Storytelling as a political act: towards a politics of complexity and counter-hegemonic narratives

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Storytelling as a political act: towards a politics of complexity and counter-hegemonic narratives

Narration en tant qu’action politique: Vers une politique de complexité et de narration contre-hégémoniques

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Making accessible research findings through forms of storytelling is a useful method for activist and public scholarship. This article explores these possibilities through a project on migration and gender in the city of Durban, in South Africa. The research project collected oral histories of migrant women’s experiences in the city, and, in collaboration with artists, wove these narratives into a theatre performance titled *The Last Country*. *The Last Country* used an anti-essentialist politics to complicate, disrupt and make messy exclusionary hegemonic narratives on migration and gender that circulated within the contemporary social fabric. Storytelling as a political act is made visible through a reflection on the storytelling processes in the project. Building a *chorus of voices*, not just in the stories performed but in the design, data collection and analysis stage of a research project, is a productive and critical method for developing storytelling as an intentional political act. Public storytelling, such as *The Last Country*, used counter-hegemonic narratives to disrupt, disarticulate and expand dominant storylines, so that we may reimagine anew alternative ways of seeing and being in the city.

Keywords: oral histories; storytelling; migration; gender; public scholarship

Rendre accessibles les résultats de recherche à travers des formes de narration est une méthode utile pour les bourses activistes et publiques. Cet article explore ces possibilités à travers un projet sur la migration et le genre dans la ville de Durban, en Afrique du Sud. Le projet de recherche a compilé des récits oraux d’expériences de femmes dans la ville, et en collaboration avec des artistes, ont tissé ces récits pour en faire un spectacle théâtral intitulé ‘*The Last Country*’ (Le Dernier Pays). *The Last Country* a employé une politique anti-essentialiste pour compliquer, perturber, et désordonner des récits hégémoniques d’exclusion sur la migration et le genre qui ont circulé au sein du tissu social contemporain. La narration en tant qu’action politique est rendue visible à travers une réflexion sur les processus de narration dans le cadre du projet. Construire un *coeur de voix*, non seulement dans les récits joués, mais aussi dans la conception, la collecte de données et le stade de l’analyse d’un projet de recherche, est une méthode productive et essentielle pour développer la narration en tant qu’acte politique intentionnel. La narration publique, telle que *The Last Country*, a utilisé des récits contre-hégémoniques pour perturber, désarticuler et étendre les lignes narratives dominantes, afin que nous puissions de nouveau ré-imaginer des façons alternatives de voir et d’être dans la ville.

Mots clés: Récits oraux; narration; migration; genre; bourses publiques

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Introduction

I have crossed half a continent to get here. Trace you finger down a map and you will see how far I have come. When I look out onto the horizon, all I see is the sea, this is where the continent ends, there are no places, no more countries left for me to run to. Aamina (The Last Country 2019)

This emotive quote comes from the script of a theatre production titled The Last Country. The play was developed and performed in, and around, the city of Durban in South Africa between 2017 and 2019. The Last Country is an intimate research-based theatre piece that performs the stories of migrant women arriving in the city, and explores what it means for these women to try and make the city a place something like home. The performances were based on 30 oral histories of migrant women created during a research project on migration, inclusion and gender in Durban. The Last Country was in part a dissemination strategy to make accessible the oral history data collected during the project, and, as will be explored in this article, a method through which research served as a form of public storytelling. Debates on moving oral histories outside of university archives to become accessible to their narrators and a broader public (Benson and Nagar 2006), and sharing authority with participants (Sheftel and Zembrzycki 2019), speak to the transformative possibilities and constraints of oral history beyond limited ideas of giving voice to the marginalised (Field 2008a). South African and international scholars have also written on the power relationships and ethics involved in producing collective oral stories (Minkley and Rassool 1998). These entangled processes reshape meanings, intersubjectivity and popular memory in society (Field 2008b; Thomson, Frisch, and Hamilton 1994).

Benson and Nagar argue that if ‘a project does not go beyond recording an oral history, that act becomes an end in itself rather than a means to challenge hegemonic knowledges’ (2006, 587). In this project, one way that oral history narratives received a wider public audience in order to challenge hegemonic knowledge, was through being theatrically performed. During apartheid in South Africa theatre performances were, at times, used as forms of political resistance to racial and capitalist oppression (Penfold 2015; Kruger 1997). The role of theatre as transformative and catalyst for conscientization, such as in the Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal 2000), and through empathetic learnings (McGarry 2018), are all ongoing and important debates on the activist potential and politics of theatre performance.

This article, however, focuses on the process and strategies in which the narratives from an oral history project were reshaped into a form of public storytelling. Primarily it explores how this form of storytelling can be used as a particular political act. In this case a distinctive anti-essentialist politics was used to complicate, disrupt and make messy discriminatory hegemonic narratives on migration that circulated within the contemporary social fabric. Using a sociological lens I will explore the political strategies we developed in relation to The Last Country as a form of counter-hegemonic storytelling. Extracts from the oral histories and the script itself, as well as extracts from recorded discussions with audiences, provide the data for this exploration.

Sharing stories can change the meaning and experience of the world through reconstituting the social realm, for the storyteller and the listener (Jackson 2013). Michael Jackson argues that when people tell stories it is ‘precisely because personal experience remains on the margins of state discourse and ideology that it may become, in any society, a critical force that perennially unsettles received wisdom and challenges the status quo’ (2013, 78). The politics of storytelling then lies in the process in which personal experiences are made public (Jackson 2013, 140). In post-conflict societies, including South Africa, there has been substantive scholarly work on the ‘creative and redemptive potential of storytelling to help remake personal and social worlds’ (Colvin 2004, 84). Yet, when storytelling is undertaken on a grand scale, such as it was in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa (see Ross 2003), or used in NGO advocacy campaigns and political electioneering (Fernandes 2017), it can equally, intentionally and
unintentionally, serve to entrench power relations in ways that reproduces marginalisation. *The Last Country*, however, is not this kind of grand or overt political storytelling. Rather, it is a way of performing diverse everyday politics within, and around which, migrant and refugee women experience arriving and living in the city.

Storytelling is political when it makes claims in relation to power. In this project *The Last Country* refuses to make definitive claims about what should or should not be done about gender and the perceived migrant and refugee issue, rather a claim is made that *these stories exist* in our city. Speaking a claim does more than describe a ‘state of affairs, but in and by making claims it is also bringing a state of affairs into being’ (Isin 2017, 187). Telling stories can be a performative act that creates obligations to speak to and against abuses of power (Isin 2017, 187). In this project, storytelling is viewed, following Michael Jackson, as an ‘action of meaning-making’ (2013, 37). It is in performing a chorus of everyday stories and through post-performance discussions that *The Last Country* hoped to bring into being a more complex counter-narrative. Counter-narratives can be used to disarticulate problematic dominant storylines of migrants and refugees within the social imagination. In this sense *The Last Country* project enacted a politics of storytelling in which, even for a moment those involved, participants, actors, researchers and audiences, could work ‘with others to transform what is given, or what simply befalls us, into forms of life, experience, and meaning that are collectively viable’ (Jackson 2013, 246).

Yet even storytelling at the local or micro scale can ambiguously reshape our social worlds, particularly when stories include narratives of trauma (Ross 2003; Colvin 2004), as many expect migrant and refugee stories to do. Cognisance of this, exploring a politics of storytelling then requires moving beyond the narrative product of a story, into the messy social processes of its creation (Jackson 2013, 37). It is hoped that by exploring our political strategies in *The Last Country* this article will prove useful for thinking about how activist and public scholarship can build a politics of complexity through public storytelling. After outlining the performances of *The Last Country*, I will briefly examine some of the hegemonic narratives on migration globally and locally, within which our counter-hegemonic storytelling comes into being. The analysis then turns to why we chose to perform parts of these oral history narratives, in which ways, and for whom.

**The Last Country performances**

*The Last Country* was embedded in a partnership project between two civil society organisations, the Democracy Development Program and the African Solidarity Network, and the Urban Futures Centre based at The Durban University of Technology. This project produced a number of conventional research outputs; seminars, stakeholder meetings, public dialogues, conference presentations, as well as a detailed research report. The theatre component of the project, on which this article focuses, was produced through a collaborative partnership with Mpume Mthombeni and Neil Coppen from the Empatheatre organisation. This article is my own attempt to explore what we learnt about the process of storytelling as a political strategy for public scholarship. The enormous benefits of partnerships and collaborations cannot be understated in the arguments I present in this article. The ideas and strategies discussed are born out of these numerous rich conversations. I gratefully acknowledge how much our coming together to talk has shaped my thinking.

*The Last Country* script was developed from oral histories of migrant women living in Durban. Twenty of the participants came from countries outside of South Africa, such as Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Somalia, Uganda and the DRC. The remaining oral histories in this data set were from internal migrant South African women arriving in the city from rural areas in the KwaZulu-Natal province, in which Durban is located. The histories were collected in the participants’ preferred language. For the most part, the women chose to tell their stories in their mother
tongues. In order to do this myself and co-researcher Nomkhosi Xulu-Gama trained fieldworkers in oral history methodology and research ethics. The fieldworkers were migrant women themselves and spoke a range of languages, including English, Swahili, French, Tshiluba and Lingala. Nomkhosi collected the 10 oral histories of South African women migrants in isiZulu. The oral histories with pseudonyms are available as an online archive. Interviews with civil society organisations and municipal officials were a secondary data set. The oral history narratives were then woven together into a theatre script with four characters; MaThwala from rural KwaZulu Natal, Aamina from Somalia, Aneni from Zimbabwe and Ofrah from the DRC.

The play opens with the South African character MaThwala stating:

one day I will return to my homeland and finish building my house. That is my dream … that is what I am working in this city for. (The Last Country 2019)

The performance centres around the four women’s experiences of arriving and living in Durban. The narrative style of the performances mirrored the research method, not just in that the script wove together verbatim extracts from the 30 oral histories, but in its focus on the use of oral narratives to make sense of the world. The traditional theatre auditorium spatially shifts the audiences into spectators rather than listeners of the stories. For this play, Neil Coppen, the director, designed the audience to sit with the women actors on the stage in a circle of chairs. The actors entered into the venues at the same time as the audience, and many times audience members only discovered they were sitting next to a performer once she started to tell her story. As everyday storytellers usually do with their listeners the performers interacted with audience members at specific moments during the play. Playing the performance in a circle made it much easier for us to perform in non-traditional theatre venues, such as in community halls and other available spaces in the city. The Last Country used few props and was performed both with and without theatre lighting. We ran The Last Country in one to two week runs each year from 2017 to 2019. Altogether the play was performed for approximately one thousand people in various venues throughout the Durban metropolitan area, including in areas where tensions around migrants had erupted, in inner-city venues, at both university theatres and at the hostel in which the South African oral history participants lived. Audience members included participants, fieldworkers, researchers, civil society and faith-based organisations, the general public, university students, school children, as well as municipal and local government officials.

At the end of the play MaThwala reveals a hand-made model of her dream house. She explains to the audience:

When I return to my community I want the people to see that ja Ma Thwala went to work in the city and now look … look what she has achieved. Everyone will welcome me. My grandchildren will call out and say welcome home Gogo! They will say finally she is home. They will say she paid for every brick of that home with her own two hands … her own hard work. That is what they must think when they see me returning home. (The Last Country 2019)

During the 50 min, the audience intimately listens to the experiences of leaving home and arriving in an unknown place, navigating social relationships of all kinds, the frustrations of government departments who dismiss you, and finding small comforts and kindness in trying to make a home in the city. Afterwards post-performance discussion sessions with the audience and the actors took place whilst sitting in the circle. These post-performance discussions were facilitated by members of the research team, myself usually, and in a few instances Nomkhosi. In some performances, we asked for permission to record these discussions as an additional layer of data. The importance of these discussions, as well as the form and narratives in the theatre production will be explored further. But before doing so, it is useful to give some background context into the types of
narratives and popular stories that shape people’s ideas of migration in contemporary South Africa, the dominant ‘storyscapes’ within and against which The Last Country was produced.

Migration and refugee ‘storyscapes’

The crisis narrative is a particularly powerful global discourse in relation to how governments and the public view migration and refugees (Antonsich, Marvoudi, and Mihelji 2016, 1). In its more liberal form it underpins the need for migration management and control, as it underpins the nationalist rhetoric, epitomised by the USA’s ex-president Donald Trump, that migrants are a dangerous inflow of people bringing with them an endless list of imagined ills for the host country. Both the liberal and the nationalist iterations of this narrative create exclusionary experiences for migrants. Crisis narratives frequently mask complex and entangled economic and social processes related to the movement of people between political geographies. These hegemonic discourses on migration serve powerful elites; for example see Piper (2017) on how remittance flows support, rather than subvert neoliberal economic policies, or how social identities of race, ethnicity and ‘foreignness’ are used as exclusionary strategies in both conservative and radical left agendas in Europe (Lianos 2013). Inherent in these entanglements are tensions between structures and agency, as migrants and government officials navigate, reinforce and subvert formal legal channels of belonging in the nation state (Amx 2015; Kihato 2007, 263).

South Africa’s popular and, sadly at times, political discourse on migration closely mirrors the crisis narrative. South Africa’s border management, and the creation of categories of people to determine legal entry follows a similar pattern to that of our Northern counterparts (Crush and Dodson 2007, 449), albeit with some important contextual differences (see Erwin and Grest 2018). After the repeal of apartheid laws and the move into democracy in 1994, South African cities experienced an inflow of people from other African countries (Kihato 2007, 265). However, the population numbers of so-called ‘foreign nationals’ is paltry when compared to the amount of internal South African migrants moving from rural areas into the cities. Inflated figures and media sensationalism have fed the story of South Africa as a ‘country under siege’ by migrants and refugees (Crush and Dodson 2007, 444). Certainly the lack of reliable and verifiable data means that statistics on ‘foreigners’ in the country can only be seen as the ‘crudest estimates of these diverse and dynamic populations’ (Landau et al. 2016, 6).

In 2008 and 2009, South Africa made international news when violent attacks on ‘foreigners’ erupted in many urban areas. These attacks were predominantly against migrants from other African countries, and have continued sporadically throughout the country. In Durban in 2015, violent attacks against ‘foreigners’ took place in the centre of the city and in periphery locations (Beetar 2019). In addition to these horrific events, people viewed as migrants and refugees in South Africa confront daily forms of subtle and overt discrimination. These are often linked to crude methods of identification in ways reminiscent of apartheid racial profiling; such as skin tone, language, accent, dress styles and hair type (Peberdy 2001, 24; Greenburg 2010, 69).

One of the participants in this study, Kudzy from Zimbabwe, explains how the stereotypical gaze relates to her experiences in Durban:

I only had this experience in hospitals because I am a light-coloured Zimbabwean. My skin is so light that, funny enough, they would never ask me for my ID. They would just assume I am South African. So I just experienced discrimination in offices and hospitals where people would actually see my ID and would say: ‘You’re a foreigner’. I think I look like some of the people here. You can only tell that I am a foreigner when you see my ID or speak to me. Then you would pick up my accent. (Oral history with Kudzy 2017)

The troubling similarities with apartheid practices of exclusion and reading otherness from the body demands of South Africans serious critical debate around habitual practices of racialisation.
Yet as Polletta and Callahan remind us ‘we glean a story’s point by reference to stories we have heard before … stories’ persuasive power lies in their ability to call up other compelling stories’ (2017). South Africa’s history of racial segregation appears to have normalized ideas that social identities are a means of spatially sorting who belongs where (Dixon and Durrheim 2000). Certainly the memory of punitive policing of black people’s mobility into, and within, the city during apartheid has ‘helped entrench and naturalize a system of social division and a demonization of unfettered movement and social mixing’ (Landau 2014, 296). The dominant narrative about migrants and refugees is that they cause conflict by being here, and should ‘go home’. Perhaps then it is less amnesia of exclusion and more the familiarity of these practices that make them so prevalent in our cities.

Popular, and political, narratives perceive ‘foreigners’ as both committing crimes, and taking away jobs from South Africans. That these stories contradict each other, and are refuted by research, have done little to lessen migrants’ experiences of discrimination in the city. Dominant storylines do not have to be consistent nor coherent, instead many smaller stories weave together to feed a loose narrative that roughly outlines the way things are, or should be. Lived experiences profoundly shape people’s ‘political common sense’ but it is equally shaped by ‘stories they read and hear on TV, stories told by friends and acquaintances, stories that substitute memory for history, stories that make the experience of others seem as if it is their own, and stories whose truth is relatively unimportant to their value’. (Polletta and Callahan 2017)

Storytelling

Political actors of all kinds tactically use narratives that ‘symbolically aligned with common sense’ (Polletta et al. 2011, 110). In South Africa some political actors use discriminatory storylines about ‘foreigners’ to leverage the popular vote (Landau et al. 2016, 12; Perneggar 2015, 70). In Durban, political councillors at a ward level (local political demarcation) have used rhetorical promises of limiting ‘foreigners’ getting jobs as an electoral campaign (Erwin and Grest 2018, 25). The use of repetitive narratives as persuasive tools has ‘ burgeoned’ in the world of business, branding and political electioneering (Polletta et al. 2011, 110). These popular narratives are less reliant on authenticity and credibility and more focused on aligning listeners and voters to a dominant storyline that serves a narrow political agenda. Sujatha Fernandes, in the book Curated Stories, illustrates how civil society and political campaigning use personal storytelling of the marginalized as ‘a site for constructing hegemony’ (2017, 13). Public storytelling can be used to ‘resecure the sovereignty of the autonomous liberal subject’, feeding the neoliberal myth that abstracts individual histories from the oppressive structures that shape them (Fernandes 2017, 167). For political theorists such as Chantal Mouffe, increasingly the ‘discursive nature’ of neo-liberal hegemony is exposed (2013, 89). But if narrative methods are strategically used to construct forms of oppression and exclusion, then ‘common sense can be transformed through counter-hegemonic interventions’ (Mouffe 2013, 90).

Scholarly research is one way of creating counter-hegemonic narratives. The symbolic capital given to scientific knowledge plays a powerful role in giving credibility to both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic narratives (Barnes and Edge 1982, 233). Traditional academic dissemination strategies work fairly well in terms of making visible counter-hegemonic narratives within the field of academia itself, and optimistically within the fields of commerce, civil society and policy making. But on the whole academic research has been far less successful in accessing and influencing popular common sense. In the burgeoning world of social media, storytelling projects are frequently repackaged so ‘histories, ambiguities, and political struggles are erased in an
effort to create warm and relatable portraits of others who are ‘just like us’ (Fernandes 2017, 2). No matter how relevant or urgent, the long wordy arguments published by academics are weak competition to the short snapshot stories that Instagram and Twitter tell, and about, the world. Although there has been an attempt by academia to engage with these communication tools, by their very design they require the translation of complex findings into bite-sized chunks of trending information. New scientific data therefore can experience significant lags translating into popular common sense.9

In order to move counter-hegemonic scholarly findings into the public domain, it is useful to strategize around how robust and complex data may become more accessible through longer forms of public storytelling. In The Last Country, we use storytelling in a similar way to Jackson, where stories ‘from the outer edge [that] have little currency and validity within the polis’ are brought closer to the centre (2013, 51). Not in an attempt to make marginalised stories more palatable to those positioned in dominant vantage points, but to ‘interleave’ these stories into the hegemonic narratives. As the personal is interwoven into the public realm, moments of meaning-making are created in which new intersubjectivity may be imagined (Jackson 2013, 144).

Trans and interdisciplinary collaborations with artists of different kinds is a very productive way in which research can be translated into public storytelling. Chantal Mouffe argues that in the construction of counter-hegemonic interventions ‘cultural and artistic practices can play a decisive role’ (2013, 90) through their,

profound grasp of the role that affect plays in the process of identification and of the role of passionate attachments in the constitution of political identities. If artistic practices can play a decisive role in the construction of new forms of subjectivity, it is because, in using resources which induce emotional responses, they are able to reach human beings at the affective level. This is where art’s great power lies – in its capacity to make us see things in a different way, to make us perceive new possibilities. (96–97)

This may be an accurate description of the possibilities of cultural and artistic practices, but there are cautionary considerations when imagining the impact of artistic storytelling practices. As Mouffe herself warns imagining that ‘artistic activism’ can, on its own, disarticulate hegemonies is ‘an illusion’ (2013, 99). It is not the case that publicly telling the stories of the marginalized changes the relationships of power in the lives of the marginalized or the elite (Fernandes 2017; Colvin 2004). A sociological view requires recognition that not ‘all people’s stories [are] heard the same way’ (Polletta et al. 2011, 114). Public storytelling is always a move into ‘competing discourse’ in society (Jackson 2013, 140), and ‘stories might be persuasive when told by some groups and seen as unconvincing when told by others’ (Polletta et al. 2011, 114).

Recognizing the limitations on the ‘liberatory capacity of storytelling’ (Polletta et al. 2011, 114) mean recognizing that affect in storytelling does not automatically translate into action for change or the type of change desired. Activists in various social and political struggles have successfully used narrative strategies to create new storylines that challenge, and at times de-centre, hegemonic stories. As Fernandes clearly shows in her American case studies, activists can use public storytelling for limited legislative gains. Often this is at the expense of leaving structural inequalities intact or enforcing neoliberal views that offer recognition only to a few deemed to hold individual merit (2017). Some new storylines are so successful they become institutionalized. One such example was how activists against gendered violence ‘were able to create a legal and social infrastructure of support for the victims of domestic abuse by telling a horrifying story of extreme violence’ (Polletta et al. 2011, 120). But as Polletta et al argue ‘activists have since struggled with the possibility not only that the story may not fit all battered women’s
experiences, but that it may not fit most battered women’s experiences’ (120–121). In this sense, the narrative of victimhood with its appetite for grand physical violence and trauma can serve to dismiss the accumulative experiences of everyday structural oppression and systematic violence against women. Exclusionary dominant narratives frequently legitimate disempowering narratives of victimhood for a social group as the only form in which to be officially noticed (Fernandes 2017, 42; Colvin 2004).

In South Africa, policy and ideological distinctions are made between two categories of immigrants; refugees and economic migrants. This desire ‘to produce neat, orderly, and well-demarcated policy categories’ through which to manage and monitor migration legitimizes some forms of migration and demonizes others (Wee, Vanyoro, and Jinnah 2018, 800). While economic migrants with specialized or scarce skills may find a warmer welcome in national and global policy, the trickier discussions on migrants who don’t meet these criteria are often neglected. These binaries valorize the forced migration of refugees over what is considered ‘voluntary’ economic migration (Piper and Withers 2018, 559). For example, Palmary argues that in perceptions on migrants in South Africa:

refugees are forced migrants; economic migrants, on the other hand, are conflated with illegal immigrants who are criminalised. In this way, the refugee is legitimised by their lack of agency and victim status and their comparison with the economic migrant. Leaving one’s country of citizenship for economic reasons (regardless of how much one may not want to) is not accorded the same status. (2009, 59–60)

This can create a currency around stories of trauma for refugees, where only narratives of horror and war are seen as acceptable reasons for home affairs officials to grant asylum seeker permits. This narrows the understanding of trauma by excluding ‘ongoing racism and poverty that many people may in fact experience as more traumatic than a single life threatening event’ (Palmary 2009, 60). The legitimization of only some forms of violence as justification for asylum has negative consequences for women migrants. Applications by women who cite gendered violence as reasons for asylum seeking are seldom successful. Middleton (2010) shows in her research with South African Home Affairs officials that gendered violence is only considered a case for asylum if it is viewed within the context of war, or national political conflict. This despite gender being recognized as a social group deserving of asylum in the amended Refugee Act No. 130 of 1998. 10 Perhaps then it is not surprising that a participant in this study believes ‘when we come here as foreigners, all of us come as liars’ (Oral history with Mathy 2017). Many people arrive at home affairs having experienced violence of one kind or another. But in order to legitimise their arrival trauma narratives, actual, embellished and fictional, are demanded of refugees in their interactions with the state, and sometimes civil society organizations. Understanding these social narratives around belonging and violence were necessary for thinking through the political strategy of making visible a chorus of voices in The Last Country.

Storytelling as a political act then requires a politics of complexity. Without narrative complexity storytelling lacks possibilities for critiquing structural oppression, or imagining forms of collective resistance (Fernandes 2017, 168). Rather than using storytelling to advocate for recognition of a narrow storyline, such as victimhood, complex stories make messy, disarticulate, disrupt and imagine multiple alternatives that unsettle dominant narratives. To do this storytellers need to think carefully and strategically about whose stories we wish to tell, in what form, and why. We need to make clear who benefits from this telling, and what parts of these stories we wish to forefront and why. Equally important is the question of to whom we wish to tell them, and why (Fernandes 2017, 7). The following section outlines how we attempted, and did not necessarily always get right, these sorts of political intentions during the development and performance of The Last Country.
The politics of storytelling in the Last Country

Imagining storytelling as a political act is futile without strategizing around constructing the audience. Besides the general public and the participants and fieldworkers we performed the play for, we also wanted in the audience key stakeholders who hold agency in determining practices and policy frameworks on migration and inclusion in the city. In this case, municipal and local government officials, as well as civil society organisations who were already engaging in these issues, and in which hegemonic stories about migration were already at play. Beyond simply strategizing about who the audience should be it was critical to consider the form and content of the production, to construct what Patti Lather calls ‘an audience with ears to hear’ (2000, 19). Sitting the audience in a circle with the actors created an intimacy that would not have been possible in a traditional theatre set-up. In this theatre form audience members are constructed more as witness, or ‘participant observer’ than spectator (Mienczakowski 2009, 328).

Another way that the degree of separation was reduced between the actors, the stories they performed, and the audience was through discussion sessions with the audience after each performance (Coppen 2020; Mienczakowski 2009, 327). Directly after the performance a research team member explained that what the audience had just experienced came from the oral histories of migrant women living with them in their city and asked the audience to share their own experiences of being a part of the performance, and what the narratives meant to them. In keeping with the politics of complexity, facilitators did not attempt to push the audience into a preferred interpretation of the performance or narrative of migration; nor did they offer their own interpretation of the women’s lives. Instead audience members, researchers, participants and actors were invited to interact through sharing various viewpoints. Storytelling that invokes multiple viewpoints disables reductionist explanations that seek to quickly resolve ethical dilemma according to a fixed set of principles (Jackson 2013, 146). This dialogue was a space where alternative meanings, interpretations and intersubjectivities could tentatively emerge, but it was also a space ‘without the possibility of a final reconciliation’ (Mouffe 2013, 92).

One such example of creating alternative meanings was with an audience of city officials, mostly from the municipal planning department. The Last Country ends with MaThwala placing a model of a home-made house into the centre of the circle, the house she has built slowly over the years by sending money back home to her family in the rural area. In the post-performance discussion, a senior planner told her peers that when she first saw the house arrive in the circle, she automatically went into planning mode noting that the house was not built to the existing construction and density regulations. But that a moment later she had realized that she was forgetting that the house was far more than a physical structure, it was MaThwala’s dream that she had worked towards her whole life. The discussion that followed between the planners, started by the senior managers, focused on how they needed to place people at the centre of their practice in the city.

One of the most time consuming, but vital, parts of attempting to use storytelling as a political act is making sure the audience you wish to target are in the room.11 It took the project partnership team many unsuccessful attempts to connect with local government before we finally got around 20 municipal officials as part of the audience for The Last Country. The response from the officials who attended was profoundly moving. And following the performance, word got around city departments that this was a project of interest. For example, in response to the invitation to the final project presentation, we received the largest attendance of municipal officials we had yet experienced during the initial two years. This set the ground work to play The Last Country to a larger audience of local and provincial government officials in 2019.

Storytelling, unlike dissemination outputs such as research reports and journal publications, makes audiences ‘less likely to hear ambiguity in stories as imprecision or error’ (Polletta
et al. 2011, 112). The difference between listening to research data when presented as findings, and when presented through storytelling, is expressed in an interview with another senior municipal official in Durban. The official was interviewed two weeks after seeing The Last Country, he explained:

For me it was hard-hitting. It was a real wakeup call for me, something which I had not had before. And I guess when you see it in two-dimension, when you read a text book or a case study, you kind of get cynical and you almost get comfortable where you think that the researcher had a bias. Or you never fully see what the researcher was seeing through their rose-coloured glasses, and you kind of park it, and don’t ascribe much importance to it. But when you see it in front of you, and you see that the research is talking to you, and you see that it is pounding at your door, it is a whole new concept of learning and it’s a whole new concept of awakening. It was a brilliant thing! (Interview with city official 2018)

The above official was not alone in his emotive experience of listening differently to research data. In comparison to scholarly publications which are set up for critical reading, ‘people may cognitively process stories differently … suspending their natural proclivity to counterargue when they are absorbed or transported by a story’ (Polletta et al. 2011, 112). This makes storytelling a tool that can be manipulated for nefarious purposes (see Fernandes 2017), but it also makes for a powerful form of public scholarship, if done through critical and ethical processes. The weight afforded to scholarly research was not absent from the performance, it was just emphasized after the performance, when the audience members were reminded that the stories came from oral histories of migrant women living with them in the city. Here the social capital given to research creates somewhat of a ruse of authenticity. This is not to suggest for a moment that The Last Country offers authentic storytelling, I agree with Mienczakowski that, no matter how deep the research and how wide the background discussions and performer preparation … [the performers] are performing a version, an understanding, of the life and circumstances of some other’s existence and life events. (2009, 325)

Yet the legitimacy of research-derived stories in the general public is a useful strategy to mitigate against dismissing subjective everyday stories as ‘purely fictional’. It is prudent to remember that cultural and social norms create challenges to alternative storytelling ‘less by limiting the stories that can be imagined than by limiting the stories that can be authoritatively told’ (Polletta et al. 2011, 123).

The political act of storytelling in The Last Country is not about ‘giving voice’ to lesser heard stories, a practice fraught with power relations in itself (Lather 2000, 19). Instead it was about the process of making visible a chorus of voices that purposefully complicated the dominant storylines that circulated on migration in the city. In other words, a storytelling insistent on ‘refusing easy identification’ in which ‘the reader comes to know through a form of textual dispersal of discontinuous bits and multiples of the women’s stories’ (Lather 2000, 19). To make messy, expand and complicate storylines in the city we purposefully collected oral histories from women who cut-across the various binaries that hold together hegemonic narratives of ‘us South Africans’ and ‘them foreigners’.

Working across binaries went beyond simply including the stories of South African internal migrants, which aimed to trouble the problematic idea that conflates migrancy with notions of ‘foreignness’. The Last Country included voices of women who are economic migrants (including South African internal migrants who move to the city for economic reasons) and women who have applied for asylum permits, as well as women who come from different income categories,
some of whom came to South Africa for postgraduate studies, or on work or a spousal visa, and some who work as informal traders in the city.

Storytelling as a political act requires more than choosing carefully whose stories you wish to listen to. It also requires critical reflection on what parts of stories should be told. Here researchers and script writers cannot escape the power dynamics inherent in their positionality and agency to shape the method and content of a public storytelling process. In this project deliberative collaboration with a range of partners and multiple interdisciplinary discussions, as well as playing back the performances to fieldworkers and participants, were mechanisms used to minimize the potential for power relations to do harm for all involved. Building collaborations and partnerships, and sharing processes and knowledge ‘moves conversations about uneven power dynamics between the social/global position of the ‘researcher’ and the ‘researched’ beyond discussions of who can study and write what, to how studying and writing can advance social struggles on the ground’ (Benson and Nagar 2006, 587).

An anti-essentialist and counter-hegemonic focus assisted in deciding which parts of what stories better disrupted and complicated dominant exclusionary views of migrants in the city, such as the victim narratives around migrants and refugees. In the collection of oral histories, some women had deeply traumatic stories of running from war torn areas. In _The Last Country_ script we wanted to include some of these stories, but not sensationalize it in ways that reproduced the problematic narratives of victimhood discussed earlier. Instead of selecting only these expected narratives, we also told the more immediate everyday experiences of exclusion these women faced in the city. These included experiences of xenophobia, sexism, class exploitation and racism in hospitals, government offices, on the street and in the workplace. Ofrah’s character during the play explained her journey of trying to find work in the country. She recounted her experiences of discrimination due to language, but also in how formal businesses exploited her vulnerable position by paying her below minimum wage. Towards the end of the performance she poignantly outlined why she ultimately chose to engage in street trading in Durban:

> On Sundays I don’t come down to sell. Whatever the weather, I will not come. That is my day for prayer and rest. My business is closed. At least selling on the side of the road I can make this choice for myself… I don’t have to report to anyone, I don’t have to justify my absence. On the road I am no one’s slave … on the road I am free to make up my own mind. (The Last Country 2019)

The oral histories clearly narrated how essentialist forms of social identities are deployed to dehumanize or render women invisible; through fixing them as migrant, refugee, black, poor, informal workers and woman in different contexts. Chantal Mouffe (2013, 90) urges that a counter-hegemonic politics must engage with how identities are mobilized and used in hegemonic politics. The intersectionality of everyday stories in _The Last Country_, embedded in the messiness of variegated political, economic and social lives, then directly confronted the violence of how essentialist fixed identities are mobilized to exclude and harm. It is through the entanglements of the everyday that we may ‘foster other forms of identification’ (Mouffe 2013, 90). Fostering alternatives is not about erasing difference and diversity through the façade of commonality, but imagining how we may expand and complicate ways of seeing the self and others. A chorus of voices then included stories of pain and oppression, and everyday stories of humour, love, parenthood, family and friendship. Humorous moments that resonates with audiences’ experiences offered points of connection in the narratives. For example, all people living in Durban have encountered the large flying cockroaches that inhabit the city during the summer. No space in the city is exempt from these urban dwellers. Aneni told her story of encountering these insects:
The first thing I noticed about this place were the cockroaches ... ... everywhere. You must know, I had never interacted with cockroaches until I came to Durban. I was like ... whaaaat! I mean I was screaming ... cockroaches in Durban are gigantic. Make sure you write that down ... ... Zimbabwe may have many things, but definitely not cockroaches that size. Be sure to mention that in your research ... the cockroaches in Durban need to be attended to as a matter of national importance!
(The Last Country 2019)

Another way that connections and commonalities were made possible was through including the everyday stories of MaThwala, a South African woman. Her character had a noticeable impact on many audience members in the post-performance discussions. Racist segregation under apartheid meant that the vast majority of black South Africans faced oppressive exclusion from urban life. MaThwala’s stories of arriving in the city to work and sending money back to the rural homestead, and the exclusions she experienced, resonated strongly with audience members’ memories of their own mothers and grandmothers. Hearing MaThwala’s story as part of the chorus of voices meant that for some audience members it was the first time they started listening to the stories in the rest of the chorus. For example, an audience member told the group in the post-performance discussion session:

The show needs to go to people like me, I am a young Zulu black man ... so ja ... but with this set up, with this story, I know this story [talking about Ma Thwala’s character], that is where I come from. So, seeing how this links to that, and that, and that [talking about the other three characters from Somalia, the DRC and Zimbabwe], it just did something to me, it hit home! Right now, I literally feel like walking out onto the street and at least smiling at someone in that attire [pointing to the actress playing Amina in her Somalian dress], because before when I saw someone like that it is like they don’t even exist, so ja, well done guys. (Post performance audio file 2017)

There are many familiar experiences between urban dwellers in Durban, no matter whether you come from an imagined here or there. Both migrant and host populations in South African cities face ‘limited economic opportunities, difficult to access services and overcrowding in houses’ (Kihato 2007, 265). Complex everyday stories offer what Fernandes calls ‘double voicings or multiple registers that allow the expression of experiences such as gendered poverty’ (2017, 166), to imagine forms of solidarity across differences.

Landau et al. (2016), researching in the context of African cities, have similarly called for civil society to explore alternative approaches to organising around issues of migrants and refugees. Pushing for a human rights compliance framework with migrants and refugees as a separate vulnerable grouping is often ineffective in cities, like Durban, that already have a highly vulnerable and poorly serviced host population. We had hoped that weaving together migration stories that included South African voices would work to ‘defamiliarize the familiar’ (Bauman and May 2001, 10), and in doing so, enable alternative narratives based on shared forms of structural oppression. Again this is not to suggest a shared universal experience of marginalisation, but rather to make visible other ways of organising and imagining the social relations between us (Bauman and May 2001, 10).

Concluding thoughts
What I hope to have shown in this article is the usefulness for public scholarship of making visible the political strategies used in public storytelling. In this case looking at The Last Country performances in Durban. A chorus of voices, not just in the stories performed but through partnerships and collaborations, and in the design, data collection and analysis stage of a research project, is a productive and critical method for developing storytelling as an intentional political
act. Including artists of various kinds within the chorus of voices that make up the project research team is particularly useful to develop counter-hegemonic storylines, and formulate public storytelling. No public storytelling is devoid of power relations in its creation or retelling, but it is by working with and between these complex relationships, social and disciplinary, that a political strategy of storytelling is negotiated. Developing collaborative strategies enables researchers, participants, and project partners, to move beyond focusing only on replacing a dominant narrative with a narrow storyline limited to legislative requirements, representation and identity. Staying with a politics of complexity assists collaborators to navigate and strategize on how counter-hegemonic narratives can act as disruption, disarticulation, expansion and reimagining anew in relation to dominant storylines.

The storytelling in *The Last Country* refused to simply mimic the hegemonic narratives that circulated in policy and popular stories on migration in the city, including reproducing expected stories of trauma and victimhood. It also refused to fit participants into the ‘neat and ordered’ categories of people so prolific in contemporary political life. Using an anti-essentialist and counter-hegemonic political intent *The Last Country*, in my view, was a meaningful and profound project to be a part of exactly because of its failure to represent migrant women in the city as fitting easily into any officially produced or popularly imagined category of people (Lather 2000, 19). Making visible a chorus of variegated narratives invited the social imagination to explore alternative ways of seeing and being in the city. In this way a politics of storytelling embraced the messiness of a multitude of everyday negotiations in which we work to reshape the social fabric in order to become part of it (Jackson 2013). For researchers, fieldworkers and participants, theatre practitioners and the public audience being a part of *The Last Country* was ‘not about empathy so much as becoming’ (Lather 2000, 19).

Public storytelling of this kind need not present well-thought through solutions and suggestions, as academics frequently do in more traditional scholarly outputs. Embracing the politics of complexity invited a space in which the audiences were participant observers who grappled with their own and others’ interpretation of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic stories. This was an invitation that rejected an easy retreat back to our familiar discourses of migration in the city. Rather it was an invitation that, to use Donna Haraway’s beautiful phase, invited us to ‘stay with the trouble’ in our complex, messy entangled social fabrics where we ‘become-with each other or not at all’ (2016, 4).

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5. The trailer of *The Last Country* is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dg4P38dbBao&t=4s

6. Under apartheid hostels were built to house black workers who, due to racist policy that denied black people the right to the city, were forced to migrate from rural areas to serve as exploited labour for urban industries. Hostels remain under democracy, although now run as subsidized rental units by municipalities. They continue to serve as the first port of entry into the city for individuals and families coming from urban peripheries and rural areas.

7. *Gogo* is isiZulu for Grandmother.

8. An academic book published on the violence was titled ‘Go Home or Die Here: Violence, Xenophobia and the Reinvention of Difference in South Africa’ (Hassim, Kupe, and Worby 2008).

9. This is especially the case with scientific knowledge related to social constructs, see Paul Gilroy on how decoding the human DNA exposes the fallacy of race, yet has done little to shift racialisation and racism (2000, 21).


11. See McGarry’s (2018) introduction to the *Ulwembu* script for the importance of building partnerships when advocating for a political shift in perspective.

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