

Lalela uLwandle (Listen to the Sea):
Interdisciplinary approaches and embodied engagements in thinking with ocean/s

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Abstract

This article is a self-reflexive engagement on the performance, *Lalela uLwandle* (Listen to the Sea, 2019) created by the South African collective, Empatheatre. I engage with the performance in an affective and embodied way, commenting on my experience of watching myself, watching *Lalela uLwandle*. I ask how the performance contributes to knowledge production on the ocean, and how it might facilitate agentic engagements with its current health tragedy. To do so I examine the modalities employed in *Lalela uLwandle*: research-creation, empatheatre as methodology, indigenous storytelling and material aesthetics. I propose that, through its specific methodological framings and performance aesthetics, *Lalela uLwandle* repositions the (disconnected) audience member to reconnect with the human and the non-human. I suggest that the performance aesthetics enacted in the methodological approaches used by Empatheatre offer audiences an opportunity to acknowledge their own precarious construction in relation to the ocean by considering their historical entanglements with it.

Keywords: Affect, Empatheatre, *Lalela uLwandle* (Listen to the Sea), Performance Aesthetics, Research-Creation, South African theatre

In this article, I focus on the play *Lalela uLwandle* (Listen to the Sea, 2019), and reflect on the response that the performance generated in me as an observer/participant. I propose that *Lalela uLwandle* – through specific methodological framings of research-creation, empatheatre, indigenous storytelling, and material aesthetics – re-positions the (otherwise disconnected) audience member to reconnect with the human and the non-human. As I will demonstrate, the approaches used by the South African theatre collective, Empatheatre, offer audiences an opportunity to acknowledge their own precarious construction in relation to the ocean by considering their historical entanglements with the ocean. To explain this process I will share what the performance evoked in me as I sat watching and thinking, my responses thus written, as it were, in the margins of the performance. I reflect on how the performance performed in me as I watched myself watching *Lalela uLwandle*. Through this self-reflective inquiry, I consider how the



performance invites its audience to think with and alongside the various ‘actors’ in the urban ocean ecology, opening them up to ‘feel-with’ and thus ‘think-with’ their individual entanglements to and with the ocean. In the act of watching I pause to ‘listen to the sea’ and in listening feel what the ocean is saying.

In summary, by exploring *Lalela uLwandle* as an example of empathetheatre performance practice, and using a participant-based research methodology, I aim to show how such an approach can offer scope for developing a self-reflexive and transformative teaching practice. In establishing a context for this discussion, I will introduce the concept of the ‘thinking-body’, before outlining what empathetheatre entails as performance modality, as well as how self-reflexivity operates as an integral facet of this process.

The Thinking-Body

In writing in the margins, notating and reflecting alongside what I experience while watching the performance, I explore how *Lalela uLwandle*’s performance aesthetics awaken the subconscious to ways that re-ignite the body into a ‘thinking-body’ (Blackman, 2008) in its engagement with the ocean. The thinking-body connects to the idea of the feeling body and highlights how thinking is part of rather than separate from the body. It also blurs the boundaries between inside and outside spaces as well as what is and is not contained in the body (Blackman, 2008: 13). It asserts that bodies think as they feel, on a level that commensurate with their movements. I draw from Brian Massumi and Erin Manning in their account of bodily meaning-making in terms of how affect traffics through bodies and why it is characterised as ‘precognitive’ and ‘preconscious’.¹ For Massumi, this takes thinking out of the ‘interiority of a psychological subject’ and sees the human body in ‘the co-motion of relational encounters’ (2015: 211). Massumi therefore identifies affect as part of a process of thought in motion; that is a process of thinking vaguely, not yet fully formed (2015: 10). The realm of cognition is thus inseparable from the realm of affect, since our existence in the world is, as Lévi-Strauss suggests, ‘learned, internalised

¹ Affect in performance has been debated since the turn of the twentieth century, with practitioners such as Konstantin Stanislavski and Michael Chekhov holding differing views on whether the performer had to tap into personal emotional recall to evoke emotion, or whether the body through gesture, posture and breath could evoke emotional responses. Method acting, a technique based on the concepts and teachings of Stanislavski, emphasised the actor’s drawing on personal emotions and memories as a way of connecting to character. Michael Chekhov’s psychophysical approach to acting developed the idea that body posture had the potential to effect emotion. His concept of psychological gesture involves activating bodily gestures as a means of accessing the emotional, feeling, and psychological life of a character (Chekhov, 2002: 63-64). This study moves away from Stanislavski’s approach of generating emotion through memory and centres embodied processes as an alternative way of understanding how affect works on and through the body. Affect and its relation to testimony, confessional trials, witnessing and story, post the Nuremberg Trials (1945-1946) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa (1995-2002), has stimulated critical inquiry into its role in the performance of narrative, testimony, and account.

patterns of thought-feeling' (cited. in Ingold, 2000: 161). Similarly, according to human geographer Tim Ingold, 'to study cognition is to focus on the *modus operandi* not of the mind but of the whole body-person' (2000: 162). I invoke Ingold's perspective to argue that intelligent actions are not confined to some interior space of the mind (within the skull, as it were) but are rather processes that freely penetrate both the body and its environment (2000: 165). In doing so I attempt to situate the body as the primary site for 'practice, process and potentiality' in how I reflect on and think alongside *Lalela uLwandle*. My aim is to arrive at a clearer understanding of what performative aesthetics does to my body in my thinking engagement with ocean/s and to ask what embodied engagements that seek to tap into embodied knowledge offer conversations that centre the Ocean (Blackman, 2008: 5). Performance therefore suggests looking and listening with the whole body. This theoretical framework is important to a discussion of how the aesthetics of performance affectively charges the body to feel and thus think. It is the performance style of *Lalela uLwandle*, one that is image-centred and body-centred that activates collaborative participation by audience members in how meaning-making takes place. In keeping with the focus of this special issue, I explore how the responses to the play also perform a collaborative, non-hierarchical, inclusive and non-hierarchical teaching and learning approach.

***Lalela uLwandle* as an immersive theatre and public storytelling experience**

Lalela uLwandle is an immersive theatre and public storytelling experience created by South African theatre practitioners working in the field of empathatre. *Lalela uLwandle* began as a response to local conflict around the application for a permit for deep sea gas prospecting by the Shell Oil Company off the coast of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa in 2018. The various stakeholders and policymakers who had in some way been impacted by the application of the oil and gas company gathered for a meeting in Durban facilitated by urban sociologist Dr Kira Erwin (key researcher in the research-creation process of *Lalela uLwandle*). Following this encounter, Erwin recognised the need for a methodological practice that could include as many voices as possible, especially grassroots and marginalised ones, in any attempt to combat the proposed move to extract oil from our seas as well as tackle other pressing ocean health issues.² Accordingly, the research team (Empatatre Collective and the Ocean Hub Collective) embarked on a two-year process in which they adopted a research-creation methodology that brought together a wide and interconnected collection of human identities and narratives that focussed on historic lines of engagement and entanglement with the sea.³ The script of *Lalela uLwandle* evolved out of recorded conversations that researchers documented during this period of extensive fieldwork and that dramatist Neil Copen sought to honour and respect in crafting

²The following YouTube video available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apNw1H8CTKY> offers a helpful, extensive, and detailed account of Empatatre's methodological journey in collecting data for the play.

³ See also '*Lalela uLwandle: An Experiment in Plural Governance Discussions*' by Erwin, et al. that details how the research team experimented locally along the Kwa Zulu-Natal coastline of South Africa in listening to plural epistemologies in collecting and forming the play (2022: 390-395).

the script for the play. Shaped by the stories collected through fieldwork from subsistence and small-scale fisherfolk, academics and researchers, marine scientists, traditional healers, religious followers, lifesavers, civil society partners, activists, and marine educators, the script was thus the product of an emerging and iterative process, a key aspect of research-creation that is discussed below. By drawing from this wide net, the data collection process and in turn the content of the play facilitated and amplified voices not usually heard or included in policy-making decisions about the ocean (Erwin et al., 2022).

Lalela uLwandle was conceived in such a way that it could be performed anywhere, making it accessible to communities and gatherings where theatre is often an inaccessible medium of education, connection and experience. Unlike traditional theatre spaces that can be restricted by theatrical elements such as lighting, raked seating, a backstage area or scene changes, the performance is designed around a circle in which actors and the audience are interspersed. Placed centre stage is a mound of beach sand, surrounded by a few objects that include a crocheted blanket (which signifies a coral reef and suggests a comforting and protective dimension of the sea), a conch shell, a neatly folded pile of clothes, and a hat with a guinea fowl feather attached to the ribbon. When it is their turn, the actors move to the centre of the stage to perform their stories. In addition to the carefully constructed set, a recorded musical arrangement scores the storytelling, adding an additional layer to the play's affective impact.

I attended the preview run of *Lalela uLwandle* at the Magnet Theatre in Observatory, Cape Town, in September 2022.⁴ Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the play had not been performed live since 2019. This period of perceived dormancy coincided with expanded efforts by Shell to mine the ocean in additional sites that extended to False Bay, the Wild Coast and the West Coast, all flagged as oil-rich mining hotspots (but also home to highly diverse and sensitive marine ecosystems). These developments impacted and fed into the responses and engagements of audience members attending the performance in 2022. Interestingly, I became freshly aware of how the *liveness* of the performance after a hiatus of almost four years brought with it new tensions, entanglements, and engagements with concerns regarding ocean health and the future of the ocean. Unlike a book, which once published does not allow for a continuing expansion or gathering of narratives, ongoing performative practice (and especially one employing a methodological approach like *Lalela uLwandle*) makes possible an evolving engagement with oceans that is current, tangible and capable of gathering a broader and more diverse collection of narratives. This iterative process of knowledge generation opens up possibilities for other disciplines to consider how collective learning that is slow-research, active, fluid, inclusive, expansive and engaged with communities outside the 'boundary' of a particular discipline could be incorporated into their particular field of research and learning.

⁴Most recently the cast of *Lalela uLwandle* was invited by the UNFCCC (The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) Secretariat to perform in person at the Capacity-Building Hub of the Blue Zone of the United Nations COP27 in Sharm el-Sheikh, 14th November 2022.

Seated in the theatre with me are bodies with their own histories and entanglements. I enter this performance with a different perspective from the one I had when I first saw video footage and still images of the Lalela uLwandle back in 2019.

Lalela uLwandle is performed by three actors whose characters reflect a multicultural engagement with the sea: Niren, Faye and Nolwandle. Niren is a 24-year-old Durban Indian activist who comes from a long line of fisherfolk. He speaks to his family's displacement and generational severing from the sea as a result of the Group Areas Act in 1950. Faye is a 65-year-old retired English-speaking white South African marine scientist who highlights how the ocean can also be a place of comfort, human connection and healing. Nolwandle is a 40-year-old isiZulu woman, employed as an educator at the uShaka Marine World Aquarium. She traces her mythical and intergenerational cultural and spiritual ties to the ocean. Nolwandle – which means 'girl of the waves' in isiZulu – shares stories passed down to her from a long line of traditional healers, including some about mermaids who come to heal the ocean but require the help of humans to do so.

Research-creation as methodology in research process

Research-creation is the methodology used by the research team in the development and realisation of *Lalela uLwandle*. Part of a wider umbrella of terminology that includes artistic research, arts-based research, practice-based research, and research-led/practice-led research, the term research-creation was developed by Senselab, a laboratory for thought in motion founded by Erin Manning, based at Concordia University in Canada. This wide and growing range of terminology reflects the diverse variety of engagements in and with the methodology. The phrase references an intuitive research philosophy, with the hyphen between the words serving as the liminal space of research-creation potential, the affective exchange/encounter (Thain, 2008: 2). Research-creation is described as the 'thinking-feeling of what happens' (Massumi, 2008). The methodology thus facilitates alternative approaches to *thinking-with* the ocean/s, providing a different sort of knowledge, a knowledge of 'the things behind the things' (Radway, 2008: ix-x). I too, use research-creation in the writing of this article as I reflect on myself watching myself watching *Lalela uLwandle*, as an experience of 'affective co-motion' (Thain, 2008: 3). This occurs through the self-reflexivity of my response to the performance, and in the process of thinking with the both/and of theory and practice (embodied meaning-making and the act of writing), and not the binary position of either/or.

Lalela uLwandle was fortunate to have had extensive funding to research various trajectories in ocean health. The play serves as an example of the quality of work that can be produced when funding allows for a slow research-creation methodology, a luxury very few theatre-makers ever get to explore in the South African theatre-making landscape, especially in the aftermath of COVID-19. This type of approach enables a holistic and nuanced process of reflection, which in turn generates agentic interactions with audience members. In addition,

access to funding has also enabled the play text to be turned into a full-length radio play, while extracts from the script have been re-created in stop-motion animation.⁵ These outputs underline how the methodology of research-creation can be generative of further engagements with ocean scholarship that are interdisciplinary in approach.

Empatheatre as methodology in performance practice

I was fortunate to participate in an Empatheatre Collective five-week workshop hosted by the STAND Foundation⁶ in March 2021. It was also during the workshops facilitated by Empatheatre Collective founders, Dylan McGarry, Neil Coppen, and Mpume Ntombeni that I heard more about the Collective's specific methodology: empathetheatre. The Collective describes this methodology as facilitating a space in which multiple narratives and cross-overs can be held together in a wider rhizome of entanglements that work at breaking down polarised discussions and instead build 'amphitheatres of empathetheatre' (Empatheatre, 2019). This catchy phrase references classical Greek theatre while also suggesting that it is the theatrical encounter that enables an amplification of empathy. This is achieved through an aesthetics of performance that encourages the audience to focus on what their active listening to the stories of strangers performed in front of them might be making them feel internally as they sit in stillness silently watching. The performance gathers strangers together into a space in which they co-watch and co-experience something that is previously unknown. Vulnerable bodies thus sit in a collective space where they open themselves to a potential of seeing anew histories, people and the more-than-human in ways they might have previously been blind to or failed to understand.

I sit in the round. There are two circles repeated to form the audience. We sit alongside and around the stage – a blue ocean. The performers sit across from each other and alongside the audience. We too are part of the performance. This is a tribunal for the ocean. We watch each other, and we too are being watched. How will we account for what we hear? I hear the waves crashing.

Theatre-in-the-round does not allow me to sit passively. A performer sits alongside me. I do not feel as relaxed as I would like. Whereas normally in a more traditional proscenium arch theatre-setting with tiered seating I can slink into my seat and absorb the performance as I choose, I am now compelled to engage with the performer in a more intimate and intense way. Furthermore, I feel conspicuous and am aware that as much as I am watched by my co-participants, so too am I watching them. I look to see how the audience who sit with me responds and reacts to the performance, something I seldom get to do when watching a theatre

⁵ To listen to the radio play drama of *Lalela uLwandle* click on the following link: <https://soundcloud.com/user-670708972/lalela-ulwandle-an-empatheatre-radiopodcast-play>
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p_W3QBz9cPY

⁶ STAND Foundation is an acronym for sustaining theatre and dance in South Africa, an independent, non-profit, and public benefit entity that hopes to promote and support local theatre and dance.

performance. The circular staging surfaces new stories that illicit a more collective response to and interaction with live performance, a dimension often hidden in traditional performance archiving where what is performed is documented and not necessarily how the audience interact with or experience the performance. The seating arrangement echoes the shape of a tribunal. I am reminded of bell hooks' words in *All about love*, where she speaks to how we heal together, 'rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation. Healing is an act of communion' (2001: 233). I wonder whether the seating arrangement is a physical enactment of the hope that we might collectively heal ourselves and our relationship with the ocean?

The sense of relationality is further enhanced by the invitation to participate in a public conversation that includes the production's researchers, performers and audience members present for *Lalela uLwandle's* post-performance discussion. Not only does this encounter extend the role of storytelling beyond the Empatheatre performance, it also continues the process of data collection, in which audience members' responses are collected from multiple performance venues in varying locales, in South Africa and internationally. The post-performance discussion thus expands the relational potential by providing a space for members of the audience to think through the feelings ignited in their bodies as a result of the performance. It gives them time to process what it is they might be feeling before the moment of dislocation when the house lights are turned on and they are ushered out of their seats and out of the venue. The post-performance encounter also extends the audience's thinking-feeling engagement with the piece, and heightens their sense of agency through their direct involvement in the performance discussion and research-creation. The invitation to articulate and share feelings that the play has evoked in them encourages them to concretise and consolidate how the play might have affected them.

Placing audience members in the round positions them as witnesses, witnessing is an acute affective experience. The role of witnessing is inescapably a collective and relational practice. The heightened state of witnessing generated by the specific aesthetics of performance thus affectively generates a sense of interconnectedness and fellow feeling. Thus the staging choices in *Lalela uLwandle* heighten the potentiality of affective witnessing for bodies and politics, and create possibilities for otherwise obscured voices, stories and cultures that are silenced, suppressed, or simply unheard to be spoken and shared.

In an interview with Mary Zournazi, media and cultural theorist Nikos Papastergiadis characterises empathy as an act of going closer in order to be able to see, whilst at the same time never forgetting where you are coming from (Papastergiadis & Zournazi, 2002). This conception of empathy encompasses a recognition of difference that speaks to the sympathetic engagement that performance aesthetics might evoke in co-participants/observers through their being in a more immersive engagement and proximity to other bodies. In such a performance, strangers watch the play collectively and are simultaneously alerted to their own situated history in relation to the stories they watch unfolding before them.

In the eighteenth century, Johann Gottfried Herder insisted on the important relationship between history and empathy: 'what all forms of empathy share is a concept of History, a

progressional time: no conception of empathy in the modern sense of the word is possible without History' (cited in Trusscott, 2017: 82). Trusscott (2016) claims that apartheid arrested a capacity for empathy. While the post-apartheid moment does not necessarily imply a return of empathy, Trusscott proposes empathy as a goal, an ongoing pursuit and process, something that needs to be worked at to be restored.⁷ Reflecting on the post-apartheid condition and the dilemma of empathy, Trusscott remarks:

[I]f empathy has been proclaimed as a threshold of psychosocial transformation, empathic identifications as the mark of colonial and apartheid relations having been transcended, the claim of this chapter is that, on the contrary, empathy is integral to the order we have still to work through, that such working through – if we are to abide by this psychoanalytic term – will consist in the reworking of the concept of empathy itself It is, however, precisely in the disclosure of empathy's dilemmas that the possibility of a postapartheid ethics of empathy might emerge: empathy as a repetition without guarantee, a discursive reinscription rather than a clean break with the past or a threshold to be triumphantly declared. (2017: 86)

By asking the question, 'What was your first memory of the sea?', *Lalela uLwandle* opens us towards a self-reflective engagement and internal tracing of historical entanglements with the ocean. This helps to bring to the surface a much wider social and historical context of connection with the sea and helps to make possible an experience of empathy as framed by Herder and Papastergiadis, above, as each member of the audience traces their history of interrelations with the sea. The question generates a wealth of reflections that reconnects disconnected bodies to their relationship with the sea and in turn with each other in ways that actively undermine traditional discourses framed in terms of polarisation and hierarchy.

***Lalela uLwandle* as a model for a self-reflexive pedagogy**

For many South Africans, access to the ocean is tied to a history that has forcibly limited certain bodies from accessing it. Furthermore engagements with the ocean are a luxury given the additional costs in transportation to get to the sea. It is worth noting Dylan McGarry's (2014) theory of 'Ecological Apartheid' which is a central idea raised through the play. McGarry defines the term as a growing separation of relationships that include the human being's relationship with the natural world as well as disconnections experienced within one's own inner and outer capacities (2014: 20). The term also highlights present-day inequalities that are tied up to who has access to 'clean air, water, and natural resources – as well as the long legacy of apartheid,

⁷ Trusscott's article was written in 2016 at a time when student organisations across 26 universities in South Africa were calling for institutional redress and coalescing around 'black pain'. Trusscott challenges the assumed good of the postapartheid moment and its continued lack of empathy. I deliberately type 'postapartheid' here as this is how the term is framed in Trusscott's writing, as there is not a bridge between post and apartheid but rather a continuation of the apartheid condition into this 'postapartheid' moment.

which has excluded people from accessing their homelands, their indigenous ways of life and their customary practices of sustainably using and managing resources' (McGarry, 2022: 19). Moreover, engaging in the ocean in an immersive way is an experience most South Africans are denied because of a lack of early years education and exposure to sea swimming. This interaction is further limited by inadequate or lack of equipment for sea swimming (bathing suits, snorkels, masks, flippers, belt weights and wetsuits for the cold Atlantic, for those who live on the Southwest and West coast). What lies beneath the ocean's waves is therefore obscured from the purview of many ordinary South Africans. How, then, might performance build a relationality to the ocean and reconnect the otherwise disconnected human to the ocean once more? As noted earlier, performance in its very nature fosters and builds relationality. Performance embodies a relational enactment between a performer and an audience member or witness. It is through this relational exchange that performers and audience participants can register how a particular performance affects them. This affective engagement, through our bodies' awareness being heightened by the aesthetics of performance, makes us more aware of (in this instance) what the body feels in relation to the sea and in relation to other people's relationship to the sea. The performance therefore facilitates a destabilisation of 'ecological apartheid' and forms connections to the sea and its histories for those audience members who may still be cut off from it.

Plankton – the ocean helps me breathe?

During the post-performance discussion of *Lalela uLwandle*, a lifeguard raised his hand and told us how he had worked at Muizenberg beach in Cape Town for fifteen years, but now felt that 'my feet will feel the sand differently the next time I step on the beach' (co-participant's observation, Sept. 2022). Another audience member who had initially engaged with the play through the radio drama suggested that the radio play had afforded her the 'opportunity to construct my own images', which she felt had heightened her 'engagement with the performance' (co-participant's observation, Sept. 2022). I found this comment very interesting in the context of agency and the generative possibilities produced through the different methodologies employed by Empatheatre. Erwin includes a contribution by a co-participant from a previous post-performance discussion, who recalled that 'grandmother always told me that we are a guest in the ocean' (co-participant contribution cited. by Erwin, 2022).⁸ Erwin's digest of a co-participant's reflection gathered from a previous post-performance discussion works like a thread that links the present performance (I sit in and participate in) to other post-performance discussions, and the growing resultant corpus of stories is absorbed into the performance as a result of the entangled research-creation methodological process.

⁸ The direct reference Erwin, et al. is referring to is 'I was brought up with respect for the ocean. My mother would say when you enter the sea you are a guest of the fish, be a good guest' (Port Shepstone P10, 7/10/2019 cited in Erwin, et al, (2022: 387)).

After the show, I had dinner with friends who had also watched the performance. The dinner afforded an additional, more intimate post-performance discussion and demonstrated how the performance catalyses a self-reflexive inquiry into one's relationship with the ocean as we shared memories of our individual and family connections to the ocean. The reflection accompanying reminiscence is the first port of call in getting us to mend our connection to the ocean and thus each other.

***Lalela uLwandle* as a model for a transformative pedagogy**

In this section, I focus on the transformative pedagogy that *Lalela uLwandle* incorporates in its approach to teaching and learning. Firstly, the research team's approach was inter- and transdisciplinary, engaging participants, thinkers and researchers from various fields and communities to generate a more inclusive and dynamic approach. Secondly, the research process was developed through a performative research-creation methodology that involves a multi-sensory and transdisciplinary learning and teaching approach. This is evident in how the radio drama and stop-motion animation outputs bring the poignant narrative of the play into learning spaces and contexts of engagement where live performance is not possible due to location, logistics and the running costs incurred by live performance. During the Empatheatre Collective workshop hosted by the STAND foundation⁹, McGarry and Coppen informed us that the radio play had been incorporated into an Environmental Studies module at a tertiary institute in the United States. The module thus generates new experiential contexts for students to think within and engage with the play, the ocean, further enabling stories to transgress borders, histories, and cultures.

My experience of the play has profoundly shifted how I think about the sea, specifically from socio-economic and socio-historical perspectives. As mentioned earlier, Papastergiadis's formulation of empathy in terms of going closer to be able to see, but also never forgetting where you are coming from, resulted in my leaving the performance with a heightened recognition of difference and awareness of how experiences of the ocean for black and brown South Africans have been marked by exclusion and oppression (Papastergiadis & Zournazi, 2002). Thus, when I started watching the play I recalled childhood memories of joy, exploration, delight and connectedness to my family. However, the sea has since become a site of heightened societal awareness of racial and cultural oppression and exclusion. I am now more aware of the celebration and triumph that should be experienced when brown and black bodies reclaim their relationship with the ocean and dive deep beneath its waves.

Through a process of reflective engagement, I realised that *Lalela uLwandle* offered me what Bracha Ettinger (2010) names as 'aesthetic wit(h)nessing'¹⁰ of traces or residues of what

⁹ STAND foundation refers to the Sustaining Theatre and Dance Foundation founded in South Africa created by individuals in the arts sector.

¹⁰ Ettinger conjoins two words, 'with' and 'witness', and by bracketing the letter (h) creates an undecidable suspension between the two words. In a performative sense, the role of wit(h)nessing reflects Ettinger's insight that the word is related to gaze, a gaze formed in the connection between bodies (2006).

could not be immediately represented. Ettinger identifies these aesthetic moments as *fascinace*,¹¹ and describes it as 'a prolonged aesthetically affecting and learning encounter' (2013: Preface). Artist and psychoanalyst, Griselda Pollock expands Ettinger's idea with her development of the term 'after-affects' which she characterises as something that works towards a phrasing 'not merely linguistic, but gestural, sonic or graphic, that produces encounters capable of shifting us both subjectively and collectively' especially in the context of non-linguistic learning through a prolonged encounter (2017: 27).

Human connections to the sea are also reflections of human beings' connections to themselves and each other. The play performs a transformative pedagogy in facilitating a collective process of sharing and listening, that results from choices made in *Lalela uLwandle* research process, its performance aesthetics and its inclusion of a post-performance discussion. These choices produce a play that actively performs against a hierarchical, unilateral and top-down teaching and learning approach that is exclusionary and silencing.

Self-reflexivity as integral to the spectator-witness position in empathatre

The play provokes spectators to contemplate their historical relationship to the sea. Before I share my own memories I need to articulate an awareness of the locatedness from which I speak. I am a white, middle-class, English-speaking South African. Because I was racially classified as 'white' from birth I have never been denied access to a beach, pool, or body of water on account of my race. My social currency has also granted me a feeling of familiarity around water despite growing up in a landlocked town. From the time that I was able to walk I had access to a pool in my back garden and I attended swimming lessons as a toddler. Submerging my body in water is a sensation I readily associate with childhood: a moment of silent, weightless, effortless floating, with eyes closed and breath held. Water and being surrounded by it are tied to many moments in my childhood. So, the feeling of being submerged in water often generates a return to child-like wonder and a floating feeling of freedom and escape.

I spent the first ten years of my life growing up in a small town called Springs, in the East Rand area of Gauteng, South Africa. Springs was once a bustling coal and gold-mining town. During the years I lived there (1987–1997), its socio-economic status declined drastically with most if not all the mines having closed by the time we left. The flatness of Springs is relieved along its peripheries by the artificial hills of mine dumps. Springs is now a forgotten and waterless town othered by and ostracised from the nearby metropole of Johannesburg.

As the characters share their stories of the sea, many of my own fill my mind as I sit watching the play. My memories play alongside the characters' as parts of mine are

Performance cannot exist outside of relationship: it is dependent on a shared connection and thus a gaze of wit(h)nessing. The gazer is unable to witness without a sense of being *with*.

¹¹ Ettinger defines *fascinace* as follows: 'a prolonged openness to being co-affected in the encounter with the pathos of the other, or to shared learning from the other and thus being transformed in the encounter, *fascinace* is neither voyeuristic nor fetishising, neither sadistic nor mastering' (2017: 269).

mirrored by theirs. Burnt sugarcane, banana leaves, collecting tiny shells to store in glass bottles. Sticking fingers in sea anemones, fishing nets, snorkels, swimming out to sea to stand on the nearby sandbank. Nearly drowning.

My first memory of the sea dates from a holiday with my family on the Natal South Coast. Because the ocean was a place we travelled to only when on holiday, the ocean was a space I shared with family and one wrapped in childhood joy, exploration, holiday memories, time spent with family, Christmas, bubblegum flavoured ice-cream, sunscreen, swimming out to sandbanks, bodyboards, flippers, seashells, sandy hair, sandwiches, Coca-Cola, and long hot summer days spent on the sand and in the ocean. I later moved to Durban when I was ten and stayed there until I was twenty-five. My relationship with the sea was formed during this time and the specific feeling developed towards the Indian Ocean of the Durban coastline still affects how I relate to or am inhibited by my interactions with other oceans.

It is also important to highlight when speaking about locatedness that with each beach on which I spent time – be it Bazley or Shelley Beach along the South Coast or Anstey's and Brighton Beach on the Bluff, to central Durban beaches such as New Pier, Vetchies Pier, North Beach, Battery, Suncoast and Blue Lagoon – brought with it a unique relationship and experience permanently embodied in the setting. Although these beaches are but a part of the larger unified body of the Indian ocean and the expansive body of water that is the ocean worldwide, it is important to note how each beach brought with it a unique and distinctive engagement with the sea through the forging of different memories and connections. These reflections may seem merely anecdotal and incidental to the focus of the article, but what they demonstrate is how detailed, nuanced and shifting our relationship to the sea is. They also serve as a reminder within my evolving connection to the sea that heightens my awareness of black and brown bodies who were cut off from the access to the ocean I was granted as a child.

Scattered historical entanglements with the sea bring about a surfacing of discomfort.

As Herder and Papastergiadis postulate, empathy and history are entwined. Tracing historical lines has the potential to activate a condition of empathy but this is not a given. In tracing my history and situatedness in relation to the sea I experience an increased consciousness of the relational entanglement with others. *Lalela uLwandle* is expansive by including stories and entanglements to the sea that have previously been invisibilised.

I sit with a discomfort I know too well. The discomfort of shame. I sit watching the performance of *Lalela uLwandle* and feel the shame of ignorance, of not knowing how so many people's histories are marked by a story of exclusion, separation and the forced rupture of generational ties to the sea. This shame comes from a positioning of self that Elspeth Probyn describes in *Blush* (2006) when she notes how the body 'can also tell us when we have stumbled into other people's history, culture, and beliefs of which we are ignorant' (xvi). The final phrase of this quotation speaks to the discomfort I experience while watching *Lalela uLwandle*. After so

many visits to the sea, of being immersed in it, swimming in it, collecting seashells from its shore, looking at sea life hidden beneath its waves, I had never considered the extent to which other South Africans' experience of the ocean differed from mine. I had never thought about how the sea carried with it many traumatic memories formed under colonial and apartheid regimes. By granting me the space to reflect, *Lalela uLwandle* opened me up to a heightened awareness of the Other and the process of othering. In other words, as suggested above, its performance aesthetics and performance histories woke my body up to areas of potential empathy I had not sought out.

The discomfort I feel grows when *Lalela uLwandle* addresses the history of forced removals along the Durban coastline. An example of this is when Nolwandle speaks as follows:

Traditional healers gathering *muthi* in the forests and rock pools were told by these conservation authorities that they now needed permits to abide by their ancestors' wishes.¹² When they of course ignored these rules, and continued as they always had in the past, many of them were arrested. Next came those fences rising all over the place... fences where there had never been before. When the people asked what these were about, the authorities told us these areas were now called marine parks... special areas that would protect the sea life and the white people who wanted to come on holidays to snorkel with them. (Empatheatre, 2019: 24)

Nolwandle highlights a sangoma's spiritual relationship to the sea, noting how with each new full moon the sangoma makes her way down to the ocean to bathe in its waters. But one night when the sangoma follows the old established path down to the sea in the light of the full moon, she encounters a wire fence that cuts her and her community off from the sea. The only way to regain access to it is the road that was constructed for the mining company to use. This route is too long to walk, she requires transport, but does not have money to pay for it.¹³ This scene surfaces a deeper history of exclusion, through the severing of spiritual and cultural ties to the sea. This is an impact that, although not often acknowledged, carries deep-seated implications for attempts to sustain our relationship with the sea. As Nolwandle speaks she places

¹² 'Research Note: For many the sea is a provider. It is especially important for livelihoods, and shellfish gathering entails a deep cultural relationship between women and the sea. It was the forbidding of shellfish gathering at Dwesa-Cwebe that started one of the most important protests by local people against the restrictions imposed on them in protected areas. In a landmark decision in 2018, South Africa's Supreme Court of Appeal (SCA) ruled that a local community ruled by customary law could fish in the Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve (a Marine Protected Area) without permits.' (Empatheatre, 2019: 24, footnote 25).

¹³ It is important to note so this information does not appear 'extracted' that the character Nolwandle was developed from the creative work of 'renowned KZN storyteller Gcina Mhlope titled *Nolwandle: Girl of the waves*' as well as the work of Dr, Philile Mbatha on "forced removals in KZN during apartheid and the impact of coastal mining on traditional healing practices (Erwin, et al., 2022: 392).

small replicas of homestead huts with thatch roofs on the stage floor. Once they have all been placed, a performer stamps on them, crushing them underfoot.

In thinking about how Othering is often an attempt to dehumanise that which is human I draw from Achille Mbembe's discussion *On the Postcolony* in how certain humans are seen or unseen, made visible or invisibilised:

But what does it mean to do violence to what is nothing? ... [W]hat does it mean to partake of human existence? Who is a human being and who is not, and by what authority is such a distinction made? If one is not a human being, what is one? And what is the relationship human beings should or can have with that on which it has not been possible to confer the attribute of humanity, or to which it has been denied? (2001: 173–74)

Mbembe's words, '[B]ut what does it mean to do violence to what is nothing?,' encapsulate my realisation of the shame I experienced because of this play – the idea that it is not just the violence of forced removals and its destruction to a community's social and financial economy but that the community has been the object of violence for many years in how cultural and spiritual histories, access and engagement with the ocean have been severed intergenerationally for black and brown bodies in South Africa.

The Apartheid system not only dehumanised certain racial groups, it also cut them off from environmental engagements. This deadening of the senses to nature is most evident in the architectural and town planning decisions made by the apartheid regime (McGarry, 2014). The severing of the human from environmental interaction is an aspect of the colonial attempt to control and desensitise the thinking-feeling body of those they oppressed by reserving access to and interaction with nature for a select few.¹⁴ In this way, the South African government impaired and stunted people's awareness of how they could continue to relate to nature, an aspect of identity inseparable from a deep sense of self for many indigenous groups in South Africa. The ramifications of colonial and apartheid regimes have thus left their destructive mark on the crisis we currently find ourselves in regarding our human impact on earth.

A third story in *Lalela uLwandle* that deepens an awareness of displacement, disconnectedness and dislocation from the sea in South Africa's history is told through the character of Niren, an Indian South African who traces his lineage to indentured Indian labourers who settled on the coast of Natal. Niren uses the prop of a pop-up book which reveals a three-dimensional model of his great-grandfather's home. The use of the pop-up book in the retelling of Niren's family's relationship to the sea and subsequent dislocation from it, adds a childlike and whimsical dimension to a haunting aspect of South Africa's past that is not often spoken about.

¹⁴ This detachment of humans from nature is seen in the development of reserves throughout South Africa. Lack of engagement with sealife and wildlife is evident. Furthermore, the opportunity to view wildlife in reserves or sealife beneath the water is an experience only the rich have access to due to the high costs and fees involved to do so. This exclusivity results in many South Africans never coming into direct contact with wildlife or sealife.

The imaginative, child-like sense of wonder kindled by the pop-up book also affectively evokes a child-like wonder with regards to the sea and helps to heighten our ability to 'feel' in a retelling of apartheid history in which many South Africans were cut off from feeling anything. Perhaps this moment highlights how the aesthetic choices in the performance are actively working towards a condition of empathy.

When Niren's family arrive in Durban they form a new life for themselves by starting a small-scale fishery. However, with the relocation of Indian South Africans in terms of the 1950 Group Areas Act, Niren's grandfather and his family are uprooted and forcibly removed from their coastal home to an inland area similar to Sea Cow Lake, Chatsworth, Phoenix, Sydenham and Wentworth, all founded during the forced removals of the Group Areas Act. With this relocation, Niren's family's generational entanglement with the sea is severed, heightening their sense of displacement and consequent social instability and erosion.¹⁵ In provoking us to think with the ocean, *Lalela uLwandle* demands that we attend to historical lines of human oppression that are linked to and carried by the ocean.

Live performance brings the bodies of strangers into a situation of relational communion. This live, relational coming together offers a type of engagement that is different from that encountered in a boardroom, lecture hall, community meeting or documentary film. This is most evident in the responses the performance generated in me. It is the liveness of performance that collects and ignites a vibrant archive of engagements with the ocean, as new audiences in different locales and at different times encounter the work. I use the word 'encounter' here as I think specifically of Gilles Deleuze's remark in *Proust and Signs* that 'more important than thought is "what leads to thought" ... impressions which force us to look, encounters which force us to interpret, expressions which force us to think' (2008: 161). This 'encounter' with the performance folds back into the performance through the post-performance discussion but also in the additional research outputs alluded to or cited in this article. This paper in itself is an iteration of this 'encounter'. *Lalela uLwandle* activates responses and 'encounters' with the ocean that are continually expanding, despite the research being situated in a specific socio-political context and geographic location. It is the aesthetics of performance that fosters a living engagement on the part of members of the audience, whose thinking with ocean stores/histories develop a feeling of greater empathy.

The performance places me in the Ocean. I am immersed in it.

The performance does not unify positionalities, histories, privileges or accessibility to the ocean but acknowledges instead the general 'unshareability of [our] feelings' because of our distinct social, political, and cultural positions (Golanska, 2017: 186). It affords a capacious

¹⁵ As highlighted in footnote 9, to avoid this story appearing 'extracted' I note that the character of Niren in the play was developed from Viroshen Chetty and Neelan Govender's book *The Legends of the Tide*, 'which records generations of stories around the South Indian Seine Net Fisher fold and industry in Durban' (Erwin, et al., 2022: 392).

pluriversity¹⁶ of human relationships and narratives with the ocean that accommodates a multitude of ocean experiences, knowledges and histories that emerge when thinking with the ocean (Mignolo, 1995).¹⁷ We enter into proximity and are deeply affected without assuming that we are the same as the experiences undergone by others or ourselves. This type of approach to research makes possible sensitive and careful inquiry and is vital to the decolonial reframing of practices in higher education. In repositioning the affective marks made in the margins of the performance into the body of an article, these marks can in turn fold into the thinking of the reader, potentially altering the reader's engagement with the ocean. This in turn reflects the methodological approach of Empatheatre and the pattern of the ocean: one that folds back into itself to form new waves that spill out onto the shore, only to be pulled back into the ocean once more.

The performance leaks out. It enters me. I leave carrying what has been folded into me. It forms new ruptures and makes its way into new thoughts as I make my way home.

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¹⁶ Here I make use of Walter D. Mignolo's definition of the pluriverse coined in 1995 that articulates a decolonial political vision where many worlds can co-exist alongside each other.

¹⁷ For a more detailed analysis of the plural epistemologies employed in the making and staging of *Lalela uLwandle* see Erwin, et al. (2022).

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