

# Abahlali's Vocal Politics of Proximity: Speaking, Suffering and Political Subjectivization

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## Abstract

Using as its point of departure the claim that today the urban is the main site for the abandonment of superfluous people, this article explores the emancipatory politics of the South African shack-dwellers' movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo. Based on a notion of political subjectivization as the appropriation of excess freedom, I argue that Abahlali disrupt the order of the 'world-class city' when they expose the contradiction between the democratic inscriptions of equality and the lethal segmentation of the urban order. In articulating their living conditions as the unjustified breach of the promise of 'a better life', the shack-dwellers prove their equality and thus emerge as political subjects. As the article argues, at the centre of this process is a political practice of speaking and listening that is driven by the imperative to reverse the distancing and delaying practices of an order that abandons them by remaining physically, experientially and cognitively proximate to the experiences of life in the shantytown.

## Keywords

Abahlali, abandonment, political subjectivity, Rancière, superfluous people, urban struggles

## Introduction

In late October 2010, following member reports on the workshops or conferences that they attended, or the journeys to which they were delegated, a middle-aged woman took the floor of Abahlali baseMjondolo's general meeting being held in the fully packed 'board room' of the office building where the movement now has its headquarters. She came from Richmond Farm<sup>1</sup> where years ago she bought a plot to build her shack on, but in the preceding few months she had been threatened with eviction and the demolition of her home because the landowner sold the same piece of land to someone else – this time with a title deed. When she had resisted the orders of the new owner to move out, people affiliated with the local councillor started to threaten her. Recounting the manifold and humiliating ways they were trying to chase her away – such as throwing human faeces at her shack – she soon burst into tears and could not stop crying for several minutes. Trying to comfort her, someone filled a bottle with water, while other women in the room chanted a song.

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While such events did not occur at every meeting I had the chance to attend, they were not uncommon in the normal conduct of Abahlali, South Africa's largest shantytown movement.<sup>2</sup> In fact, with or without reference to this particular event, conversations with members solidly confirm the then chairperson S'bu Zikode's claim: 'that experience [. . .] was actually the core call of the movement' (interview, 25 October 2010). Almost all accounts of the movement and its 'living politics' emphasize the role of speaking about and listening to shack dwellers' sufferings. Indeed, experiences of their sufferings make up the stuff of Abahlali's living politics. As I will argue, the verbal articulation of such experiences is pivotal for the process of the shack-dwellers' political mobilization for at least two reasons. On the one hand, the public verbalization of the sufferings entailed in living in shantytowns, and the related feelings of being ridiculed or neglected, has translated into Abahlali's emergence as political subjects in exposing the wrong that has been done to the shack-dwellers: when the shack-dwellers articulated their abandonment as the unjustified breach of the promise of 'a better life for all'. On the other hand, the practice of recounting and attending to the concerns of those living in informal settlements both guarantees and requires that, as opposed to 'party politics' which they perceive to be distancing, Abahlali's politics stays close to shack-dwellers' lives. Together, these two modes of speaking define a political practice that disrupts the order of urban governance which allocates forced mobility and/or the stretched temporality of an emptied out developmentalism to those who can't afford formal housing. In exploring the role of speaking in Abahlali's 'living politics', it is on this disruption, concurring with the shack-dwellers' collective political subjectivization, that the present article centres.

These concerns are part of wider research that inquires into the possibilities of politically challenging the techniques and rationalities of abandonment through which contemporary biopolitics materializes as the power to disallow life. Abandonment, understood here as a function of this modern form of rule whose subject is the human being as a biological existence (Foucault, 1978), operates through the production of superfluous life, a life whose capacities cannot be rendered useful and is therefore not to be fostered. Doubtless, in our day the urban emerges as the main site for the production and abandonment of superfluous life; one need only recall the months-long shack-demolition campaign of the Zimbabwean government in 2005, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the anti-homeless laws of the United States or, to add one of the major targets of Abahlali's struggle, the forced relocation of shantytown and backyard dwellers in cities of post-apartheid South Africa. It is within the space of aspiring 'world class cities' that the distinction between useful and disposable lives most clearly crystallizes. With infrastructural networks increasingly privatized and customized, lines of demarcation between affluent and poor parts of a city are either ossified or emerge anew (Graham and Marvin, 2001) and, in areas associated with 'flawed consumers' (Bauman, 2004), spaces of abandonment take shape. Especially so since the optimal flow of economic circulation is now to be secured through sealing it off from potentially obstructive people and places, hence, along with the criminalization of poverty, both spatial demarcation and policing are intensified.

However, as Abahlali's mobilization aptly illustrates, when the neoliberal reconfiguration of urban spaces reaches its limit figure in the free movement of the superfluous people, it also exposes how spatial ordering is always much more than topography. It is but one aspect of a sensible order that determines the parts that the whole of the community is made up of, and what the place and the role of each part are. Correspondingly, in distributing capacities and sensibilities according to places and roles, it determines what is audible and visible, which utterances are of concern for the community and which are to be dismissed as unworthy noise (Rancière, 1999). Thus the spatial order of the world-class city that is redesigned along the axis of assumed capacities, in order to function as the properly free entrepreneurial subject of neoliberalism, is, at the same time, albeit

less and less tangibly, an order that distributes political capacities. But whereas this order more or less unproblematically matches up the properly free entrepreneurial subject with political capacities reduced to the regular reinforcement of the prudent state and its austere governance (Rancière, 2007), the political capacities of the superfluous people appear to be in excess. That is, the freedom inscribed in the foundational documents of democratic regimes as belonging to all equally emerges as an excess in the efforts to secure the city against the influx of superfluous people. Of course, it only emerges as such once the order of the audible and the visible is disturbed by the appearance of a subject that does not fit the account of the order because, in articulating the contradiction between inscriptions of equality and the lethal segmentation of the urban order, it makes visible what was supposed to be tossed out of sight and communicates what was supposed to be inscrutable, thus demonstrating that, in fact, it has the capacities that it was not supposed to have. This is the kind of disruption that is called politics (Rancière, 1999) and, as I will show, Abahlali's struggle for a place in the city enacts precisely such politics.

In lieu of the emptied-out developmental mandate and in completion to an increasingly violent policing, to secure the unobstructed circulation of people and goods, neoliberal governance of the South African city suspends the excess mobility of superfluous people by pushing them into unbearable living conditions or insurmountable distances, or both, in this sequence. It does so in the interplay between a political order that supposedly contains the superfluous as stable voters of the ruling party and entries on waiting lists for 'a better life,' always yet to come. When Abahlali (2006a: 7) declare: 'We know that we are not supposed to be living the way we do', they refute precisely these terms of their suspended inclusion. Demonstrating their identity with 'the people' as the referents of the democratic order, they show that their freedom is not at all ambivalent; that their obedience is not unconditioned. When they protest against the lethal impacts of withdrawing basic infrastructure, such as shack fires ('We are being left to burn because we don't count') or forced evictions to peripheral and isolated relocation camps ('No to evictions to human dumping grounds!'), they expose their abandonment as conditional to a set of practices and assumptions that deny them as political subjects. Accordingly, both in this article and the research that frames it, and based on the resonance of Abahlali's resistant practice with Jacques Rancière's writings on the conception of politics, I deploy an account of the political subject as that collectivity which emerges through the appropriation or, better, the enactment of the excess freedom of every speaking being: the freedom to expose the contingency of the order of rule to which s/he is subjected.<sup>3</sup> Thus, it is claimed here, Abahlali reveals that the governmental rationality of the neoliberal city, like rationalities of rule in general, has to secure against the contingency of the order that it institutes by distancing the *demos* from itself. That is, the people have to be distanced – spatially and discursively – from their capacity to reveal that the order has no grounds: they have to be rendered unequal. 'Depoliticization is the oldest task of politics' (Rancière, 2007: 19); or, 'The government wants us to think we are useless and nothing so that we won't speak. They want us to feel inferior. So they use the word slum, and eliminate' (Abahlali, 2007a: para. 35).

Based on these considerations, to explore the Abahlali's emergence as a collective political subject, in this article I first assess the role of the feeling of betrayal in this process, and then present the centrality of speaking in their collective assertion of equality. Having traced the governmental practices of rendering unequal in, among others, the widely publicized accusation according to which the movement's mobilization was due to White intellectuals' manipulation, I next turn to the ways Abahlali call into question the forms of their inclusion within the political order of post-apartheid South Africa, thus contesting official constructions of freedom too. Challenging the distancing and delaying effects of this order and their position therein, as the subsequent section discusses, the shack-dwellers' 'living politics' is formulated as an emphatically vocal politics of

proximity; that is, a political practice, the utmost principle of which is to stay close to the sufferings entailed by the living conditions in shantytowns. Finally, looking into how this principle is channelled into the movement's intellectual practice, in the last section I present the form of knowledge that drives and potentially sustains the Abahlali's political subjectivization.

## The Promise of 'a Better Life' and Political Subjectivization

To account for the shack-dwellers' emergence as political subjects, we need to return to the first demonstration of the Kennedy Road settlement; that is, the spontaneous road blockade staged in early 2005, a day after inhabitants learnt that, instead of their houses, a brick factory was to be built on a piece of land on the close-by Elf Road, a piece of land that the councillor had previously promised to grant to the community for low-cost housing development.<sup>4</sup> It is certainly here, in the breaching of this particular promise, that we find the 'immediate' reason for the shack-dwellers' mobilization (Pithouse, 2005). As this section will show, moreover, every aspect of Abahlali's political subjectivization leading up to the inception of the movement in October 2005, and their activism thereafter, can be discerned from a closer look at this event and the reflections of those involved. That is, both the outrage about betrayal and its condemnation on grounds of the shack-dwellers' assertion of equality as thinking and speaking beings are to be found already at this early moment. It is to the interrelated dynamics of these two aspects, articulating freedom as the 'improper property' of the surplus people, that I turn to in the following section.

### *'It Was Forced to be Formed': Betrayal and Political Subjectivization*

How does the breach of a promise trigger political subjectivization? First, the realization that a promise was breached entails the recognition of oneself as wronged, as not being treated as an equal party to the promise; that is, the recognition that injustice has been done. This was clearly present in Kennedy Road inhabitants' interpretation of the events: the councillor betrayed them when he ignored their agreement about the piece of land on Elf road. Second, however, this experience of betrayal translated into the shack-dwellers' political subjectivization when – through the councillor's (and all other concerned parties') disregard of the Kennedy Road Development Committee's (KRDC) request for a meeting and their subsequent criminalization – they linked it to their recurrent experiences of being disregarded as human beings; as speaking human beings living under inhuman circumstances.

Everybody is just rotting here. We have no land. Most of us have no jobs. [. . . City Manager Mike] Sutcliffe talks to the *Tribune* about us but he doesn't speak to us. All they do is send the police every time we ask to talk. It is a war. They are attacking us. What do you do when the man you have elected to represent you calls you criminal when you ask him to keep his promises? He has still not come here. We are not fighting. We want to be listened to. We want someone to tell us what is going on. (S'bu Zikode in Pithouse, 2005: 15)

As Pithouse's (2005) reconstruction of these first days clearly shows, by the night of the road blockade, after fourteen of the protesters were arrested, the shack-dwellers' feeling of betrayal over the 'promised land' had been generalized through relating it to various manifestations of the (local) government's contempt for their lives, ranging from being referred to as criminals to the absence of refuse collection, or the municipality's failure (for the previous five years) to clean the pit latrines installed by the Urban Foundation in the early nineties, as well as to not being listened to.

Putting years of effort to improve their living conditions into a new perspective, through the decision to blockade the road and the parallel process of generalizing their experience of betrayal, the shack-dwellers of Kennedy Road forcefully stepped out of their roles as 'good girls and good boys' of the local governmental order (research notes, April 2009).

This was a revolt of obedient and faithful citizens. These [sic] had done everything asked of them. [...] They revolted because the moment when they asked that their faith not be spurned is the moment their aspirations for dignity became criminal. On the day of the road blockade they entered the tunnel of the discovery of their betrayal. (Pithouse, 2005: 16)

Indeed, as the quote's first sentence suggests, the shack-dwellers' reflections on the events of the blockade expanded the scope of reference for their betrayal beyond the local level to that of the post-apartheid order: 'And this is the government that we fought for, and then worked for and then voted for and which now beats us and arrests us' (Zikode, 2005: 15). With their experiences of betrayal and criminalization thus universalized, they emerged as separate from that order: 'We are on our own now' (Zikode cited in Abahlali, 2006a: 1). Separate from the order whose subject is supposed to be them exactly: 'They say we have committed public violence but against which public? If we are not the public, then who is the public and who are we?' (Zikode cited in Pithouse, 2005: 15).

Conversely, with the surrounding settlements' instant sympathy, and the consequent mobilization of thousands of the area's shack-dwellers, this articulation of 'the part that has no part' gained an explicitly collective nature (Rancière, 1999) which, a few months later, gained inscription by choosing the generic name 'shack-dwellers'.<sup>5</sup> Naming those whose living conditions testify to their being denied as parties to the promise of 'a better life for all',<sup>6</sup> the movement was formed out of linking the breach of this promise with the shack-dwellers' feeling of invisibility and inaudibility. With attributing their sufferings to the government's breaking its promise of 'a better life for all' on the one hand, and, on the other, recognizing that the experience of this injustice is shared well beyond Kennedy Road, at the moment when the force 'to be formed' was strongly reverberated, the referent of the Abahlali's emerging politics has become much broader too: the poor, the public, the people – all those appearing in the space between two realizations: '[w]e are on our own now' and 'we are not on our own':

The movement grew out of a spontaneous blockade; of our radical anger and frustration. It was not preceded by intellectual work but afterwards the movement was formed because we realized that *we are not on our own*. We are suffering from the lies of the democracy and others suffer too. (S'bu Zikode, research notes, 6 May 2009; emphasis added)

We started to march after 10 years of empty promises from the government. [...] The ANC [African National Congress] said 'a better life for all', but I don't know, it's not a better life for all, especially if you live in the shacks. We waited for the promises from 1994, up to 2004, that's 10 years of waiting for the promises from the government. (Mnikelo Ndabankulu interviewed by Bryant, 2005)

I will say, and I always said it, when the organization was formed, it was automatically formed. It was forced to be formed. Nobody wanted to form the organization but it happened automatically because when Kennedy Road saw a need to mobilize, they mobilized as KRDC, not even knowing they are forming Abahlali organization. [...] But when they mobilized, the nearby areas were also mobilized by them [...] So, we came together in that idea, thinking that we need to raise our voice together because individually we are just disregarded. Maybe, in the name of the masses we'll be taken into note. [...] We felt that over

so many years living in such conditions, but we are not known. If we are, we are not being taken seriously. (Philani Zungu, interview, 2 November 2010)

Starting from the notion of the breached promise, then, we can see how speaking and suffering from the living conditions in the shantytown add up to political subjectivization. Reflected also in members' accounts of their involvement in the movement as lending them courage and the ability to be heard and seen,<sup>7</sup> Abahlali's demonstrations can be understood as (re-)staging their appearance as political subjects, as people who contest the arbitrariness of their status as 'forgotten citizens' by articulately and visibly asserting that they are equal parts of the 'all' that was promised a better life.<sup>8</sup> That is, they contest being allotted abandonment by asserting that, as thinking and speaking human beings, they are aware of the promises of the post-apartheid order as well as their own equality within that order and, at the same time, by proving to themselves and everyone else that they have become willing to so demonstrate. 'We have shown the world that we know that we are not supposed to be living the way we do' (Zikode cited in Abahlali, 2006a: 7).<sup>9</sup>

### 'We Are Not Animals. We Are Human Beings': Asserting the Equality of Speaking Beings

To further explore the place of Abahlali's emphasis on speaking and thinking within their demonstrations of equality, and thus their political subjectivization, let us consider the link members make between the breach of promises and not being spoken and listened to. Just like on the day of Kennedy Road's first road blockade, often spontaneous protest occurs in informal settlements when officials cancel (or simply don't show up at) a meeting previously set up with the community. As the following quote from *Dear Mandela*, Dara Kell and Christopher Nizza's (2011) documentary exemplifies, being denied the chance of discussion on these occasions the shack-dwellers interpret as the denial of their humanity as speaking beings. In a scene shot for the movie in the Siyanda C informal settlement after a protest – triggered by the municipality cancelling their meeting – had been dissolved by the police, Mama Nxumalo (1:25) addresses municipal official Bongi Hlengwa (who later that day eventually agreed to visit the scene):

Many of us have been living here for more than 21 years. The people of Siyanda have pain in their hearts. The houses that are being built . . . the people who are getting them are not even from around here. We are not animals, we are human beings. We would like the City of Durban to think about the people of Siyanda.

The same association between not being considered an equal party to a discussion or a promise and being denied one's humanity is perhaps even more emphatically expressed by Zama Ndlovu (interview, 12 October 2010), long-time Abahlali member who continued to stay at Kennedy Road after the September 2009 attack<sup>10</sup> on the movement:

[. . .] After the September attacks they came, they [i.e. the local ANC] promised so many things, which included that Kennedy road is going to be moved 'cause there are houses that are built for Kennedy Road. [. . .] Guess what: they'd never come back, ever since. [. . .] They should have come back at least to lie again and at least to say, 'okay, we have a problem there and there but we know, we're not forgetting about your project'. They just . . . they went like that. It's like we're not existing to them. 'Cause you can't lie to a human being and not come back to make an apology even if you're, okay, you are not considering yourself lying. You cannot tell me something that you're going to do this for me and then you just like . . . what the hell? You don't even come to tell me what happened, what went wrong, if there is anything that went wrong, or if you're still doing it? No, you don't come back: just like that. So, to me, it's like . . . I felt



like, okay, we are not recognized as human beings, we're just like, you know, the animals, not just any . . . or, like, the wild animals 'cause you can't bother yourself as a human being to talk to the wild animals 'cause at the end of the day the animal can't understand your language!

Similar interpretations of the way government officials or politicians treat them define Abahlali's position on elections. As they frequently note, politicians only set foot in the *jondolos* during the electoral campaigns, but after the votes are cast, their inhabitants are ignored again. Asked what she meant when describing the shack-dwellers' situation as 'marginalized', Zodwa Nsibande (young woman in her mid-twenties, then General Secretary of Abahlali) replied:

You know, when a person is pretending that he or she sees you, whereas he doesn't even care about you! That is the current situation of the shack-dwellers in this country. They only care about people living in the shacks, about poor people, when it was election. After that, they don't care about them; they just arrest them, they shoot them, they do whatever they want to do with them, without consulting them. But when it comes to elections: that's when they are able to practice all those systems that exist within the democratic era. Just because they are the ones who are needing you more than we need them. (interview, 28 May 2009)<sup>11</sup>

To define the same situation, Mnikelo Ndabankulu (interview, 29 June 2009) uses the term 'election specialists': the shack-dwellers' existence matters only every five years, when 'everybody promises us heaven and earth', but once the campaign is over, everything returns to normal: 'as if we never existed'.

It is precisely within these accounts of being completely neglected or treated as one ignorant mass of 'voting material' that we can locate practices of rendering unequal (Mnikelo Ndabankulu, interview, 29 June 2009). Ignoring shack-dwellers' requests for conversation and information, or heeding these requests only at times when the block vote needs to be delivered to the party outlines their role and position within the biopolitical order of dispersal rather clearly; they are inaudible and invisible or to be pushed out of sight, with their political (in)existence being reduced to voting for the governing party. Working to solidify this position through the temporal dimension is the promise of development and the expectation that the poor be patient; all summed up in the South African policy-topos of 'service delivery' (cf. Pithouse, 2011). Through conditioning poor people's patience, the splintered temporality of urban development effectively reinforces the ordering of the (in)visible and the (a)political, even though the eThekweni Municipality's 'Slums Clearance Programme' or the 'Slums Act' hardly suggest that services will be delivered to the shantytown in the foreseeable future. 'Until when will these policies be used as government propaganda? One day they announce the budget to build reconstruction and development programme (RDP) houses, the next day they announce the Slums Act as a way of addressing the housing backlog' (Abahlali, 2008b: 1).

Such is the segmentary spatial order of the global city tied to a sensible distribution that denies the surplus population's ability to speak and understand, and such are the reasons for Abahlali's insistence on defining their equality in terms of thinking and speaking. In turn, this insistence directs attention to further practices that deny the political nature of the shack-dwellers' struggles. To begin, this seems to be the effect of the post-apartheid reconfiguration of the notion of violence discussed by Michael Neocosmos (2011). As he shows, the power of 'human rights culture' and transitional justice effectively recast violence as 'the antithesis of democracy': as 'a leftover from authoritarianism, or as an effect of transition, or else as simply pathological' (Neocosmos, 2011: 369). Accordingly, routinely deeming 'service delivery' protests violent and destructive – the general practice of South African politicians and the media – enables their criminalization and depoliticization. With the reason for the protests and their objectives thus predetermined by the label,

and their form (marching, chanting, occasionally burning tires or mattresses) uniformly condemned, whatever the protestors wish to communicate can go unnoticed. In defiance of this logic, Abahlali frame their mass marches as discourse, thus creating continuity between attempts at discussion and their public protests:

We discovered that our municipality does not listen to us when we speak to them in Zulu. We tried English. Now we realize that they won't understand Xhosa or Sotho either. The only language that they understand is when we put thousands of people on the street. (Zikode, 2005: 2)

While, on occasion, this language certainly has a significant impact, as experienced by Abahlali having mobilized thousands of shack-dwellers in Durban, by the time S'bu Zikode wrote the essay cited, Mzonke Poni, chairperson of Abahlali baseMjondolo Western Cape, reflects on the paradox of having to use it. That is, not being listened to can easily loop back into the circular figure of 'service delivery riots' and the discourse of violence (see Poni, 2009).

I have lost count of how many times we went to (municipal offices in) Cape Town, to put forward the people's complaints, who are, by the way, living like animals in this township [. . .] The only way the government notices us is when we express our anger and rage, then they understand how we feel. (Poni in Mabandla, 2009: para. 4)

Yet the fact that Abahlali reject the 'service delivery protest' label in their public appearances, for example by revealing its depoliticizing logic, proves precisely that demonstration is a valid language of politics, and a language that they speak.

However, this very phenomenon – Abahlali's public manifestations of political dissidence resisting the 'service delivery' categorization – seems to have activated a further mechanism of rendering unequal; namely, the figure of the 'Third Force'. Reinvigorating a notion that was used under apartheid with reference to 'security agents offering military support to the Zulu nationalist attacks on ANC supporters in defence of apartheid', two months after the shack-dwellers' first protest, more specifically, following their 3,000-people strong march on Ward Councillor Baig, a delegation of the local ANC called a meeting to the Kennedy Road hall and demanded that the protestors reveal 'the Third Force behind the protest' (Pithouse, 2005: 17). In the context of Abahlali's political subjectivization, two comments have to be made about this accusation. On the one hand, S'bu Zikode's immediate response, according to which the Third Force is the approaching winter that, in settlements without electricity, means shack-fires and deaths, as well as the elaboration of this response in his article 'Third Force', affirms the previous point that the relationship between articulations of the shack-dwellers' suffering and the assertion of their equality is central to the process of their political subjectivization:

Well, I am the Third Force myself. The Third Force is all the pain and the suffering that the poor are subjected to every second in our lives. The shack dwellers have many things to say about the Third Force. It is time for us to speak out and to say this is who we are, this is where we are, and this is how we live. The life that we are living makes our communities the Third Force. (Zikode, 2005: 1)

On the other hand, the accusation of the Third Force – echoed by the local media soon after the ANC's visit, and prevalent in various forms ever since – implies, of course, that by themselves the shack-dwellers either wouldn't have questioned the rightfulness of their situation, or wouldn't have been able to conceptualize and organize the political activities of the early months. It suggests that being ignorant and defenceless due to their poverty, shack-dwellers have become subject to the



manipulation of White intellectuals, and are used as ‘stepping stones’ for these ‘agents provocateur’ advancing hidden agendas.<sup>12</sup> What the Third Force-plot certainly does not entail is a conception of the shack-dwellers as people capable of political resistance – a puzzling fact considering the role of shantytowns in the anti-apartheid struggle (cf. Pithouse, 2005).

### *Problematizing Political Integration, Contesting UnFreedom*

To take a hint from the agent provocateur argumentation as to what kind of activism is presumed to suit the shack-dwellers: ‘Abahlali have a democratic right to exist as a lobby group but cannot act as if they have their own pseudo leaders other than the democratically elected leaders of our people’ (Mbaso and Mchunu, 2006). Whereas the previous sections showed how the failure of ‘lobbying’ triggered the political subjectivization of Abahlali, let us now extend these considerations to the form of democratic action that supposedly match the shack-dwellers’ interests and capacities. More precisely, let us see how Abahlali question such limitations of their political action.

As Neocosmos (2011) argues, a major pillar of the post-apartheid order is the idea that the evils of minority rule have been redeemed with the political emancipation of the Black majority, with the inception of multiracial democracy. Although in codifying the developmental mandate of the first Mandela government, the democratic constitution and its Bill of Rights enshrined a vast array of socio-economic rights, with statist developmentalism fading away, the political symbolism of these documents seems to have been narrowed down to the celebration of the rule of law and the legitimate state (where, in turn, the legitimate state equals the prudent state). Correspondingly, by the time the Freedom Charter Monument was erected and the part of Kliptown (in Soweto, Johannesburg) where in 1955, the Congress of the People adopted the charter was rebranded as the Walter Sisulu Square of Dedication – ‘a world-class tourist destination and heritage site’ (Blue IQ Investment Holdings quoted in Davie and Alexander, 2005) – for many, ‘[f]reedom turned out to be just a word’ (Ntswayi cited in Perry, 2009).

Enacting this very discordance between freedom identified with the institutions of the liberal democratic state and the lived experiences of the poor majority in the post-apartheid order, on 27 April every year; that is, on Freedom Day, Abahlali baseMjondolo (2008a) ‘mourn UnFreedom’.<sup>13</sup> On the day marked as a national holiday in commemoration of the first democratic elections of 1994, since 2006, the movement organizes its UnFreedom Day to stage the shack-dwellers’ discursive deconstruction of the official notion of freedom which, in their perception, moved away from the one embraced by the anti-apartheid struggle and does not extend to the political criticism coming from the surplus population.

We fought, died, and voted for this government and so that we can be free in our country and have decent lives, houses and jobs – but this government doesn’t treat us as people who can speak and think for themselves and who have the freedom to do so. (Abahlali, 2007b: para. 7)

On UnFreedom Days, shack-dwellers from settlements around the city – and, depending on financial resources, around the country – gather to articulate the difference between their understanding of freedom and the one celebrated by the state, and to prove by their very appearance that they know this difference cannot be justified: ‘We are the living truth of broken promises and betrayals of the last 12 years’ (Abahlali, 2006b: 1). Posing what seems to be a paradox, it is precisely by building an event around the statement that ‘so much of people’s lives is in contradiction to freedom’ that Abahlali (2008b: 1) enact their excess freedom. It is indeed through questioning

the kind of freedom they are allowed to practice as citizens of post-apartheid South Africa, that they appropriate freedom as their 'improper property' (Rancière, 1999: 8).

When we have UnFreedom Day as well as a new law like the Slums Act being pushed at the people by the same politicians, and all in the name and language of 'freedom', we see the contradictions in our country. It is true that we are told in SA [South Africa] that there is this freedom but there [are] also evictions – they say we are free but it cannot be true when evictions and hunger continue. (Abahlali, 2008b: 1)

These contradictions, whose reconstruction as unjust gives rise to Abahlali's politics, articulate the shack-dwellers' excess freedom as an obligation to debate and question. On the days when the ANC rallies nationwide, mobilizing thousands of poor people to form the celebratory masses, Abahlali (2008b: 1) speaks about the 'unfreedom [that] is lived daily in the shacks', and reiterates the need to expose the discourse that mutes and masks it over.

[Q]uestioning of the authorities will be crucial. What causes them to turn a blind eye on the poor who voted for them? Why is there an obvious consistency in terms of failure to deliver once they are elected to power? Who really distracts them from recognizing shack-dwellers? Will they continue to think that shack-dwellers are to be wiped out had they knew the PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE OF SHACKDWELLING? Would they not revisit their unrealistic policies afterwards? (2008b: 1, emphasis in original)

In accordance with the idea of the UnFreedom Day and the way it problematizes what they interpret as the official reduction of freedom to practicing one's voting rights, since the run-up to the 2005 municipal elections, Abahlali have regularly announced their 'No land, no house, no vote!' campaign. Adopting a strategy of the Landless People's Movement that called for abstention from voting at the 2004 general elections, by refusing to participate, the shack-dwellers reject their automatic inclusion into the political order as the guaranteed supporters of the governing party, and work to disrupt the previously mentioned five-year cycles of promises and neglect.<sup>14</sup>

I was born into the ANC and I have voted for the party in every election except for the last one when Abahlali decided on the 'No Land. No House. No Vote.' campaign. When we formed Abahlali many of us were doing so as unsatisfied members of the ANC . . . it was about fighting for the practicalities of the theory in the Freedom Charter and the Constitution. [ . . . ] The ANC has lobbied support for elections and when we remind them of the promises they made, when we quote them, they get angry with us. (Mnikelo Ndabankulu in Tolsi, 2009).

Stemming from the interpretation of the shack-dwellers' living conditions as the evidence of unkept promises, the definition of their function as that of 'reminding' the government of what it has pledged to do is, in fact, quite prevalent in Abahlali's discourse (Abahlali, 2007b; Mashumi Figlan, interview, 5 October 2010; cf. Bryant, 2007, and Harris, 2006).<sup>15</sup> Just like the concept of UnFreedom Day, which intends to recall the notion of freedom that was inscribed as the Freedom Charter and thus to the post-apartheid constitution, so as to contrast it to the freedom of 'party politics', this definition affirms the equality of the shack-dwellers as thinking beings who are aware of the meaning of equality that the democratic order was meant to grant them. At the same time, it refers to their aim to counter the temporal and spatial distancing that allows for the forgetfulness of politicians: the discrepancy between the notion of freedom celebrated at the self-congratulatory rallies of Freedom Day and the Unfreedom lived daily in the shacks is, for Abahlali, due to the fact that 'the democratically elected leaders of [the] people' can, and do, move away from the people

or, rather, move the people away from themselves (Mbaso and Mchunu, 2006). To counter such dynamics of dispersal that, in effect, materializes abandonment, the movement builds their politics around the imperative to stay close to shack-dwellers' lives.

## Abahlali's Vocal Politics of Proximity

Setting out to discuss the implications of this imperative – that is, to elaborate what I refer to as Abahlali's politics of proximity – this section focuses on the shack-dwellers' construction of their politics as a space of speaking and listening, as a space where the sufferings of their everyday lives can be recounted and are attended to. Articulating one of the major aspects of Abahlali's politics and the way it disrupts the distancing and delaying effects of the 'world class' city's sensible order, by presenting a militant practice of putting everyday life into discourse, politics as a space for speaking suffering means that the specific concerns of shack-dwellers' lives provide the sole and constant reference for the movement's activism. In thus complementing the other two aspects of the politics of proximity – resisting forced mobility and insisting on the closeness of equal intelligences – politics as the space for speaking and listening rejects the notion of 'life in general' that has enabled the inscription of abandonment into biopolitical governmental rationalities (Foucault, 2003: 253; cf. Selmeczi, 2009).

Referred to as the 'people's politics', the 'politics of the poor', their 'homemade politics' but most often as 'living politics', and defined as being 'about what really hurts the people', Abahlali's politics, then, is built on the imperative to maintain a direct connection, a close-up perspective on the experiences of living in informal settlements (Mnikelo Ndabankulu interviewed by Bryant, 2005). Due to its polysemy, the verb *attend to* well describes how this practice of filling the governmental gap of abandonment occurs. On the one hand, the space of living politics is attentive in entailing an ethical praxis where everyone is listened to, where everyone's cry can be voiced and is taken seriously.

[Living politics is] a very, very important space for any human being that is oppressed in the manner that our members are oppressed. It's a space where they can cough out all their frustrations. In many aspects, it's a space where their dignity is restored. Their thoughts are respected, their views are listened to. (S'bu Zikode, interview, 2 June 2009)

In this primary sense, 'living politics' simply refers to the practice according to which any shack-dweller (whether member or not) can turn to the movement with her problem, and anyone can raise any point of concern at any gathering of the movement. However, living politics as a discursive space also implies that, although there certainly are issues that shack-dwellers, backyard-dwellers or those relocated to transit camps commonly face – such as the threat of eviction, the precarious relations of owning or renting a shack, and the lack of life-supporting infrastructure – here everyone's concern is received anew, in its singularity. In addition to the conviction that everyone's suffering is equally unjust, in being aware of the varying practical contexts of every issue raised this implication also points to the second sense which living politics points to.<sup>16</sup> Beyond the healing effects of 'providing that ear'; 'something that people are craving', in this second meaning, living politics attends to formulating a responsibility to effectively deal with the problem which the cry is about (Zodwa Nsibande, interview, 2 November 2010).

Then Abahlali [. . .] they used to give their times to go to that settlement or that area, to hear the views of the people: what [is] their problem? And they used to advise them, not to take their problem as theirs; they

used to advise how to deal with the problem. So, when someone is coming to your problem and listen[s], at least it's a better relief even to you that 'at least this person is willing to help me'. So, it's working like that. [Abahlali don't] choose which place to go – they [go] anywhere. . . (Nozuko Hulushe, interview, 11 October 2010)

Such are the ways living politics aims to make up for the negligence of the politicians who are seen to be 'distancing [themselves] from the people' (Nozuko Hulushe, 2010).

There is, however, another aspect of living politics and its imperative to stay close to the life of shack-dwellers: that of the temporality imposed upon them within the splintering order of urban development. Contesting the empty myth of service delivery or the constant temporariness of relocation camps, Abahlali define their politics according to the immediacy of lives exposed to biopolitical abandonment. 'A living politics is whereby our difficulties are always next to us, so we need to challenge it, we need to face them, we need to accomplish one day, in order to live a better life' (Mzwake Mdlalose, interview, 24 October 2010). When crying 'We are dying while we wait!' (Philani Zungu in Abahlali, 2006c: para. 5), Abahlali (2008b: 1) point not only at the 'obvious consistency in terms of failure to deliver', they also target the rationality that is, by default, blind to the temporality of the singular suffering life. Defined as 'the politics of the present tense' (Philani Zungu, interview 2 November 2010) – that is, as a political practice attentive precisely to these individual temporalities – living politics hence exposes the sensible order that materializes the biopolitical 'division between what must be done and what it is advisable not to do' (Foucault, 2008: 11).

Ja, living politics . . . living politics is politics that one speaks in order to reveal what's real. In order to say the present tense. Yes! Ja! I think that's the right word: living politics, it's an engagement to present the present tense, especially the poor's tenses, our tenses: the shack-dwellers. [. . .] So, speaking that tense or addressing that problem, I have to expose it that this is me and this is what I want and how I want it. Or this is how I'm suffering and these are the ideas, at least, that should help me. It's all about me, the people, and the present tense: living politics. (Philani Zungu, interview, 2 November 2010)

As S'bu Zikode's experiences of participating in planning development suggest, Abahlali's politics of the present tense is, accordingly, in conflict with the temporality that characterizes the making of urban development. Recounting the potential tension that results from the movement's success in claiming a say in the fate of their settlements, Zikode (interview, 26 October 2010; emphasis added) refers to the danger of moving away from the temporality of the very concerns their participation is meant to address:

[I]t's very dangerous in the sense that you seem to be co-opted, and you seem to be understanding this protocol; then you may be co-opted in this *politics of patience*. Then you begin to say: 'comrades, no, hang on, be patient' because you tend to understand this technicality. 'This thing is complicated, you know, we have to go and find another architect or an engineer'. [. . .] So, you'll be the first one to say: 'but hang on, this thing is really complicated. . .'

By pointing to this conflict, Zikode's account clearly identifies the continuity between the power effects of expert knowledge and (temporal) distancing. While acknowledging the inherent risks, Abahlali's approach to development aims to counter such power dynamics by re-rendering it according to the politics of proximity. The conception of knowledge that enables this re-rendering is the subject of the final section.

## **'I am the Professor of My Own Suffering': Living Politics as a Form of Knowledge**

As I have shown, at the roots of Abahlali's political subjectivization is the recognition that their suffering is unjust, with the articulation of this recognition contemporaneously demonstrating their equality as thinking and speaking human beings. In what follows, I argue that thus enabling the practice of a politics of proximity, this process of emancipation, configures a form of knowledge. That is, the movement's political practice and, by implication, their efforts to maintain thinking development in proximity are conditional upon rendering suffering as cognition.

In parallel to the emergence of Abahlali's political subjectivity, and as opposed to the distancing and delaying effects of the post-apartheid city's sensible order, the connection between suffering and knowledge is clearly established in the movement's response to the 'Third Force' accusation:

Those in power are blind to our suffering. This is because they have not seen what we see, they have not felt what we are feeling every second, every day. My appeal is that leaders who are concerned about peoples' lives must come and stay at least one week in the *jondolos*. They must feel the mud. They must share six toilets with 6,000 people. [ . . . ] For us time has been a very good teacher. People have realized so many things. We have learnt from the past – we have suffered alone. That pain and suffering has taught us a lot. We have begun to realize that we are not supposed to be living under these conditions. There has been a dawn of democracy for the poor. (Zikode, 2005: 2)

The call for people higher up in the social hierarchy to directly experience life in the informal settlements was present already at Abahlali's first organized march, in the form of a banner that read: 'University of Kennedy Road', which then was followed by the 'University of Foreman Road', and so forth, until – with the movement's naming – the University of Abahlali baseMjondolo was 'founded'<sup>17</sup>

[The University of Abahlali is] also part of the idea of passing on the message and grievances or exposing the life-conditions. Because what was happening: Abahlali was inviting the senior to come to shacks and live the life and experience the same conditions that we are experiencing. And then tell us that how long can he or she live in that conditions. So, one night, it is obvious that he will get up with one big lesson . . . (Philani Zungu, interview, 2 November 2010)

As Bryant (2007: 25) shows, these banners are equivalent to 'declaring the settlements to be places of learning even as they are places of suffering, and their residents to be people worth listening to'. Hence, the connection to their emancipation understood – with Rancière (2007: 48) – as proving equality to oneself. The recognition 'that we are not supposed to be living the way we do' entails an active reflection on suffering as cognition, which then transforms into the power to contest the sensible order (Abahlali, 2006a, 1). This transformation is also apparent in descriptions of living politics as a space for people 'to say what they want, how they want to govern to do it'; or as 'a certain corner [ . . . ] where the poor people on the ground define themselves' (Mashumi Figlan, interview, 5 October 2010). According to Thembanani 'TJ' Ngongoma's (interview, 3 October 2010) account of such self-definition, when entering this space – that is, again, created through the recognition that their sufferings are not meant to be – shack-dwellers assume the power of 'that normal resistance'; the power to 'use verbal resistance without any backing'.

I'll put it this way: once a certain community joins Abahlali, they automatically claim their political space in the society. [ . . . ] You know what happens? We are living with this inferiority complex that we

have inherited from the past. It is quite difficult for an African male or female these days to come out of that shell. [. . .] Now when you join Abahlali as a community, Abahlali educate you and remind you that look: you are a law-abiding citizen of South Africa! Then you automatically . . . that ‘uummff’ comes up within you and you automatically reclaim that space, that political space and you become somebody, out of nowhere! And that is why the government is also being intimidated by Abahlali because they do not know what drives Abahlali behind them – for them to be . . . to stand so bold and say what they have to say without being shy in the face of danger, despite the intimidations. That’s what Abahlali is.

With their experiences rendered as knowledge, the same authority enables the shack-dwellers to alter the material patterns of urban biopolitics. Under the banner of another often sounded motto of theirs – ‘Those who feel it, should lead it!’ – they demand to be parties to every decision or plan that affects their homes. By way of appropriating the discourse of ‘participatory development’,<sup>18</sup> they insist that responsible authorities engage with them and, as I alluded earlier, often with success.<sup>19</sup> Countering the ‘politics of patience’ and the governmental technology of expert knowledge, then, conceptions such as the University of Abahlali, or the imperative to maintain living politics as a discourse that everyone must understand functions to guarantee that participation in planning development does not result in distancing from the perspective of their everyday struggles.

To be sure, the principle that living politics must be accessible to everyone does not imply a need to simplify it so as to suit the shack-dwellers’ intellect. Instead, defiantly contesting the patronizing effects of expert or academic knowledge, through rendering suffering as knowledge, Abahlali declare to be ‘the professors of their own suffering’. This principle – that establishes equivalence between the suffering person as the subject and the object of knowledge – defines the movement’s critical attitude to being rendered as objects of knowledge by people distant from the University of Abahlali. Paralleling the earlier discussed effects of speaking suffering, this self-representation, or the demands of direct engagement (‘Talk to us, not for us!’) are further forms of the shack-dwellers’ attack on the distribution of intellectual capacities correlative to the sensible order that constructs shantytowns as spaces of mute desperation. In the spirit of Abahlali’s intellectual practice, in particular, their attempt to eliminate the distance of explanation and the presumption of intellectual inequality it implies (Rancière, 1991), I conclude with a declaration from Lacey Road shack-dweller M’dú Hlongwa’s (2007) essay restating the reasons for Abahlali’s ‘No land, no house, no vote!’ campaign:

We know that our country is rich. We know that it is the suffering of the poor that makes it rich. We know how we suffer and we know why we suffer. But in Abahlali we have found that, even though we are a democratic organization that gets its power from the trust of our members and have never hurt one person, the government and even some NGOs [non-governmental organizations] call us criminal when we speak for ourselves. We are supposed to suffer silently so that some rich people can get rich from our work and others can get rich having conferences about having more conferences about our suffering. [. . .] I want to say clearly that I am a Professor of my suffering. We are all Professors of our suffering. But in this South Africa the poor must always be invisible. We must be invisible where we live and where we work. We must even be invisible when people are getting paid to talk about us in government or in NGOs! Everything is done in our name.

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## Notes

1. Richmond Farm is located in the Greater Durban area, cc. 20km west of Durban, KwaZulu-Natal Province.
2. I conducted research with Abahlali baseMjondolo in two phases (April–July 2009 and late September–early November 2010). Research comprised daily visits to the movement's central office in the Kennedy road shack settlement (before September 2009) and occasionally to other settlements in eThekweni (Greater Durban), conducting interviews with members individually or in small groups, and observing (and to a lesser extent taking part in) the movement's activities. Further resources for research are Abahlali's press statements and other writings, as well as works of activists and/or academics working close to the movement. See: [www.abahlali.org](http://www.abahlali.org).
3. For Rancière (2007: 84), the political subject is necessarily collective: 'A community of equals is an insubstantial community of individuals engaged in the ongoing creation of equality'.
4. Most historical accounts of Abahlali baseMjondolo refer to the events of these few days as the origin of the movement. While the specific chronology of events during these first days is somewhat unclear, a common element is certainly that, despite their attempts at communicating with the local government, the inhabitants did not get a satisfactory answer on what happened to the 'promised land', as members often refer to it. The repercussions of this disappointment gained larger publicity when early next day about 700–750 shack-dwellers from Kennedy Road blockaded the nearby six-lane Umgeni road. After a few hours of standstill, the riot police dispersed the blockade and arrested 14 people on charges of public violence. For invaluable accounts of this early period, see Pithouse (2005) and Bryant (2008).
5. The name Abahlali baseMjondolo simply means 'the people who live in the shacks'; that is, 'shack-dwellers'. As Philani Zungu (interview, 2 November 2010) recalls, beyond marking a major step in the movement's official organization, this name had a unifying function, as under its banners inhabitants of any settlement in the area could wholeheartedly get involved in marches of settlements other than their own: 'They are marching for themselves, they are taking their own grievances, it's for their own benefit because they are the shack-dwellers of course.'
6. To build 'a better life for all' was one of the major objectives set out in the ANC's 1994 election manifesto and, having become iconic, has served as the party's election slogan ever since.
7. See, for example, System Cele (in Bryant, 2008: 41): 'Now that we're protesting, our voice is heard [. . .] our struggle is the voice of silent victims [. . .] we hadn't been able to talk before'. Or, as Mariet Kikine (a 54-year-old woman who was shot in her back with six rubber bullets during the dispersion of Abahlali's legal march on Durban's mayor, Obed Mlaba on 28 September 2007) declares in Jenny Morgan's (2008: 4:12'') documentary: 'For that thing they done to me, I am not stopping to fight for government for my rights! Now they make me brave. I'm not turning back anymore'. See Mnikelo Ndabankulu (spokesperson of Abahlali, interview, 29 June 2009): 'I think when I started to stay full time here in Durban, when there is a shack fire, you only see experts, like . . . councilors, politicians, saying that people have lost this and that, but after the inception of Abahlali, ordinary people from the settlement were speaking for themselves on the news, in the radio, in the papers, on the television. So, it's because of Abahlali that people have claimed a space'.
8. On the notion of the 'forgotten citizens', see Mazwi Nzimande (interview, 8 July 2009): 'We are forgotten, we are treated invisible. The government is 100% aware that we are existing but he would just like treat us invisible. So, we are the forgotten citizens of this country – for now'.
9. See the first two paragraphs of the 'Memorandum of Demands' addressed to councillor Yacoob Baig: 'We the people of Ward 25, democrats and loyal citizens of the Republic of South Africa, note that this country is rich because of the theft of our land and because of our work in the farms, mines, factories, kitchens and laundries of the rich. We cannot and will not continue to suffer the way that we do and so we unite behind the following demands: for too long our communities have survived in sub-standard and informal housing, and for too long we have been promised land, only to be betrayed. Therefore we demand adequate land and housing to live in safety, health and dignity' (Abahlali, 2005: para. 1).
10. On 26 September 2009, the all-night camp of the Youth League of Abahlali at the Kennedy road settlement suffered an armed attack that continued in a hunt for the movement's leaders. Thousands of people

fled the settlement fearing their lives, leaders of Abahlali were forced into hiding, and the movement's activities had to be pursued underground for months, until early 2010. Their office was destroyed, as well as many prominent members' shacks. For a thoroughly researched account of the attack and its circumstances, see Chance (2010).

11. See her essay 'Party Politics vs. Living Politics' (Nsibande, 2011).
12. Both quoted terms are from the article 'Shack-dwellers under the sway of an agent provocateur' (Mboso and Mchunu, 2006), published in KwaZulu-Natal newspaper *Sunday Tribune* on 24 September 2006, and authored by two communication officers of the provincial Department of Local Government, Housing, and Traditional Affairs. In a recent reply to accusations against the movement, among them the Third Force, Abahlali (2011: para. 1) state: 'There are many tactics to keep us, as the organized poor in our place'.
13. Cf. the press release about the 2009 UnFreedom Day: 'Monday 27 April will mark the 15th anniversary of the first democratic elections in South Africa. Once again the poor will be herded into stadiums so that the politicians can tell the people to celebrate their freedom. Once again Abahlali baseMjondolo will be decelebrating' (Abahlali, 2009: para. 1).
14. While at the level of the movement the campaign was consistently announced in every election year, members are free to vote if they decide to do so.
15. As Jessica Harris (2006: 7) rightly notes, this formulation aims to underline that the movement is 'not fighting the government' but aims to help the government 'to realize what they cannot realize, [. . .] to see what they cannot see, access what they cannot access' (S'bu Zikode, interview, 2 June 2009). To be sure, this is only one of the approaches to the movement's position in relation to the government; many times it is expressed and enacted in explicitly militant terms.
16. 'People are suffering in different ways in different settlements. Take, for example, you remember when at our last general meeting there was this woman who was having a problem with the person who's owning the land. So, that on its own, it's a suffering, but it's a different suffering from a person who's staying in Foreman road. [. . .] So, to tackle those issues, you cannot use the same techniques [. . .]' (Zodwa Nsibande, interview, 2 November 2010).
17. Cf. the special section of the Abahlali website under the same title: <http://abahlali.org/node/237>.
18. As an illustration of their often critical stance on developmental discourse: 'So this domestication can be seen also in how language and words are used and abused – even the ideas that came originally from genuine struggles. For example, at one time, the idea of "sustainable development" seemed like quite a good idea that could accommodate some of the protests against bad development that different struggles have raised – but by now, even the World Bank can use the words "sustainable development" for their own projects' (Abahlali and Rural Network, 2009: 37). At other times, as, for example, in the case of 'owning development', this reflection does not seem to be at work: 'It is important [for] the people to participate on their development because, even if you see the house, already build that house, you see that house, you know that, "hey, I put all my effort on that house". Somebody will feel proud and is going to protect it, make sure that he maintained. But if somebody was not there. . .' (Mashumi Figlan, interview, 5 October 2010).
19. A recent example of such success is the ongoing project to provide basic services (water, sanitation, roads, and electricity) to the inhabitants of the informal settlement in Siyanda B. Another one was the agreement signed in 2008 between Abahlali baseMjondolo and the eThekweni Municipality to upgrade 14 settlements, among them Kennedy Road. At least with regards to this particular settlement that was the target of the violent attack on Abahlali in September 2009, this project appears to be at a standstill at the time of writing.

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