

Power Talks

Cape Town, September 2022

'Soft power' is a seemingly innocuous term referring to the use of economic or cultural influence in international affairs. The term belies the forces unleashed in performance, in poetic language, in art and aesthetics. In the mid 1960s, a writer described South Africa's Blue Notes at the Antibes Festival as 'fire', bringing something unprecedented, fresh to European stages. They point to the individual accomplishment and artistry of Dudu Pukwana, Sathima Benjamin and others, but also to a certain collective impact, brought about by the ejection of a powerful emergent movement, a spirit and imagination of freedom. These accounts speak to powers which an emerging discourse of global affairs perhaps seeks to harness. This unnatural journey of South African art, ideas, struggles into exile and the international arena in the 1960s has resonated over the decades.

Meanwhile, as art does impactful, transformative work, so international relations between states do inform and are a dimension of such processes. Since its inception in 2019, the Goethe Institute Power Talks series has taken the practices of European cultural institutions active on the African continent as a point of departure. Mindful of the overbearing weight of global inequality and the persistence of apartheid, and of the place of Europe in these, the series has a stated desire to transcend the dogmas of north vs south 'super narratives' in favour of finding and working the 'spaces between'. This need not mean that the critical edge of dialogue is elided or avoided. In the pursuit of independent thinking and art making, criticality is at the centre of contemporary knowledge. The in-between spaces here potentially produce the conditions for newness, something that universities and art production have in common. Yet, the presumption of power and knowledge in these spaces is highly contested. New ways of negotiating space and power emerge,;or else, familiar ways emerge anew:

*"Like the Bible is for an elder, or the taxi for a ghaatjie, my body became the conduit to transport me from one set of circumstances to another and in singular moments inhabit multiple contexts and knowledges."*ⁱ

This recalls the self-fashioning 'staffrider' - that familiar 'artful' and self-aware urban South African survivor of the literary 1970s? Today, the scene is Cape Town where the Woodstock/ Salt River neighborhood borders the restless commerce of Voortrekker road - a corridor and palimpsest of urban development. The words quoted above are by choreographer and performance scholar jacki job, who hails from neighboring Facticeon, a working-class township built atop the ruins of earlier Windermere camp where the composer Abdullah Ibrahim formed his first creative impressions of the world he would come to inhabit. Facticeon thus constitutes a single layer in the multiple 'emergences' (and erasures) that have formed the City. jacki describes multiple ways her body might write, research and inhabit an urban life-world, integrating these sensibilities at different registers and granularities where "new energies arise from the strip malls, repair shops and car dealers, with street vendors converging on the main thoroughfare."ⁱⁱ

Historically, Woodstock is a border and beach town, infused with sonic fossils from both the Indian and the Atlantic Oceanic worlds. After more than a century, the *Athaan* still inspires moral panic here. Sonic power bristles with new force in a neighborhood under relentless commodification. In a narrative about the colonial spice race in the Indian Ocean and the terrestrial violence of the VOC, Amitav Ghosh describes the modern reach of colonial 'terraforming' in which the very stakes of power were embedded with how institutions visit spatial violence in the drive to commodify.ⁱⁱⁱ Main Road Woodstock, Voortrekker Road both represent such a configuration in the city.

It is in and about the humanities and the arts that these movements of power reverberate, and where their logics can be understood, tested. Apartheid was both sensory and economic. In their different ways, that is, these instances offer coordinates for thinking about power, knowledge and public space in urban neighborhoods at the gritty edge of downtown Cape Town. We believe

creative inscription and movement can replot old coordinates for a practice of freedom; one that is alive to the many registers and modalities of power as we face changing physical, sonic and natural environments, new modes of encroachment by power on space. Woodstock, once the colonial town of Papendorp, is again the site of 'terraforming' - examples range from the historic destruction of the Beach in the colonial era, to the rise of industrial development and clothing workers and immigration; to 'sonic warfare' waged on the Islamic *Athaan* in contemporary times; to ongoing land encroachment pitted against [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), and the mechanised forms of life which now take on the mantle of neoliberal and financial power.

With the Cape Town Power Talks programme we take in a new convergence as Woodstock's cosmopolitan knowledge commons - its bookshops, galleries, NGOs, klopse kamers, libraries, schools and *madrasas* - encounter an emerging university humanities and arts hub first as a building site, then as a long-term institutional neighbor. In other words, the neighborhood encounters a black university breaching the historic white city; from 'a clearing in the bush' as Zoe Wicomb described it, to a gritty inner city neighborhood where new commodity forms and new forms of economic power emerge alongside old ones, manifest as enclosures. As the stakes change so might the questions also. In particular, across the road, is the iconic Greatmore Studios, an adjacent art fellowship with black leadership, which is intentional about supporting emergent black South African artists, and facilitating linkages with artists from elsewhere in Africa and the Diaspora.

Power Talks opens to a critical question: What does such multiple emergence mean; how can we manifest it? We intend that the programme will point tentatively to a first articulation; to several ways we might form the research questions that might animate such work. Can we think the arts and humanities, the knowledge commons anew; that is, can we bring newness to its practice? Who is the public we nurture in this place? What do we have in the humanistic toolbox?

It is no accident that the name of Cissie Gool is invoked in a nearby urban occupation highlighting the crisis of housing and the ongoing structural

neglect accompanying it - an assertion of a history of freedom pitted against neoliberal power. We mean to be intentional about ways to imagine and produce new forms of public life, harnessing the humanities inside of a knowledge commons informed by art as transformative practice. This is about power as institution making and knowledge making. We enter a neighborhood rich with this public work - community organisations, radical urban movements, bringing the affordances of a research university and an artists' studio into play.

In the modalities of the time, several temporal registers converge. Immediate struggles around bread and butter, university fees and affordable housing converge with planetary threats and the historical timescales of the colonial period and the postapartheid. Woodstock offers a varied palette for interrogating the forms of power that implicate the city in global discussions about the local and the planetary. What might it mean to revisit power and public space in the contemporary world in which coordinates of time, space and the human shift radically and in which power works at macro and micro scales? The arts and the humanities are both forms and registers in which this work can produce newness. In this programme we look for ways to enable new thinking and new practice to inform the making of public institutions.

Artist residencies are, in their turn, a fundamental seam of artistic production. Because of its transitional place in the modern property economy, the Woodstock Salt River area is typical of the kind of urban landscape into which independent artists across the spectrum of income and opportunity are able to find a place holding, and a kind of traction. Here, independent arts and commercial spaces meet a black peripheral university with a growing critical practice, enquiring how we think of critique in relation to secular criticism and modernity, and the public locations of critical thought. We might amplify different manifestations of such encounters, the ordinary with the new. Might we think of the neighborhood as terrain for exploring contours of a critical public? The project seeks to build the basis for arts and humanistic commons, one that encompasses public scholarship - that is, knowledge not easily absorbed in scholarly papers - via independents, artists, schools, libraries, performance, museums, galleries, studios, cinema and the like. The arts

generally, including the 'minor' and 'folk' arts.

The project seeks to signal experiences and dialogues, pairings of art, dialogue and public scholarship. How might we negotiate the terms of such engagement with Cape Town's unique legacy of knowledge in the service of violence and power? If we take as given that humanistic activity means finding and shifting the 'sweet spot' of public debate towards freedom, and criticality, based on research and knowledge making (or public scholarship), then what are the terms for longer-term conversations and actions?

In doing so, how do the humanities play and think with artists and with scientists? They do so by inventing adequate concepts for our predicaments. We believe that recognising the arts as a critical part of this field might enable ways of inhabiting and sensing to emerge from research. For example, in 2022 our fellows are all thinking about the minor, minority question. The Greatmore building emerged as a primary school - the place of the child. How might the child and the minor echo in multiple ways in the work of the precinct? Might we seek partnerships beyond projects, which enable practice and institutional form to manifest. Build concepts through a dialogue of the senses, dialogues of love and revolution. Who gets to define /make the knowledges and pathways to the new?

Speed, preemption, mechanised thought and feeling - these are the currencies of digital commodity forms, of the relentless drive to monetise experience. This work is thus also about knowing speed, knowing the need to slow down, to take stock of the human senses. Likewise, humanistic work is part of a longer game in which 'slow thinking' is not only tolerated but actively engendered. Here institutional lifespans yield slow but profound impacts. It gestures to the work of the arts over long periods, to technogenesis and the constant emergence of newness. Hence humanistic work is out of place in the immediatist imperatives of financial digital capital. Impacts, and proliferating monetisation. We want to argue that commodifications are always present, turning slowness, the radical response to a commodity. We want to watch it in slow motion, to slow down the compulsion of speed, immediate gratification. The aesthetic politics of vinyl, books and slow food all succumb to the

pushback against capitalist accumulation but are immediately re-commodified.

Artistic knowledge can help to negotiate these inner tensions. So the humanities offer public scholarship, forms of knowledge that relentlessly produce a sense of freedom, that escape the traps of the commodity. Jazz did it. Literature did. Architect. These are slow languages. As old as institutions and as hard to shift. Discourse and power help as grist is to Mills.

ⁱ jacki job, ““Who Do You Think You Are to Speak to Me Like That?””, in *Surfacing: On Being Black and Feminist in South Africa*, ed. Desiree Lewis and Gabeba Baderoon (Wits University Press, 2021), 100–118, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/surfacing/who-do-you-think-you-are-to-speak-to-me-like-that/959292494E88D4A04BF7B7760D0E9B98>.

ⁱⁱ See <https://www.chrflagship.uwc.ac.za/visual-gateways-exhibition/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (Hachette UK, 2021).