how to fight against it' (2016, 987).

I draw on the work of two American Scholars Revered Thandeka (1999) and Timothy J. Lensmire's (2017), who analyse how white people learn to be white as a fundamental aspect of understanding race-visibility. Both scholars theorise the complexity of white identity as an ongoing process. I employ Thandeka's conceptualisation of how white people learn to become white through *white shame* (1999). Thandeka argues that white supremacy is maintained by avoiding confrontations with whiteness and its relationship to building racist societies (Thandeka 1999). This is a form of self-protection. Thandeka explains that one of these avoidances is adults being silent about racial abuse, and children witness this. Thandeka argues children then 'deny its own resonant feelings towards racially proscribed others, not because it chooses to become white, but because it wishes to remain with the community that is quite literally its life' (1999, 24).

Children are not aware of race until they are inducted into whiteness by adults according to Thandeka. When opportunities to socialise with black children are denied this desire to engage with different races manifests in hidden shame (Thandeka 1999). White people continue to carry this shame into adulthood which becomes projected onto racial others in order to maintain white allegiances. This shame is left unexamined and often becomes exacerbated by a lack of spaces to openly interrogate race. Thandeka elaborates on *white shame* as a 'pitched battle by a self against itself in order to stop feeling what it is not supposed to feel: forbidden desires and prohibited feelings that render one different' (1999, 12).

Thandeka's *white shame* framework is drawn upon to investigate how my coming into whiteness during significant changes in South Africa deeply influenced the ways in which I carry whiteness and its influence on my conducting in PT. I bring to the fore specific aspects of my *becoming* identity, which became entangled with socio-political and historical factors of racial inequality in South Africa. From this, I trace how historic white shame inherited from the benefits of apartheid arose and how its affect impacted the choices I made as a PT conductor. On recognising this historic white shame in relation to whiteness,

I sought to utilise this as a conductor to contribute to anti-racist action within the PT performance. I look at how this materialised where whiteness and my role as a white conductor engaging with Zanele, a teller, created a crucial opening for grappling and confronting the wounds of whiteness.

Thandeka (1999) builds on the objective of second-wave whiteness studies to interpret white identities that take in 'careful consideration of the contexts of their meaning-making and action.' (Jupp, Berry, and Lensmire 2016, 986).

## Agential realism

To aid me in examining my white subjectivity in the PT performance, and how this was part of the performative layers of the project, I draw on Karen Barad's theory of Agential Realism (2007). The theory enables an investigation into how whiteness *becomes* through materialising discursive practices. These material-discursive practices are bound up in intra-actions which I explain in this section. Agential realism allows me to examine whiteness by bringing to attention the way the performativity of whiteness occurs in non-linear, causal delineations of space-time mattering. The value of this is to understand how my whiteness activated opportunities to *do white differently* as part of only one possible entwined entry point of becoming. Through this, I consider the insidious ways in which whiteness plays out and shifts without having to prioritise a particular location of whiteness that forsakes the other levels in which whiteness enacts itself. Therefore, taking into account the multiple ways in which whiteness is entangled performatively and operating individually, structurally and discursively.

Barad's Agential realism is a post-humanist framing of performativity. Agential Reality is what arises from the inquiry taking into account what manifests in the moment. It includes discursive and non-discursive material in examining the nature of material-discursive practices. In breaking away from representationalism, it propounds,

a causal relationship between specific exclusionary practices embodied as specific material configurations of the world (i.e. discursive practices/(con)figurations rather than 'words') and specific material phenomena (i.e. relations rather than 'things') (Barad 2003, 814)

Agential realism is helpful as a way of theorising whiteness that does not fall into the trap of examining whiteness on an individual scale but as bound up in sedimented layers of localised historicity. I investigate the arising sedimented material of whiteness, particular to a South Africa context that was generated by the matter present in the performance. To help orientate how causal relationships in Agential Realism may come into being certain terms are necessary to consider. I will expound on the terms of intra-action, agency and entanglement as an intrinsic part of understanding Agential realism and its implications in this article.

## Intra-actions

The concept of intra-action is applied to unravel the becoming of my white subjectivity as a material-discursive practice. Barad explains,

intra-actions are specific causal material enactments that may or may not involve 'humans'. Indeed, it is through such practices that the differential boundaries between 'humans' and

'nonhumans,' 'culture' and 'nature,' the 'social' and the 'scientific' are constituted (Barad 2003, 817).

I utilise intra-action as way to understand the relational performativity of the becoming of whiteness and reconfiguring it as dynamic materialisation of matter. I investigate the ways in which it may be possible for a PT conductor to *do white differently* through the process of intra-acting with an awareness of arising materiality. Intra-action is used instead of interaction to indicate that the agents involved in the particular intra-actions do not pre-exist independently. Rather they are material which continually alters and manifest as part of materialising of the world. Through these performed intra-actions differentiations materialise that are 'enacted in the ongoing ebb and flow of agency' (Barad 2003, 817). These intra-actions are realities in and of themselves that highlight the ongoing reformulation of the world and it's potential. Through this dynamic reconfiguring of unfolding relationships, agents arise.

In the section 'A Conductors diffractive analysis of the Playback Theatre performance' I discuss how intra-acting with Zanele, a PT teller diffracted the current issues that post-apartheid South Africa is wrestling with regarding whiteness. I consider how all matter matters when trying to engage with how whiteness comes into a performance space. This agential intra-activity of becoming is what creates possibilities for exercising white subjectivities in new ways. How whiteness is performed and articulated as part of this mattering is what leaves traces that imprint on other bodies. Whiteness in South Africa was and continues to be, violently imprinted on the bodies of black South Africans. Yet as matter is constantly unfolding as a doing in evolving intra-activity, it presents unique and ongoing possibilities to take responsibility for the brutal mattering of whiteness and attend to it.

### **Performative agents**

I examine agential whiteness in the performance which I identify arising in their different ways as the basis of this study and my response to these agents. According to Barad agency is 'understood as attributable to a complex network of human and nonhuman agents, including historically specific sets of material conditions that exceed the traditional notion of the individual' (Barad 2007, 23). The view of agency is not as internal to individuals, but a relational process, experienced with others. Arising agents create differentiations to other forms of world mattering which form into temporary localised boundaries that reveal agential possibilities. Barad names the way in which these agents become real and differing to one another as 'ontological entanglement' (2007). I identify '*to speak or not to speak*' and '*Unspoken anger towards racism in post-apartheid South Africa*' as emerging entangled agents of matter that occurred within the PT performance. Being attentive and aware of the agential material arising from intra-actions is paramount; it creates opportunities for individual whiteness to be destabilised and analysed as one of many nodes of possible constellations of whiteness. I seek to unpack how intra-acting with Zanele provoked different agents that became an enactment through our intra-action as teller and conductor. These arising agents opened the way for reconfiguring entanglements of whiteness locatable outside of our intra-action.

## Diffraction ethnography

*Diffraction ethnography* guides the analysis where according to Jessica Smartt Gullion ‘the researcher is a presence, and active force’ (2018, 122) in the research process. Diffraction ‘involves reading insights through one another in ways that help illuminate differences as they emerge: how differences get made, what gets excluded, and how exclusions matter’ (Barad 2007, 30).

The method of *Diffraction Ethnography* provides a way of identifying critical moments as a conductor that materialised to exercise the possibility of transforming whiteness. I examine these diffractive encounters in relation to the agential cut with Zanele and how it manifested through intra-actions. By tracing this intra-action and how one ‘becomes’ is an ethical act. Ethics Barad argues ‘is ... not about right response to a radically exterior/ized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part’ (2007, 393). This ethical attentiveness is not about falling into the trappings of white guilt but a commitment to the process of tracing intra-actions that diffract to make a difference in engaging with whiteness in PT.

I held focus groups with the audience members, and the PT team separately after the performance. There were also three participant-observers in the audience whose role was to observe the performance from a more detailed perspective.<sup>2</sup> I now turn to my auto-ethnographic narrative, followed by the diffractive analysis of the agential cut experienced with Zanele.

## Auto-ethnographic narrative

In this section, I am inspired by Thandeka (1999) and Lensmire’s (2017) explorations into people’s life stories to understand further the different ways in which people become white.

In Thandeka’s research (1999), the stories of coming into whiteness are often heart-breaking tales filled with angst. In recalling my first memories of coming into whiteness, I assumed I would uncover an equivalent story of despair, but instead, something different emerged. The story takes place in 1989 before Nelson Mandela’s release when I was six years old. My sister Vanessa who is sixteen years older than me, is an integral part of how I learned to be white. The stories she told me and her actions and role in The Truth and Reconciliation commission exposed me to experiences very different from my white peers.

## The food drop

One day I find myself in a supermarket with my mum buying lots of pre-made meals. This is unusual, but I do not ask why. Next thing we are delivering these meals to my sister and her fellow anti-apartheid student activists in a holding cell at a local police station. They had been protesting against apartheid policies at the very same university (Wits) that I would attend and teach at almost 14 years later. I understood that these students were in there not because they were criminals but because they were brave. I don’t know if my mum at the time had explained why they were in there, but I knew my sister was part of the ‘anti-apartheid struggle’ (PhD journal, May 2020)

The experience that I describe left a deep impression, ingraining in me an awareness of issues of race. I began to understand as a white child that I was part of an unjust system, but this realisation was also infused with an optimism around how that could be challenged. I am aware that most white South Africans of my generation did not grow up this way and were not so starkly exposed to how brutal white authority can be. Lensmire in reiterating Thandeka's research explains 'white racial identities emerge in racial abuse, by white authority, of its own community.' In my experience, this abuse did not occur through family relations, as is often the case but 'in larger relations constructed in law, policy, and social class. The result is a white racial identity riddled with shame and ambivalence ...' (2017, 34). Witnessing these white students jailed during apartheid showed me how white shame and ambivalence could be drawn upon to mobilise against white supremacy, an abusive authority and social order that growing up I did not want to be part of.

The way I came to engage with Zanele's story, was aided directly by my experiences of coming into whiteness which was negotiated through my sister's influence and growing up through a specific historical and socio-cultural time in South Africa.

### **A conductors diffractive analysis of the Playback Theatre performance**

Below I analyse how Zanele, the audience and I intra-acted with the materiality that we were confronted by, in the performance. The materiality produced different diffractive opportunities for me as a white conductor to exert becoming white differently. I look closely at my intra-actions in the performance and artistic choices, reflecting on my enactment of whiteness and negotiation of it. Barad reminds us that we do not exist in silos. 'Individuals do not pre-exist their interactions, rather individuals emerge though and as part of their entangled-relating' (Barad 2007, xi). I describe performative agents that found themselves becoming in the performance. These performative agents illustrate how through the PT performance I attempted to resist embodying a stereo-typed representation of whiteness attempting to destabilise perceptions of whiteness by the choices I made as a PT conductor and how I related to the teller, Zanele and the audience.

#### ***'To speak or not to speak'***

'To speak or not speak' (Performance transcript, March 2019) as a white person, my opening statement at the beginning of the PT performance and question to myself is a theme of salience in South Africa currently (Jansen 2017, Vice 2010). This introduction was not the one I planned and arose from the intra-action with the audience as co-participants in the performance. I needed to be honest about my vulnerabilities and limitations in front of the audience I was about to conduct for.

Lensmire explains that in becoming white children lack spaces in their lives 'to explore how we think and feel about race, white children become white adults with a deep, unnamed confusion and shame about racial matters' (2017, 33). Luckily growing up, I did have spaces where I could talk about race and engage with my whiteness. Thandeka points out that when white children are born 'personal racial identity is, in effect, non-existent because the socialisation process has not yet been undertaken by its white community of caretakers, legislators and police force' (1999, 85). As such no one is born racially

white, it is learnt. Early on, I came to understand I could comply and embody an abusive whiteness I did not relate to, or I could make different choices. Making different choices was also more possible for me in my family as I did not have a fear of being punished for it. Still, despite this, the historic shame of my white skin as a South African in the PT performance felt magnified as I led an all-black ensemble, in front of a majority-black audience. As a conductor, the audience did not know about my coming into whiteness, and so my authority as a conductor in the PT performances needed to be earned.

Recognising this, I wanted to indicate that my whiteness, even if holding a position of power at that moment in my conductor role, is not whiteness that must pre-determine power relations in the space. I cannot minimise or ignore the reality of what it is to be the only white person in the ensemble conducting for a majority black audience in a South African context.

My whiteness has given me a place of power and privilege in the world and needs to be engaged with in a meaningful way. Vice explains some of the specifics of South African whiteness,

What then is it about South Africa that makes whiteness here feel morally different—or at least more charged—to whiteness elsewhere? For one, whites are a very small minority and one's moral instincts recoil from the fact that wealth and privilege are distributed in so drastically skewed a way. For another, we are planted on one continent but brought up on the cultural influences and narratives of another ... we have lived here for generations; we identify as South African at least because we 'fit' the landscape and have a history here. The fact that some feel the need to assert that they are 'African' is an indication of their uncomfortable position ... (Vice 2010, 332)

Being a white conductor in this space becomes even more significant in this South African terrain. White South Africans assert, they are 'African' and at the same time are in denial about acknowledging the shame connected to the brutal consequences of white settler colonialism, whose traces reverberate in post-apartheid South Africa. It is an inescapable fact that white people benefited from colonialism and apartheid and continue to benefit from the inequality that was created by it, myself included (Swartz, Arogundade, and Davis 2014). Yet on the whole white South Africans remain defensive about this. When confronted by one's white privilege even indirectly, the affect of this historic white shame often crudely bursts out in the shape of aggression and defensiveness (Milazzo 2016).

This emotional response for Thandeka is part of a pressure valve of white shame that creates a silent 'hidden civil war' where 'desire and felt differences must be suppressed ... because one's community deems them bad' (1999, 12). For white South Africans to acknowledge their unearned privileges as part of benefitting from three hundred and sixty-eight years of colonialism would be to lose face and self-respect. It would be to recognise whiteness and one's self as being implicated in morally reprehensible acts.

In building up a platform to earn my legitimacy to be conducting the performance, I was revealing to the audience my internal battle with whiteness and the shame I carry as a white South African who has benefitted from settler-colonialism and apartheid. My opening statement acknowledges that I cannot escape that I am white, so the next best thing I can 'do' is being white differently (Monahan 2011, 204). I hope that through my introduction and reflection on myself, that this acknowledgement can ease open a space that acknowledges the tumultuous territory that we are all in as South

Africans when trying to create and facilitate conversations about race. About who we are, who we imagine ourselves to be and who we could be to each other. By saying it out loud was also a way of keeping myself accountable to myself.

When I reviewed the diary of a participant observer (March 2019), she noted an audience member who spontaneously responded 'excellent' in reply to the reflection on myself. The participant-observer in the focus group expanded on this expressing

how the introduction was done and how some things were able to be said after that, that challenged telling in a *politically correct* way. Even if the stories were personal, they could also be contentious (participant-observer focus group, March 2019). I like to think this was feedback that from the start of this performance that perhaps a different narrative could emerge, of what I represented in the space. I was attempting to work with the idea of 'creolizing subjectivity' (Monahan 2011), that acknowledges that I enter the context from a position of power, but that whiteness and racial identity is unstable and can be contested. Monahan expands 'a creolizing subject attends to and actively participates in this ever-shifting and developing contestation of the significance and meaning of the racial reality that both shapes and is shaped by her agency' (2011, 205).

Here the 'markers' of white shame associated and enacted by many white people can hopefully be consciously eroded so that I can embody an existence as a white South African that is more than just my race through emerging intra-actions. The 'markers' that play out in South Africa and the West is a white shame that pervades with no reflection on itself. As a defense, it muscles in, dominates, splaying itself out pretty much most of the time without question. When challenged, it gets bristly and arrogant and fearful, often fuming with a reaffirmed sense of its threatened position in the world (Lensmire 2017). These outbursts are bound up in shame as Thandeka describes where whiteness self protects a 'core sense of self' (Thandeka 1999, 17) to maintain white authority adopted in early childhood. To question white authority modelled by caregivers is permeated with fears of rejection by its community. Thus, the developing attitude of white children is to get ready to act in a certain way that promotes values that protect whiteness.

I cannot erase the gulf between who the audience is, and who I am, but I can name it, make it visible in our intra-action so that neither of us is pretending that it is business as usual, which often happens in South Africa. From this place of difference and taking responsibility for it, it is possible to engage in listening that is difficult but that allows me to respond in the most authentic way I can, opening up for different becomings of whiteness.

### ***'Unspoken anger towards racism in post-apartheid South Africa'***

Zanele's story was seemingly 'small' in the arc of the PT performance. It was in the warm-up phase. Yet her struggle to tell her story to me, the vagueness of her telling was an indication of its gravity. Her story was not about an overt act of racism but a micro-aggressive act towards her, probably one of multiple experiences over her lifetime, yet no less injurious and corrosive. The materiality of unspoken anger as an affect in response to whiteness lay present within our intra-action as teller and conductor. I had to trust that our exchange could be more than a repeating of old narratives and histories, but an opportunity for a reshaping them.

An illustration of this occurred when, during the performance, a story came from a black woman who was not South African. Suddenly a narrative that is not often visible became visible. As one participant-observer elaborated:

It just made me think of these tiny ways as South Africans we are just not ready for black people not to be black people from here. So, it made me think of that in terms of how our constitution works in even the wider sense of what a constitution is (participant-observer, March 2019)

After Zanele's sharing many such stories emerged addressing a range of themes from gender-based violence to challenging ideas around South African masculinity.

Njabulo Ndebele argues, 'a historic opportunity has arisen now for white South Africa to participate in a humanistic revival of our country through a readiness to participate in the process of redress and reconciliation' (2000, 52). As a white conductor, I sought to meet Zanele with this intention. In Zanele's story, her white colleague did not stand up for her in confronting the actions of her white boss. I did not want to be complicit in repeating the same lack of acknowledgement. Thandeka (1999) explains that the creation of white racial identities occurs through racial abuse by white authority. The abuse through the policing of white identity continues to be meted out by family, friends, and in this case, the behaviour of Zanele's boss in front of her white colleague. Zanele's colleague in her silence became complicit in the micro-aggressive racist act directed towards Zanele. Her colleague's silence was an example of the continuation of this abuse, where she became complicit out of anxiety in standing up for Zanele. Abusive white authority produces fear and white shame not just through stereotyping black people but in the way white people perpetrate violence amongst themselves towards other white people. By doing this 'white shame functions as a psychological guard, as an L.A. cop [South African in this scenario] whose sole duty is to keep the emotions of the residents of this realm in check' (1999, 27). The maintenance of this fear amongst the realm of white people in South Africa is what normalises daily racist acts and maintains white supremacy.

I wanted to work differently with the materiality that I was sensing through our performative intra-action of white South Africa's who have not taken on the responsibility of redress by stepping out of this terror from white abuse. I chose to remain with Zanele, both nonverbally and verbally. As Zanele held back on the emotion of her story, it gave further reason to spend time with her and not brush over it. As she began to speak directly about her experience of racism, I became aware of my whiteness in our interaction and the shame I felt through the tension in my body.

In a sense, I was temporarily in shut down, a clear sign that something was happening that needed listening in to. This messy dance with Zanele was stomach-churning. I had to hold the space with a certain amount of confidence as a conductor, but I did not feel confident. I was conscious of my unfolding vulnerability in front of Zanele, the PT team and the audience, of not displaying characteristics of the 'all-knowing' conductor. I had to force myself to relinquish power on a more unconscious level, the power of the 'all-knowing white conductor' and to begin to reconstruct white abusive authority and my feelings of shame into constructive anti-racist action. In South Africa knowledge, power and the preservation of whiteness remain intimately linked in post-apartheid South Africa (Green, Sonn, and Matsebula 2007, 399).

I could not wear the conductor persona in PT that the ego loves, who is suave, who knows just how to say and do all the right things at just the right time. The way I have learned to become white has given me the ability to acknowledge my whiteness and understand the white supremacist structures Zanele was talking about. I searched within myself to trust my embodiment of whiteness to be capable of disrupting the white supremacist structures Zanele was speaking about but on a relational level between us. The situation prompted me to root my feet firmly on the ground to help the rest of my body to engage and listen. My senses heightened; I began to take Zanele in. Suddenly I was also able to take in the larger room witnessing this intra-action between the two of us. Our intra-action was not an isolated one-on-one engagement with each other. I had to perform a different version of whiteness while acknowledging the presence of the white institutional materiality of the university space, which held the PT performance. One student commented on the conflict of opening up during the performance in the setting of Wits, 'as safe as the space is we are still in an academic space, and it is not safe to the extent to if I break down and cry after the performance what is going to happen? So it's tricky in that context' (audience focus group, March 2019). These material elements were looming in the intra-action threatening at times to get the best of all of us.

I was encouraging a breaking of the silence of how South Africans invite conversations about race into spaces across racial divides. I could not leave Zanele, myself and others in the murky swamp. I had led us there by encouraging Zanele to express her feelings. I had now to guide both of us out, and together. Remarkably, we managed. The affirmation of this was the teller that followed Zanele told a similar story of racial discrimination. Below one of the participant-observers expands on this:

The girl that was sitting next to me kept going umm ummm. They [the audience], their bodies, they were performing right, there was something so affective about it. Then at the end of the story, there was also a sigh and you [Kathy] brought our attention to the collective sigh that just took place, and I thought that was quite nice ... For all of us to feel it, we have all just gone 'shooo!' It was easier to go into the next story. (participant-observer focus group, March 2019)

I had to perform a different version of whiteness; a form of whiteness that would not continue to be complicit in abusive white authority. For me conducting Zanele's story was about creating a space that could acknowledge her anger in a way that white people do not participate in enough. I am not black and cannot claim to know what it is to be black. The only insight and knowledge I have is that all my working life, I have been in the situation of being the racial minority as well as in my social circles. In these contexts, I have had the privilege and gained the trust of people to learn about races, cultures and worlds outside of my whiteness. This invaluable lived experience is what consciously informed my conducting decisions that day. I was also driven by what is possible when choosing to attempt to meet another in a real and compassionate way.

The line of questioning I chose attempted to tread carefully, gently to allow space for the acknowledgement of the injustice of Zanele's experience, that communicating this to me directly as a white conductor was okay, that it could be safe. There were also three other white women in the room. They too were part of the audience along with the

majority-black students. It was about us *all* hearing and witnessing Zanele's experience in full. The understandings taken from her sharing were bound to be interpreted differently, but it was an attempt to be working on multiple levels of acknowledgement bound up in sedimented historic matter. Acknowledging the difficulty of the here and now moment of articulating her experience to a white conductor. Acknowledging the ongoing trauma that South Africans carry from the legacy of apartheid. An acknowledgement that racism is alive and kicking in South Africa in 2019. An acknowledgement that all of us are struggling to find voice, agency and our place in South Africa's new democracy. All these factors were materialising impacting the PT performance. I had to remain steadfast in the belief that I could transcend my racialisation during the performance beyond the predictable ways of embodying whiteness. I had to trust the socio-political ways in which I have been raced as something that might be relevant in racially charged moments.

In South Africa across all our divides, victims and perpetrators, we find ourselves in the unique position of being beside one another in trying to make sense of what it is to live in a post-conflict, post-colonial society. PT practitioners should never assume that because an audience is majority black or white that people's identities are fixed according to assumptions associated with racial categorizations. It also gives a PT audience more credit for the agency they possess. Understanding the socio-political dynamics and history of groups of people provides PT practitioners with information that needs recognition, but we need to find ways to work with it. By seeing our audiences as people with multiple experiences and relationships to history and the present invites new patterns of relating where novel narratives are invited.

Nisha Sajjani et al. (2014) articulates the unique contribution PT can make to mediating competing memories and discourses. Sajjani highlights how the conductor plays a crucial role in facilitating multiplicity, 'the conductor develops such a space where stories shared can live besides, rather than replace, each other' (2014, 67). Working with this sentiment in a tangible way means having the capacity to listen to the multiplicity of matter. Not being able to escape my whiteness and sensing the situation, I took the calculated risk to probe further with Zanele, actively working with an awareness of the matter arising through our intra-actions. Not attempting to grasp the full meaning of Zanele's story could have also had a negative consequence. By not being willing or able to digest her experience and giving into white shame, would only have reaffirmed racial assumptions about white South Africans. I had to trust my foundation of working with PT over time and previous intra-actions of becoming white as a resource to create a different image in the moment. The moment was an education for me about the reminder of presence required to listen to pain, to be open to it and not to become immobilised by white shame. It was a reminder that as black and white people, we can begin to talk about racism and that it does not need to implode, that we can all discover something new.

This PT performance demanded a listening into my performance of whiteness and its impact on the audience in front of me. I resisted relating to Zanele and the PT audience as objects of oppression, feeling deeply connected to them in different ways as fully-fledged human beings. I also resisted feeling pressured to take on the role of the white oppressive authority and going into a white guilt compensatory default mode, but with much difficulty.

## Doing white differently?

In this article, I examined an agential cut in a PT performance and what it generated concerning my whiteness as a conductor. I discovered the significance of how the ways in which I have come into whiteness intra-acted with discursive material which created agents with Zanele. These agents, *'To speak or not to speak'* and *'Unspoken anger towards racism in post-apartheid South Africa'* produced through our intra-action created critical diffractive opportunities for exploring *doing white differently* as a PT conductor.

The agential cut revealed fissures where powerful affects loomed concerning apartheid which challenged me in *doing white differently* as my body bears traces of being entangled with this past and the privilege that comes with it. Yet I know I am not only this. How I have been raced and my white becoming in the moment recognised these agents and attempted to reconfigure them in seeking to create 'a new white humanity' (Ndebele 2000, 46) in the spontaneous moment of conducting. If not, I would not have been able to conduct Zanele's story in a way that invited her necessary anger into the performance space. As a conductor I wanted to acknowledge the painful traces of this mattering entrenched in South Africa's apartheid past as a redressive act furthering anti-racist action.

## Notes

1. The name of the teller, Zanele has been changed to protect anonymity.
2. Ethics permission was required for this study and granted by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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