

## THE BUS AS METHOD

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Fourteen days, fifty-eight people from twenty-five countries, twenty-four public events in five towns/cities, twelve venues, three thousand kilometers, twenty-eight restaurants, two support vehicles and a sixty-seater bus. This was the infrastructure that formed the basis for an experimental conversation about contemporary racism and strategies for its overcoming.<sup>1</sup> In each place along the journey, lectures, performances, panel discussions, parties, exhibitions, planned to accord with the questions that the theme elicited from the histories of each place. Two years of conceptualisation, planning and preparation.

The idea that intellectual work requires a careful consideration of infrastructure is not something much thought about these days, beyond administrators and outsourced event co-ordinators who book air-conditioned rooms, order finger food and put out in rows those folders with paraphernalia that always seem like part of an advertising campaign. The forms of our intellectual events have become fixed, especially in the academy, captured by the conference form, parceled out in 20-minute presentations as if the very expression of our work follows the punch-in time card and the assembly line, short intervals of self-presentation. These serialised events, occurring with box-ticking surety across much of the world as a sign that all is well with the academic project, seem increasingly devoid of intellectual life. At many of the bigger conferences, people leave the conference soon after their 20-minute inputs, their work seemingly done, coming and going from the event as if engaging with a range of products for sampling, with little responsibility for the intellectual shape

and worth of the whole endeavour, and little responsibility to collective intellectual labour and solidarity. Stripped of most of their connection to their context, aside perhaps from the recommended guided tour and the nightly drink at local bars, these events tend towards formulaic repetition, hollowing out the intellectual project and providing little space for the real sharing and testing of ideas. These dead forms inure us to dissociation, are deadening to the collective intellectual project they are supposed to assist.

We have to reclaim the intellectual project from the banality of formal proceedings. If we want to make the argument that the university remains a socially relevant institution we cannot presuppose that all of our time-honoured venues and forms are worthy simply because they are part of an academic pantheon. The task of intellectuals, and universities surely, is to formulate a method for staying close enough to emerging social forms so as to gauge their quality but distant enough to be able to critically understand them. This formulation of method must itself be a continuous process of reformulation that remains alive to its conditions, its curtailments and possibilities. Universities, and the intellectual project, get stuck as soon as the experimentation with ways of relating to the social ceases. Certainly, there is something majestic about the institution of the university, its claim on academic freedom, its history of ideas, a weightiness to its centuries-old rituals and forms. But without that history being brought alive, reinvigorated, by constant query about its meaning and worth and place within emerging social life, it is mere pomp, archaic. We need to recover an ongoing experimentation with the method and forms for intellectual work, and to understand this pursuit as a collective project that holds us in constant tension with an evolving worldly context. We need to think about

our coming together as rare and important moments of convergence, as events to be imagined, stewarded. The character of events can emerge in many different ways out of a concern for the questions and themes with which we are working, their form an important aspect of the intellectual work to be done.

How do we conceptualise and plan for events that engage participants in the pursuit of the most important questions and conversations? How do we build events, craft them, as places for sustained and collective encounter with ideas that generate a criticality worthy of the contemporary world? How do we consistently recreate modes and spaces of invention and intervention in this relationship between intellectual form and the conditions of the world? Method requires explicit and conscious discussion, beyond the list of methods we discuss before ethics committees and in well-rehearsed proposals. The question is not simply what method we will apply to a specific research question, but rather what are the conditions for being able to think in and against and towards the world, and those to come?

Attentive to the need to find new ways of hosting intellectual conversations, the *Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism* planned its 2014 Workshop as a fourteen-day bus trip around South Africa and Swaziland, tracing a series of conceptual leads and archives that could help shape a conversation about race and its futures. Each venue, each route, each restaurant, was chosen as the grounds for extending and amplifying the theme of the Workshop, and the journey became the way to extend both the material and the intensity of the discussion. The bus became along the way a vehicle for intellectual conviviality, a shared intellectual project, and the presence of all kinds of genres of exchange and expression.

The bus began to invoke other bus rides in the history of anti-racist work, the racialised history of transport, indeed the very relationship between race and im/mobility. Always working explicitly against the register of tourism and against any easy narration of the journey, the bus became a moving container for an ever-deeper conversation about other places and times, intersections and open-ended questions. Fragments of archive and commentary about South Africa and elsewhere were collated into an App available through a wifi point on the bus, and these traces sometimes wove themselves into the conversation both on and off the bus. Different kinds of music were listened to at different times and in different parts of the bus. A bottle of whiskey was passed around, food shared. Poetry, impromptu performance, personal reflection, the linking up of strands of thought from two-weeks worth of conversation that moved from plenary to break-away to quiet reflection organically as people put headphones on and watched the landscape move by, took up the microphone on the bus, sat next to a new traveling companion, got on and off the bus. The bus became, over the course of the two-week journey, a new kind of method, creating an ongoing pushing forward of the questions we were asking, and a community of thought that, quite literally, was bound together by the journey.

This kind of *organising* seems more akin to political organising than academic planning. Political organising requires an attention to improvisation, movement-building, the openness to emerging practice and a willingness to learn together. Is it possible to think of academic events in terms of this quality of organising? As mobilisation, as provocation? As having an outcome that leads not simply towards more bureaucratic academic form, but to interventions in the world? To collective intellectual projects that undo idea-ownership



3 July 2014: JWTC participants dance the night away at the Prawn Shack in Dokodweni Beach, KZN en route from Swaziland to Durban.

and scholarship-as-commodity? There was a quality of comradeship in the Workshop, for all the disagreements, debates and challenges, that created a fungibility between academic and political commitments, between intellectual and personal work, between scholarly and emotional practice. In part this was because the journey produced friendship. But also because it insisted on bringing the world deliberately into the event as interruption, corroboration, prompt; insisted on including the social and political context – the data – into the form and content of the discussion, raising its experiential stakes and, if you like, keeping it real.

Discovering new methods and forms, working in new contexts with the potentiality of older ones, takes work and time and care. Experiment takes shape in the midst of scraps of notes, poetry, risk, a photograph, the willingness to listen attentively for the contours of conversation, the impulse to submit to a collective process. If we are serious about producing critical encounters that can meet and engage the world, we must

pay attention to how such scenes of engagement can be imagined and curated. We must review the usefulness of old forms, and we must be alert to ways of proceeding that push the intellectual project towards asking the most important questions in the most fertile ways. We can't allow intellectual work to be bureaucratized, so folded under the arm of administration and buttoned-up by a routinised formalism. A manifesto for the labour of critique must begin with a willingness to be vulnerable to the world, to others, and to the process of creating ideas in the thick of it.

## ENDNOTES

1 The 2014 Workshop 'Archives of the Nonracial' hosted in South Africa and Swaziland by the *Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism*.