

REPORT ON THE 2017
WINTER SCHOOL

HUMANITIES IMPROVISED



Photograph by Paul Grendon
2016 Photographer in Residence, Factory of the Arts, CHR, UWC



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INTRODUCTION

The 7th Annual Winter School was held at the Centre for Humanities Research (CHR) at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) from the 8th to the 13th August 2017.

It was hosted in partnership with the South African Research Chair Initiative Chair in Social Change (SARChI Chair) at the University of Fort Hare (UFH) and the Interdisciplinary Centre for the Study of Global Change (ICGC) at the University of Minnesota (UMN), and was joined for the second consecutive year by new partners at the Jackman Humanities Institute (JHI) at the University of Toronto (UT). The Winter School is made possible by generous grants from the South African National Research Foundation and the Andrew W Mellon Foundation.

Focused on the question of “the humanities improvised”, the Winter School was attached to the annual meeting of the Consortium for Humanities Centres and Institutes (CHCI) which was hosted by the CHR and was on the same theme. The proximity of these two events presented a unique opportunity for fellows from the CHR and our partner institutions to attend lectures by, and engage more closely with, leading scholars in the humanities globally. Given this opportunity, it was decided to invite as many students as possible from our partners across Africa to the Winter School, resulting in the CHR welcoming to and hosting in Cape Town for approximately 8 days, students and colleagues from the Ale School of Fine Art in Addis Ababa; Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia; the Makerere Institute for Social Research at Makerere University, Uganda; Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Nigeria; and the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg; in addition to our

usual partners. This was an incredible opportunity for our fellows to engage on a more substantial intellectual level and over a relatively longer period with faculty and students from across Africa.

The intensive lecture format of the Winter School drew on visiting scholars to the CHR, Brinda Bose (Jawaharlal Nehru University) and Baidik Bhattacharya (University of Delhi), who also taught a short seminar on literature and postcolonial theory in the week after Winter School and spent substantial time meeting with graduate students and discussing their work. The other lectures were presented by Renate Ferro (Cornell University), Ana Paulo Ferreira (UMN), John Mowitt (U of Leeds) who also took part in a smaller sound and music research group that met at Fort Hare University after Winter School, Gayatri Spivak (Columbia University), and Okechukwe Nwafor (Nnamdi Azikiwe University).

The return of Nwafor to the CHR in order to provide a key lecture to the Winter School was especially significant as he was one of the original doctoral participants in the inaugural Winter School that was jointly hosted by the CHR and the SARChI Chair in 2011. Participants in the Winter School also attended the opening of the “African Choir 1891 Re-Imagined” exhibition at the South African National Gallery and the “Athlone in Mind” visual and digital exhibitions at the CHCI meeting, as well as performances by Tony Bonani Miyambo, Reza Khota, and the Ukwanda Puppet Company.





THE HUMANITIES IMPROVISED

A central concern in the framing of the Winter School was a desire to place the question of improvisation at the centre of the critical humanities, both as concept and as practice: the aesthetic emerging here as a name for this improvisation.

While the annual meeting of the CHCI explored the multiple ways in which improvisation has enabled and facilitated the study of the humanities, not least in times of great social upheaval. The Winter School supplemented this exploration with a slightly slower and more in-depth discussion around key concepts and texts, taught by our participating scholars. Critical to this was the student organised Reading Group programme that took place in the weeks leading up to the Winter School at each of our partner institutions.

Under the theme of “The Humanities Improvised”, the annual meeting and Winter School gathered together artists, art commentators and humanities scholars so as to think the re-conceptualisation of the relationship between art and the humanities against the backdrop of a rapidly changing world of work, politics and technology. As such, the Winter School enabled a forum through which to think more carefully the areas of connection and touch between the research platforms on aesthetic theory and practice, on the one hand, and political theory and justice, on the other. The CHCI annual meeting and the Winter School explored these shifts against the backdrop of an African and South African context where debates about nationalism, decolonization,

neocolonialism, postcolonialism, globalization and neoliberalism have found complex expression and contestation in burgeoning arts initiatives across the continent, producing possibilities for new models of aesthetic education and cultural critique. This intervention revisited the work of improvisation in a context where changes in work, politics and technology appear to have reorganized the repertoire of consciousness, memory and desire that grounds the Humanities.

In the midst of the widening chasm between being and becoming, the Humanities in its improvisational mode may reach beyond a process that only archives and preserves foundational narratives.

The Humanities, when placed in a longer duration of such artistic forms such as jazz, cinema or the work of art, allows us to set forth in anticipation of the new, and enables more questions for humanities inquiry. The study of the Humanities in turn might offer itself as a practice of thought adequate, appropriate and necessary to the demands of a world in flux.

WINTER SCHOOL

For the 2017 Winter School we invited our fellows and partners to participate in a two-day series of lectures, together with colleagues from our partner institutions across the African Continent, on the question of the Humanities Improvised.

The participants in Winter School 2017 were also automatically registered for the CHCI meeting, and took part in the lectures and exhibitions attached to it. Through the CHCI meeting, Winter School participants were able to attend lectures by Isaac Julian, Homi Bhabha, William Kentridge, Gayatri Spivak, and Tim Murray, among others. Each of these plenary lectures articulated a connection between the improvisation of work and the improvisation of human subjectivity, whether this was through a discussion of the development of an artistic practice (Kentridge, Julian) or the problem of the refugee as a question for being in the world located as a function of movement (Bhabha, Spivak). In common in these separate and yet not distinct interventions into the question of the humanities improvised was a consideration of the work of the critic, of the reader as, itself, improvisational, even to the extent to which it produces an archive (Murray).

Indeed, it was the practice of deciphering the legibility of these improvisational categories that was expressed in the mode of the exhibition: the digital, visual, and auditory instantiation of the aesthetic (Cf. Grunebaum and Campbell, *Athlone in Mind*, 2017). In addition to the presenters of the plenary sessions, the annual meeting also hosted panel discussions and smaller lectures from figures such as Jean-Pierre Bekolo (Cameroon), Elizabeth Giorgis (Ethiopia), and Achille Mbembe (South Africa and Cameroon).

The CHR's 'Athlone in Mind' exhibition curated by Kurt Campbell, with a print and digital book (edited by Grunebaum and Campbell) and continuing digital platform were a landmark intervention in contemporary and new media arts featuring some of South Africa's most prominent visual, digital and installation artists (Kemang we Lehulere, Jane Alexander, Zyma Amien, Berni Searle and others). Along with 'Athlone in Mind' – a project that examines the aesthetic imagining of how place might be produced as a question rather than destination – "The Humanities Improvised" annual meeting included a curated selection of arts performances, film screenings and exhibitions by CHR artists in residence, by the AWMF Chair in Aesthetic Theory and Material Performance, Jane Taylor, and other participating artists as part of and alongside the panel presentations and plenary sessions of this major international gathering of humanities scholars, centres and institutes. Participating in this broader programme that situated the aesthetic at the core of humanistic inquiry allowed our fellows and other Winter School participants to encounter the possibility of what thinking with the aesthetic might produce, of the possibilities and futures it might make available.

The speakers for the 2017 Winter School were invited to present lectures on the theme of "the humanities improvised" and to hold question and answer sessions with fellows on their current research. The first day of winter school consisted of three lectures followed by discussion, as well as the opening ceremony for the "African Choir 1891 Re-Imagined". The first lecture was delivered by Visiting Scholar in the CHR, Prof Brinda Bose, on the question of "The Aesthetic and the Erotic", and was

moderated by postdoctoral fellow Dereline Marco. Through developing a reading of Arundhati Roy's literature, Bose posited the notion of the "anti-novel" as a mode of aesthetic improvisation that might be adequate to the fracturing of the self that conditions lived experience in the world. Writing, and more pointedly the work of reading, for Bose, in its shattered expression of the self, has the potential to hold open a space for difference through not fully scripting and reducing subjects to one. The erotic, especially its non-normative expressions, enables this to the extent that it presents more vulnerable subjectivities as more than simply that which must be saved. It is the potential to open this space that Bose named in the concept of the anti-novel.

In a similar mode, Renate Ferro asked how improvisation could be understood as a politically

astute theoretical mechanism through which to lay hold of that which was intended to order and control, so as to set it to work against this grain. In her lecture on "Archival Accumulations", Ferro suggested that having a critical concept of the archive was not adequate in itself. Rather, it was necessary to grasp how that site itself accretes a certain capacity to work against its own formation. Through reading "empyre", a digital archive based at Cornell University, Ferro suggested that the soft skinned space of the archive could be seen to be turned beyond its restrictive condition. In the discussion period after her lecture, moderated by Senior Researcher Heidi Grunebaum, there was much debate around the critique of the archive from historians, as well as the work of forgetting as being primary to the practice of memory from those working in psychoanalytic theory. Ultimately, what





Ferro posited through reading a digital archive, was the concept of “theory by all means” as Souleyman Bachir Diagne has named it in his reading of the literary and philosophical work of Senghor.

If Bose and Ferro both posited a sense of improvisation that turns the interpellative weight of disciplinary normativity against itself, and sets it to work in the interests of a greater democracy, then Ana Paulo Ferreira’s intervention was to locate improvisation as playfulness, as ludic in its response to power. In her lecture on “Ludic memory for Angola’s future”, Ferreira offered a reading of postcolonial Lusophone literariness as a space that facilitates what she calls “lived memory”. This is memory with a poetic quality, not quite pure invention, and yet not encumbered with the strictures of archival authority. It was this

playfulness that Okechukwe Nwafor located in his opening lecture for the second day of the Winter School on “Revisiting discourses of postcolonial modernism in Nigerian Art”. For Nwafor, the use of theory and methods often considered to be European, and therefor consigned to the waste pile of mimicry, was in fact an attempt to work these methods against their own grain where necessary, and at times demonstrated these to be useful tools for the work of producing a postcolonial African sensibility. Through discussing a short YouTube video of a street artist that performed a critique of gender based violence in his particular city by those in power, Nwafor was able to demonstrate how it was possible to play (in the sense developed by Ferreira) with both cultural norms, expressions and theoretical interventions, so as to produce new possibilities for thought. That the result of this street

performance was incarceration, served to highlight the gravity and seriousness of the play involved. In the discussions on both these lectures (moderated by SARChI Chair in Social Change Gary Minkley, and Research Convenor in the CHR Maurits van Bever Donker, respectively), what was most forcefully brought forward by fellows was the attempt to think local specificities in relation to theoretical and political interventions, both international and local. This work, Nwafor suggested, was precisely what we might mean by reading.

Baidik Bhattacharya, in his lecture “After World Literature”, argued that it is the work of the humanities to produce “a non-coercive renegotiation of desire” (Spivak). It is this possibility that is at stake, according to Bhattacharya, in the distinction between world literature and postcolonial literature. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Edward Said, Bhattacharya suggested that if literature holds a peculiar space in the production of a modern subjectivity intertwined with colonialism, particularly through how it produced concepts of subjectivity fixed to place, then the return of that spatial fixity in world literature is a problem. Postcolonial literature, as an approach to reading the play of the text, works against this fixity in its attention to the potentialities of this play. This is not about carefree encounters and articulations, it is not exactly ludic, but rather has to do with a practice of abiding by multiplicity, a practice that might be named an aesthetic education.

Following Bhattacharya’s affirmation of postcoloniality as a particular positioning within the world that enables an improvisation of the human adequate to the demands of our present, John Mowitt developed a concept of the ambient humanities in his lecture on “Jamming”. Playing

with this term, Mowitt suggested that here is both a practice of the human – to jam, to improvise – and a marker of what makes the human, precisely, human. Within the flows of desire that constitute the world (Deleuze and Guattari) the animal represents a jamming of those flows, a concretion into an organism out of flow. What the ambient humanities might allow (and Mowitt means ambient both in terms of sound and in connection with its root which joins it to a concept of being ambidextrous, a concept he jams by insisting on left-handedness) is the unsettling of a space for subjectivation, a playing with flows rather than a fixing in place, a stuttering, rather than a clear articulation.

On this note, Gayatri Spivak entered into our Winter School discourse. Rather than presenting a lecture, Spivak talked through the contents for her recently published collection of essays *Aesthetic Education*. This was an incredibly lively event, deftly moderated by next generation researcher Thozama April, during which Spivak attempted to engage our fellows and to answer the questions posed from the audience. Indeed, if there was improvisation in the Winter School, it was most clearly put into play in this moment, where Spivak took her cue entirely from the students in attendance, answering directly, often in language that itself generated further question, in such a way that the discourse became a play around meaning, around the humanities, and what the humanities might mean today.

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