FROM **HOPE** TO **ACTION** THROUGH **KNOWLEDGE**

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Editors

Ramesh Bharuthram
and Larry Pokpas

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Rethinking the Human Condition After Apartheid: Brian O'Connell's Vision for the Humanities at UWC

Professor Premesh Lalu

Director, Centre for Humanities Research;

Director, DST/NRF Flagship on Critical Thought in African Humanities

A Space for the Humanities

In 2006, at the start of his second term as Vice-Chancellor and Rector of the University of the Western Cape (UWC), Prof Brian O'Connell approved a proposal from the Faculty of Arts to establish a Centre for Humanities Research (CHR). It was a decision that displayed rare confidence in humanistic inquiry at a South African university. It also demonstrated considerable courage and remarkable foresight, especially in an environment in which the study of humanities appeared to be overwhelmed by encroaching political, epistemological and financial challenges globally (Guyer, 2020; Menon, 2019). In a bold statement of leadership, the Vice-Chancellor supported a research initiative in the humanities in an environment of resource constraints in universities and in a context in which the ideal for humanity was reduced to the supposedly representative figure of *Homo Oeconomicus*. Brian O'Connell paved the way for the disciplines of the humanities to collectively decipher and debate the meaning of post-apartheid freedom and to lend their combined intellectual resources and methodologies to imagining the meaning of a post-apartheid university and society from the unique perspective of UWC.

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O'Connell's support for the establishment of a research centre in the humanities and interpretive social sciences was integral to a broader requirement of sense making that defined his overarching leadership vision. He asked searchingly – and some will recall, frequently – how the inequities of apartheid could be reversed without establishing the markers of privilege as the ultimate arbiters of what a future non-racial society might look like. If this measure of redistribution was adhered to, the ecological strain would ultimately prove catastrophic. More than simply laying bare the outlines of the deep societal difficulties inherited from years of apartheid rule and the near evisceration of institutions such as UWC by the instruments of the apartheid state, O'Connell encouraged researchers in the humanities to make their scholarship available for an education of the senses as part of his sense-making agenda. His was an effort aimed at reinventing the best traditions of thought for a sustainable post-apartheid future. With the benefit of hindsight, O'Connell had extended an invitation to the university community to participate in forging a different perspective for UWC, one in which the humanities would prove to be both necessary and indispensable for addressing the pressures on higher education to address societal change. The work of building a new perspective required a suspension of the pathos that accompanied despairing narratives of the decline of human subjectivity. The Vice-Chancellor insisted on the twin processes of human agency and intellectual potential as starting points to bring about meaningful and purposeful change. He challenged colleagues in the humanities to shape an affirmative understanding of an ethical post-apartheid subject capable of defeating and transcending the infantilisation experienced by so many under apartheid's system of gutter education. For O'Connell, this was a matter that required intellectual rigour and commitment, on the one hand, and the building of robust and durable institutions, on the other.

The challenges he placed before UWC were succinctly stated at a 2009 conference jointly convened by the CHR and the Ferguson Centre for African and Asian Studies of the Open University, UK, on theme of *Re-imagining Postcolonial Futures: Knowledge Transactions and Contests of Culture in the African Present*. On the occasion of the opening public lecture at the District Six Museum in Cape Town, O'Connell questioned the keynote speaker, Jacques Depelchin, author of *Silences in African History* (2005), about the tendency to repeat the biblical story of the fall of 'Man' as the abiding script of humanistic inquiry. The astuteness of that formulation subsequently found eloquent expression in the overarching research orientation of the CHR, one which has enabled the Centre to

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confidently articulate a perspective on the humanities that proved compelling for scholars and public intellectuals in the fourteen years since its formation. The space opened up by Brian O'Connell encouraged those associated with the Centre to pursue a concept of the humanities that would lend itself to an affirmative understanding of post-apartheid subjectivity, while crafting ideas of freedom adequate to the demands of a post-apartheid future.

At the dawn of democracy UWC was home to several research centres that spearheaded the policy and community research agendas around land, housing, rural poverty, gender equity, adult education and public health. Led by leading activists and intellectuals in the anti-apartheid struggle, the research centres and institutes undertook strategic research projects that facilitated research related to policy and institution-making necessary to support and sustain a transition to democratic rule in South Africa. The collective impact and importance of these research formations on the policy landscape of a society in transition to democracy and on shaping the curriculum is without precedent in South African higher education. In 2006 O'Connell added a further centre to this list of research hubs. This time, he opted for a centre tasked with exploring a speculative horizon of post-apartheid freedom through a revitalised critical theory of race and racial formations adequate to the task of understanding the precarity of a technologically altered human condition. The Centre for Humanities Research (CHR) was established to rethink the racial foundations of UWC, the problem of the problematisation of race globally, and the successive intellectual traditions and formations that imagined ways to exit the legacies of slavery, colonialism, segregation and apartheid. In short, the CHR was established to reflect on those intellectual and artistic formations and critical traditions in the global humanities that could launch an aesthetic inquiry to imagine post-apartheid freedom. As might be expected, projects with speculative horizons and shifting objects do not easily lend themselves to creating stable fields of research and study. However, they often bring about convergence of the most inventive, creative, critical and experimental approaches to scholarly research and public practices. With the generous invitation to rethink UWC's inheritance and the intellectual traditions with which it might best abide, the CHR was being asked to rethink apartheid's sinister attempts at making the humanities serve a project of population control through and beyond the legal and institutional entrapments of class, race, ethnic and gender prescriptions. The CHR was being tasked with elaborating a concept of freedom that would exceed apartheid's instrumentalisation

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of the humanities in the foundational fictions of race from which UWC struggled to emerge. A crucial aspect of tasking the humanities with undoing the inherited burden of race related to remaking the place of the university in a nascent democratic public sphere, after apartheid.

The struggle for a Humanities Centre

Establishing a centre for research in the humanities proved to be an exacting undertaking at first. The faculty appeared beleaguered by the years of uncertainty prior to O'Connell's appointment as Vice-Chancellor and Rector of UWC. International partnerships were few and far between. Collaborations with institutions of public scholarship thrived through the sheer commitment and dedication of those who continued to believe in the ideals of the university that they had joined during the turbulent and politically charged years of the 1980s. Inter-faculty collaboration and university-wide exchange that had once been the distinguishing feature of UWC, with its film societies, People's History Open Days, Mayibuye Centre cultural events, and Marxist Theory Seminars, had ground to a halt. And external funding for research and projects in the public sphere was virtually non-existent. With a director, an administrator, a seminar series inherited from a prior collaboration between the Department of History and the now defunct Institute for Historical Research, the Centre seemed destined to face considerable challenges (Leslie Witz et al., 2016). In its first Advisory Board meeting, Prof Patricia Hayes playfully posed a weighty question: "What might we do without any money?" The graduate students who frequented the seminar series and reading groups soon learnt to parody this mantra, making light of their own dire circumstances. Matters came to a head when the first approaches to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation were rejected on the basis that the Centre, given its minimal resources and inadequate infrastructure, did not constitute a viable research entity to justify dedicated research grants. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation thus decided against the application to fund a programme in the humanities at UWC.

Weeks of focused and disciplined engagements around key texts and works of art in a programme of study and deliberation involving faculty, master's and doctoral students followed. The texts were carefully selected, the seminar programme was meticulously assembled and the written work collaboratively prepared and edited for publication. The excitement that defined the Centre's internal dynamics contrasted sharply with an

institution that appeared psychologically drained by the experience of the 1990s, leaderless, at the very point when it most needed to help re-envision a democratic post-apartheid future for which it had fought so hard. Brian O'Connell's struggle against proposals for UWC's merger with the neighbouring Peninsula Technikon during the restructuring process coincided with a sense of uncertainty that divided the campus community through an encroaching sense of suspicion, mistrust and intrigue amongst staff and students. This was coupled with a sense of demoralisation that had set in among faculty members following a period that ended in staff retrenchments, mainly from the Faculty of Arts, which proved difficult to reverse. Advocating for the establishment of a Centre for Research in the humanities under these conditions seemed imperilled to begin with. But this did not deter the new leadership team at UWC from persevering to appoint a full-time director to lead the newly established Centre for Humanities Research.

In an unexpected reversal of its earlier decision not to fund the CHR, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation invited a proposal for Postgraduate and Postdoctoral Fellowships under the banner of the Programme on the Study of the Humanities in Africa in the CHR led by Premesh Lalu. The decision recognised both the international reputation garnered by the CHR in a short space of time and the academic leadership that Allen Isaacman and Premesh Lalu provided on the ALUKA project on the digitisation of liberation-struggle archives involving several South African Universities. In 2006 two successive grants totalling two million rand resulted in the awarding of the first master's, doctoral and postdoctoral fellowships to the most accomplished emerging scholars in the humanities at UWC and beyond. The process of securing support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for the humanities at UWC, while initiated through the CHR, was ultimately only possible due to Brian O'Connell's assurances to Dr Stuart Saunders, and later the President of the Mellon Foundation, Prof Earl Lewis, that the CHR was a strategic research centre of UWC. At the very least, the endorsement was a welcome affirmation of the efforts of the CHR and colleagues in the Faculty of Arts who worked conscientiously to create the conditions for the Centre's emergence. By 2008 a sense of trust defined O'Connell's relationship with the newly appointed Director, who proceeded to build the Programme on the Study of the Humanities in Africa into what many recognised as a formidable research platform of the CHR.

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At the moment when Brian O'Connell set about implementing a strategy to position UWC as research-led university, the newly appointed director of CHR, Prof Premesh Lalu, also received an invitation to join a delegation from the Interdisciplinary Centre for the Study of Global Change (ICGC) at the University of Minnesota on a visit to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in New York. In the light of the expanding and exemplary interinstitutional collaborations between the CHR at UWC and the ICGC at the University of Minnesota, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation invited a fresh proposal for international partnership between the two institutions (Lalu, 2015). Conceived around the theme of *Postcolonial Transactions of Knowledge*, the proposal that was jointly prepared and submitted to the New York-based foundation created the conditions for the first major research-focused exchange of graduate students and faculty across the two institutions specifically in the humanities. Prof Suren Pillay and Ciraj Rassool accompanied the CHR Director in preparing the proposal alongside colleagues at the University of Minnesota. In the meantime, to facilitate the grant-making process, Prof O'Connell and Prof Ramesh Bharuthram, appointed as Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic in January 2008, elevated the University of Minnesota to the position of a strategic partner of UWC. In his first visit to consolidate the new partnership, Prof Allen Isaacman seemingly provided an appropriate response to Brian O'Connell's searching question: "Why does the University of Minnesota wish to be a friend of the University of the Western Cape?" Prof Isaacman replied: "Because your colleagues, like you, better than most in South Africa, understand and have demonstrated the true meaning of the words courage and struggle in the effort to build a post-apartheid vision for the humanities." To demonstrate his commitment to the partnership and to underline the promise of friendship on behalf of his university, Allen Isaacman generously donated the full extent of his vast personal library consisting of a vast collection of books on the history of Southern Africa and Mozambique, as well as the full selection of books in the Heinemann African Social History and Ohio University Press New African History Series, to the UWC library, together with an annual endowment of \$2 000 for the upkeep of the collection in perpetuity. The collection, covering the full extent of Allen Isaacman's academic career as an educator in Mozambique and the USA, was a gift to UWC made via the CHR. With this new-found partnership between the CHR at UWC and the ICGC at the University of Minnesota in place, the CHR re-submitted a fellowship grant application to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, through the office of the Vice-Chancellor, Prof O'Connell. Following an initial review, the Andrew

W. Mellon Foundation requested an expanded proposal to support the programmatic aspects of the CHR's unique approach to arts and humanities collaborations articulated through its platforms on aesthetic education and the becoming technical of the human.

Setting to work

The first study group of the CHR delved into Amitav Ghosh's elegant novel, *In an Antique Land* (1994). Set in the twelfth century, Ghosh leads the reader on a memorable journey and an equally revealing search for the name of a slave who is the subject of an epistolary exchange between two traders located in India and Egypt respectively. Given its vast canvass, the novel provided the imagery and inspiration for setting to work on a 10-year search for an elusive concept of post-apartheid freedom involving postgraduate students and faculty. Cohorts of researchers and fellows convened in study circles to engage in a trans-hemispheric exploration of disused and abandoned traditions of freedom extending from cultural formations of the Black Atlantic to Negritude, from Maxeke to Diagne via Bergson, often by tracing circuitous references buried in generative texts by intellectuals such as Edward Said and Sylvia Wynter (Truscott et al., 2017). Along the way, the CHR encountered the problem of the problematisation of race in, amongst others, institutions such as UWC under apartheid, postcolonial predicaments in the aftermath of the Second World War, and the projects of unravelling the racial legacies of slavery and colonialism. Often this required participants in the study groups to suspend the story of resistance, while recuperating the wider discursive formations that unwittingly sustained concepts of race in the discourse of humanistic disciplines. By placing discipline-based research within a larger framework of lineages of humanistic inquiry, it became possible to genealogically trace those foundational concepts in the human sciences that sustained the discourse of race. It also paved the way for exploring those constellations of freedom that tested the limits of prevailing conceptions of politics, aesthetics and subjectivity in the human sciences. In the process, the problem of race was filtered through several epistemic grids of intelligibility and forms of critical theory ranging from postcolonial theory, the scholarship of the Pan African Revolt in the Caribbean and Africa, the Frankfurt School critical theory, and the postcolonial critique of anti-colonial nationalism (Lalu, 2009). Ultimately, the overarching interest of research undertaken in the early years related to the specificity of aesthetics as a potential inherent in politics.

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The CHR's research focus converged with nascent research agendas across the African continent. With the graduation of a first cohort of doctoral candidates from South Africa, Namibia, Nigeria and Rwanda during the period 2010 to 2013, it became apparent that those schooled in post-independent Africa were engaged in critiques of nationalism, war and violence that drew extensively on the resources of art, aesthetics and African philosophy. Increasingly, the research agenda in the humanities had shifted towards opening the fields of aesthetic theory and aesthetic education to accommodate these emerging interests. Ultimately, the four research platforms that formed the core of the CHR's research interests – Aesthetic Education, Citizenship and Justice, Visual History and Theory, and the Becoming Technical of the Human – mapped the emergence of a post-apartheid discourse on a broader post-colonial African humanity, while also seeking sites of intervention that allowed for the flourishing of ideas and perspectives on freedom.

Building a future

Albeit with great difficulty, the programme of work on the foundational concepts in the humanities paved the way for engagements with public institutions, cultural formations, state research entities and international humanities networks. The CHR countered the sense of insecurity that had engulfed the humanities globally by meticulously detailing the complex dynamics entailed in forging a concept of post-apartheid freedom. The CHR was widely recognised for its work in building concepts. The dedication of a cohort of fellows and faculty who joined the study groups and seminar programme, coupled with a new-found confidence to read texts, images and works of art in relation to competing humanistic traditions, laid the foundations of an intellectually focused research community. Drawing on a corpus of representative texts that inaugurated a postcolonial turn in literary, aesthetic, theoretical, philosophical, feminist and African studies, students and faculty were invited both to locate their respective inquiries in relation to an epistemological shift in the humanities, while drawing on individual research to provide the building blocks for a more comprehensive genealogy of the problem of race. Taking care of this limit was a step towards thinking ahead.

Each year the work conducted through these carefully choreographed reading sessions were brought to a close with a fellows colloquium and a joint Winter School held in collaboration with the SARCHI Research Chair

in Social Change at the University of Fort Hare, Prof Gary Minkley, and the ICGC at the University of Minnesota, led by Prof Karen Brown. Detailed and comprehensive reports were prepared, each elaborating upon research questions and the debates that ensued over the period of two semesters. The Director presented and annually published an overarching essay on the work of the Centre that drew together the various strands of research, while responding to key debates and developments in a number of research areas. With the addition of new staff and further funding from the Mellon Foundation serving to affirm research directions charted through the colloquia and Winter Schools, the CHR expanded its projects to accommodate an increasing number of national and international partners. These included the Jackman Humanities Institute at the University of Toronto as well as colleagues from Leeds University, UK, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia, the Catholic University of Luanda, Angola, and Northwestern University, Chicago, USA. In the formative years of the CHR there was a recognisable tendency in postgraduate research towards a critique of the hardening of nationalist standpoints in the aftermaths of war and violence across the continent. To this end, graduate students led the charge to discover new textures and collections through which to rethink questions of subjectivity that had become entangled in the history of Cold War narratives, speculative leftism, a sclerotic liberalism and a faltering nationalism. It is not surprising that many would discover new ways to talk about the question of race and subjectivity, war and the everyday, and violence and freedom in the burgeoning fields of aesthetic practice that had mushroomed across the length and breadth of the African continent. The perspective is amplified in the collection of dissertations and in the range of subsequent monographs and journal articles produced by fellows of the CHR.

To look upon this changed world from the vantage point of a University that was formed in the name of one of the most devastating projects of the Cold War in Southern Africa required a kind of serious studiousness that refused the language of despair, exhaustion and crisis. In fact, the humanities bore a considerable responsibility towards reorienting the institutional site of the modern university towards the precarity confronting the planet. Brian O'Connell realised that for a Centre to conduct such research would require giving the research community room and space to develop ideas without too much bureaucratic and administrative interference. He correctly anticipated that the work would ultimately prove indispensable for the larger task of reinventing the University. It was thus unsurprising that he should task the Director of the

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CHR to prepare a reflective publication to mark the fiftieth anniversary of UWC in 2010 (Lalu & Murray, 2009). The editors of the volume presented two critical lines of argument, one around the consequences of the idea of the intellectual home for the democratic left that placed UWC squarely in opposition to apartheid in the 1980s, and another around the spatial and aesthetic reimagining of the university. With a series of accompanying essays in conversation with a photographic essay by Ingrid Masondo, a graduate student in visual history, the volume invited the UWC community to reimagine the university as a specifically post-apartheid institution, shorn of the bureaucratic, disciplinary and authoritarian tendencies that three generations of students and faculty had worked towards overturning.

The worldly university

Upon assuming the leadership position of UWC, Brian O'Connell encouraged a shift in the strategic direction of the institution by reorienting its intellectual project towards the complexities of a transition to democracy through carefully selected niche areas of research. He was no stranger to the early struggles in the 1960s against apartheid education at UWC, where he was once a student and later a member of faculty. O'Connell emphasised the positive aspects of the struggle that defined UWC in the 1980s, especially the concept of 'epistemological access' that Wally Morrow developed as a philosopher of education at UWC. The emphasis placed on an education that affirmed students and faculty shaped his views on the reconstitution of the study of the humanities at UWC. One of the enduring consequences of O'Connell's deep understanding of the history of UWC as an institution made him a fervent supporter of the humanities. He believed that forms of philosophical and aesthetic education would be critical to reverse the numbing and punitive effects of bureaucratic control for which the institution was primarily created by the apartheid state. Whether through the prose of Zoe Wicomb and Adam Small, or the poetry of Arthur Nortje, Wendy Woodward, Jane Taylor, Peter Merrington, Antjie Krog and Sandile Dikeni, or in the work of Leslie Witz and Ciraj Rassool on community museums and cultural institutions, O'Connell clearly understood that an aesthetic education would prove to be a site of intervention. It would be an area that would require careful nurturing if UWC was to emerge from the scripts of apartheid under which the institution had laboured since its inception. Similarly, without a broad interdisciplinary humanities inquiry that drew inspiration from the vast art and archival holdings at UWC, it

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would prove extremely difficult to make sense of the crucial relationship between aesthetics and freedom in the pursuit of knowledge. Inspired by the challenge to bring the humanities into conversation with often under-appreciated histories of arts practice in oppressed communities, the CHR extended its research into the foundational concepts of the humanities with a foray into aesthetic education. The question of aesthetic education was fast becoming a cohering interest across a diverse set of research platforms on Visual History, Aesthetics and Politics, the Becoming Technical of the Human, and Citizenship and Justice. In many respects, O'Connell's injunction to think of the human and the humanities in more affirming ways resulted in a very serious engagement with the meaning of aesthetics in the university in Africa, in postcolonial theory, and in institutions of public scholarship. It was this expansive horizon that the world-renowned Sudanese art critic and Cornell University professor in Art History, Salaah Hassan, reflected on when he noted that the rise of CHR as a flagship of the humanities in South Africa brought back memories of the earlier hubs of intellectualism such as the Universities of Dar es Salaam, Khartoum, Makerere and Ibadan in the 1960s and 1970s (Hassan, 2019).

The style of critical theory for which the CHR had become widely known is the subject of Dr Crain Soudien's recent review essay of three edited volumes published through the CHR that underlines the significant way in which the fellows and faculty associated with the Centre had altered the framing of the problem of race:

And here, it is suggested, is the contribution of the scholars of the CHR. It is, in the first instance, to South Africa that this body of work talks. Its unsettling is the unsettling of the cognitive pathways through which the social, the social of 'race' has been naturalised on to the physical landscape. But it is, more profoundly, to the global genealogy of this social that this contribution pushes. There in the global sit the imperious figures of deconstruction, with Foucault foremost in the recent past and, latterly, individuals such as Agamben. The CHR scholars probe the limits of both. They engage the mind-body split in important new ways. Sitting behind the process of working with this mind-body split is a simple axiological commitment. There is in it a fundamental calling into question of the ontological logic of dominance, even as that dominance is deconstructed. At the core of the questioning is, and this is the major contribution of the CHR, the racial remainder, the extraordinary ways in which 'race' remains even as dominance seeks to disavow its own power. The value of the critique is the recognition of insistent multiplicity and its currency for looking at the past, the present and the future. This bears directly on the decolonial discussion – its danger of recuperating the terms of imperialism's social – and the suggestion

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that there are other vantage points from which to think about what it means to be human. It has raised, in particular, the space and place of the post-apartheid (Soudien, 2018).

A similar sentiment is conveyed by the University of Chicago's Prof Jim Chandler in an essay in *New Literary Criticism* on 'The Question of Sensibility':

It seems that aesthetic education is making a comeback these days. It is back in theory: witness Gayatri Spivak's 2012 *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, subject of a recent roundtable in *PMLA*. And it is also back in practice: witness Premesh Lalu's exciting project at the University of the Western Cape, which seeks to supplement, even to displace, the role of political theory in shaping South Africa's future by way of an ambitious program of arts education. With this renewed commitment to aesthetic education comes a revived interest in sensibility. Confronting what she calls today's "most pernicious presupposition [...] that globalization has happily happened in every aspect of our lives," Spivak takes her stand in the domain of sensibility: "Globalization can never happen to the sensory equipment of the experiencing being," she argues, and "only an aesthetic education" can provide the needed preparation in this domain. For Lalu, who cites Spivak among his theoretical exemplars, the problem is similar: "The renewed effort to constitute the field of aesthetic education to counter the slide into a consultancy culture [...] is bringing scholars in the humanities into a more direct relation to emerging and ongoing artistic practices and thinking in the world." What is called for, writes Lalu, is not just a 'planetary library' but also 'a planetary sensibility' (Chandler, 2019).

In both Soudien's and Chandler's accounts, we hear echoes of Brian O'Connell's invitation to engage in a project of sense making about the precarity facing South African society in a rapidly changing global and planetary context. To his credit, the invitation did not arrive with a prescription about how to proceed, nor did it presume an answer in advance of the patient processes of research and scholarly inquiry. Brian O'Connell took the risk to allow a community of humanities scholars gathered around a Centre for Humanities Research to determine their research priorities and help to answer a question which, with his wry wit, he allowed his colleagues to ponder and process, with a sense of freedom. This is a truly exemplary case of leading a university without condition.

Brian O'Connell and his Executive Management Team's confidence and belief that the CHR would deliver were confirmed when the National Research Foundation (NRF) and the Department of Science and Technology (DST) awarded the CHR the first national flagship grant of

its kind in the country on Critical Thought in African Humanities in 2015. In a proposal to the NRF, supported by the Executive Management, the Centre committed to establishing two initiatives in arts education that would enhance its commitments to undoing the legacies of race in a divided city. The first centred on the idea of a Factory of the Arts that would draw together artists in residence and next-generation scholars in a collaboration about competing conceptions of post-apartheid freedom. The second was aimed specifically at enhancing youth mobilities across rural and urban divides as an aesthetic intervention in breaking up the geographies of apartheid through an extension of the idea of a post-apartheid public sphere.

In keeping with the expanded brief of a national NRF flagship award, the CHR established several important national and international partnerships and research collaborations. Locally, it is engaged in the Afro-Asia project that involves UCT and Wits, and has benefitted from a long and fruitful exchange with the SARChI Chair in Social Change at the University of Fort Hare, Prof Gary Minkley. The CHR and colleagues at the University of Fort Hare have collaborated extensively on the annual Winter Schools as well as on several collaborative publishing initiatives showcasing the research of next-generation scholars (Hayes & Minkley, 2019). The CHR also co-convenes a Mellon Foundation-funded research initiative on Other Universals involving scholars at UCT, Wits and several international partners convened by Prof Suren Pillay, a Factory of the Arts convened by Prof Heidi Grunebaum and Itumeleng wa Lehulere, and a Laboratory of Kinetic Objects convened by Prof Jane Taylor. Through its board membership of the Consortium for Humanities Centres and Institutes, the CHR has since developed a substantial network across the global South. Recently, for example, it co-convened a Global Institute with the Centre for the Study of Philosophy, Humanities and the Arts (Universidad de Chile), University of California Irvine Humanities Commons, and Oxford Comparative Criticism and Translation in Santiago, Chile. In January 2019 the CHR co-convened a graduate institute on Africa and the Global Humanities at the University of Addis Ababa that drew together forty students from across the African continent, with several from UWC, Wits, UCT and Rhodes. Several collaborative publications attest to the dynamism of the international collaborations, including a volume on the University in Africa and a journal issue on the history of missing persons and repatriation involving researchers at UWC and the University of Toronto.

The university and its publics

Brian O'Connell used every opportunity to test the senior researchers at UWC about their public commitments. The question was not lost on the CHR, which turned its attention to the arts through an engagement with what it playfully termed 'unlikely arts.' The project was facilitated in part through the acquisition of the Community Project Arts collection and the opening of a dialogue with archivists and curators at the UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Centre through the African Programme in Museum and Heritage Studies. Both collection and curatorial dialogue informed the CHR's first public exhibitions, one in Bellville at Art.b Gallery, and a second at the IZIKO National Gallery of South Africa. Accompanied by the publication of a catalogue edited by CHR staff members, Heidi Grunebaum and Emile Maurice, *Uncontained: Opening the Community Arts Collection*, was launched to coincide with the first *Love and Revolution Conference* held in partnership with the University of Minnesota and the public announcement of a partnership between the CHR and the Handspring Puppet Company (Grunebaum & Maurice, 2012). The performance of Handspring's production of *I Love You When You're Breathing* served to welcome a diverse audience of artists, scholars, international partners and members of the public. It also helped to set the tone for a new approach to working with and appreciating the sparse and scattered arts initiatives and collections at UWC.

Shortly after his retirement, O'Connell received a special mention by Minister Naledi Pandor at the CHR's launch of the DST-NRF Flagship on Critical Thought in African Humanities. O'Connell's desire for UWC to lead the way in rebuilding the relationship between higher education institutions and a nascent post-apartheid public sphere had finally received the acknowledgement it deserved. At a gathering of more than 250 guests, he handed over the gift of a thriving national and internationally recognised humanities centre to his successor, Prof Tyrone Pretorius – a significant commitment of the national flagship related to the expansion of public partnerships involving humanities researchers and arts practitioners. Based on the initial success of the public programming of the CAP exhibition, and two additional exhibitions in the National Gallery and Cape Town City Hall respectively, the CHR Flagship undertook to establish an arts programme through the establishment of a Factory of the Arts. The Factory found a home in the very building that once housed the Community Arts Project in the former District Six, a place where Brian O'Connell coincidentally spent his early childhood and which he fondly

recalled at the opening of the facility. Drawing together fine artists, musicians, documentary filmmakers and puppeteers, the Factory of the Arts was initiated as an experimental space for reconfiguring relations between humanities researchers and arts practitioners. By far the major component of the Factory consists of a partnership with the world-class Handspring Puppet Company based in Cape Town. By awarding artist-in-residence fellowships to a younger cohort of artists, the Ukwanda Puppet Collective, who had worked on the famous adaptation of Michael Morpurgo's widely acclaimed global theatrical masterpiece, *War Horse*, the CHR joined forces to open new partnership possibilities in the rural town of Barrydale in the Western Cape. Through a year-long programme and workshops, for the past ten years, the partnership culminates in an annual puppetry parade and performance for the Reconciliation Day Festival on 16 December. Set in an amphitheatre at a local school, the production involves over 200 youths under the directorship of CHR postdoctoral fellow, Aja Marneweck. The multi-faceted programme involves youths between the ages of 7 and 25. Through carefully designed educational processes that use play and the arts to learn about the technologies of kinetic or moving objects, the interface between the human and technology, and the ecological basis of human, plant and animal survival. By thus enhancing the opportunities to encourage youth mobility, the CHR's Barrydale project has paved the way for 55 youths from a rural town to enter higher education institutions and, in so doing, reverse mechanisms of apartheid control. In 2018 the annual production focused on the endangered Redfin Minnow, a prehistoric fish found only in the Tradouw Pass of the Western Cape. By partnering with Cape Nature, and various academic programmes in the sciences at UWC, the youths were exposed to a substantial educational experience about preserving the natural environment in an age of severe water scarcity. Through the medium of giant puppets, an audience of over 700 Barrydale residents and visitors were treated to a performance that educated as much as it thrilled. The 2018 production was subsequently invited to be performed at the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town.

The Barrydale partnership brings together rural and urban youths, world-class artists and community arts practitioners, academic expertise and local knowledge in a formative project of youth development and employment. The programme relies on humanistic and scientific research in a process that is setting new international standards for public scholarship. It results in building self-confidence among youths who live in a region with very high levels of unemployment, few economic

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prospects and widespread foetal alcohol syndrome. Each year, the selected theme expands knowledge about shared histories, environments and overcoming differences to deal with critical issues facing our planet. The recruitment of students from Barrydale to attend higher education institutions has resulted in several other rural areas of the Western Cape building similar initiatives. The Ukwanda Puppetry Collective, supported by the NRF flagship grant, has inspired a vast network of rural and urban youths in a process of co-creation and learning that has proven to be instructive for both how the University engages a South African public sphere and the questions it approaches in making a community that is both responsive and responsible to the spaces inhabited by that community. The programme has also supported fundraising initiatives to support educational projects by *Net vir Pret* to support after-school youth programmes in the arts. Ukwanda, for their part, developed a production on the loss of dreams among township youths that has been seen by over 17 000 youths on the Cape Flats and which received two Standard Bank Awards at the 2019 Makhanda National Arts Festival.

Figure 11.1 Brian O'Connell, with his wife Judith, in front of Handspring Puppet Company's Tony Award winning War Horse at his farewell function hosted at UWC prior to his retirement.

The Barrydale, Ukwanda, *Net vir Pret* and Handspring partnerships have yielded significant results for the CHR and UWC more generally. So too have partnerships with the Universities of Minnesota, Toronto,

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Addis Ababa, Virginia and Ghent, among others. To facilitate the public aspects of the work, the CHR, with the support of the University, secured a derelict unused school in the city. With the support of an infrastructure grant from the Department of Higher Education, the building is due to be transformed into a facility for advanced explorations of the co-evolution of the human and technology against the backdrop of the unprecedented expansion of instruments of communication. The building will host the Laboratory of Kinetic Objects (LoKO) for the making of and exploration of prosthetic art objects, an artist in residence programme, a documentary film laboratory, a public lecture and performance space, a dedicated facility to house projects on Communicating the Humanities (a 4-year grant to build capacity in documentary filmmaking in the Arts and Sciences) as well as photographic archiving (to support the work of the SARChI Research Chair in Visual History and Theory, Prof Patricia Hayes). Finally, the building will house several international partners who will partner to help fund the operational costs of the facility. The CHR's Greatmore Street initiative will potentially allow for greater mobility of youths from the Cape Flats in Cape Town, while expanding the reach of the public programming of the CHR flagship.

Compositely, the NRF flagship has laid the foundations for a broadening of the inquiry on the making of a post-apartheid society that inaugurated the CHR in 2006. The three areas of its most profound impact relate to the way in which it has enhanced the discussion of university transformation at the levels of institutional cultures, graduate recruitment and training, public engagement and international partnerships. The challenges facing South African society require the consolidated perspective of each, if it is to make headway, and the humanities will prove indispensable to the building of a cohesive society that takes forward the best traditions of humanistic inquiry nurtured in the struggle against slavery, colonialism and apartheid. To this end, the relationship between the university and its publics is critical for the purposes of drawing local constituencies into a unifying vision of post-apartheid freedom. As promised in its proposal to the NRF, the CHR has set the stage for a national re-prioritisation of the humanities and social sciences as indispensable to resolving our national and international, as well as public and institutional challenges.

A lasting legacy

A short while after Brian O'Connell retired as Vice-Chancellor, his vision for the humanities reached the apex of its first 10 years. In August 2017 the CHR hosted the annual meeting of the international Consortium for Humanities Centres and Institutes (CHCI) at the Cape Town Castle, accompanied by an exhibition and a catalogue titled *Athlone in Mind*, the conference provided a platform to stage a multi-sited exhibition of art works, performances and installations across aesthetic, historical, formal and spatial divisions. With over 300 delegates in attendance, the CHCI conference afforded an opportunity to test some key research findings of our aesthetic inquiry in conversation with humanities directors from across the world.

Titled *The Humanities Improvised*, the CHCI meeting brought together leading international scholars, artists, filmmakers and jazz musicians from across Africa and elsewhere. Amongst those attending and presenting were William Kentridge (South Africa), Elizabeth Giorgis (Ethiopia), Isaac Julian (UK), Gayatri Spivak (USA and India), Homi Bhabha (USA and India), Achille Mbembe (South Africa) and Tim Murray (USA). World-acclaimed sculptural artist, Jane Alexander from the University of Cape Town, was the invited artist for the CHCI Annual Meeting. Alexander's selected works on show presented her distinctive oeuvre as it intersects with a longer iteration of engagement with questions of aesthetics, politics and the social constitution of fields of the sensible. It was the first time the selected pieces of Alexander's work had been exhibited in South Africa, curated by Kurt Campbell. *The Humanities Improvised* set a new standard for CHCI Annual Meetings and was widely hailed for a promising and positive display of the potential of the humanities and its relationship to public arts.

Several scholars hailed the gathering as an occasion when the full potential of the intellectual and artistic strengths of the African humanities were brought to bear on the often despairing assessments of the fate of the global humanities. Prof James Chandler, the Barbara E. & Richard J. Franke Professor of the Humanities and founding Director of the Franke Institute for the Humanities at the University of Chicago, said the following about the conference in a letter addressed to the CHR Director:

I'm sure you have been deafened with thanks and praise this week, but let me lend my voice to the choir. Everyone I talked with was blown away by our week in Cape Town, and especially by your genius in putting the whole thing together

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so shrewdly and effectively. Nearly everything thing that happened dramatized humanities improvisation in some impressive way, not least the improvised Zeitz MOCAA visit on Sunday.

Katri Pohjolainen, the Senior Research Advisor at the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), was equally congratulatory in her assessment of the conference:

Thank you for an excellent conference. I have been reporting back at Sida about the very inspiring and interesting experience I had. The event indeed has led to international partnership possibilities. It would be great to hear more about this development at one moment.

Finally, the former Vice-President of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Dr Mariet Westermann wrote glowingly about the conference:

We have not stopped praising the vigour of the program and the generosity of the Cape Town welcome extended to the largest CHCI annual conference attendance ever. Bravo! Your decision to Occupy the Castle was a stroke of genius, not only for its political resonance but also because it created sustained conference community in spaces from which people could not easily run away to go off and do other things. The integration of arts activities throughout was very meaningful, as was the opportunity you afforded people new to South Africa to enjoy a variety of substantial tours.

Thank you for engaging so many students and emerging scholars in the organization of this scholarly feast. It will have been very important to them in so many ways, and surely pay off as they set off on their intellectual projects and professional trajectories. We know CHR will live up in spades to the quality of this offering to the CHCI community.

In convening this annual gathering of humanities centres and institutes, the CHR sought to put in play all of the elements of the methodologies, sequences and intellectual processes that distinguished the CHR as an exemplary formation of scholarly inquiry and arts intervention in the humanities globally. The conference justified Brian O'Connell's wager to constitute a research centre in the humanities that would help to foster UWC's standing in the global community of scholars and researchers. The conference allowed the CHR to consolidate its focus on the arts as spaces from which to think about the aesthetic reconfiguration of the post-apartheid freedom.

To convey the spirit of the CHR's public interventions and collaborations, a 2017 publication of an exhibition catalogue, *Athlone in Mind* (edited by Heidi Grunebaum and Kurt Campbell), introduced an international

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audience to the contested nature of aesthetics in post-apartheid South Africa. In the 1970s and 1980s Athlone, for example, functioned as a crossover space where apartheid's modes of producing and policing its forms of difference were regularly transgressed in a social world constituted around cinemas, libraries, film societies, civic organisations, political organisations, religious formations, youth formations and schools. The traces of the ideas and imagination created in these spaces and social worlds, which also nourished the struggles against apartheid, are utterly indiscernible now. Rather than take Athlone as a destination from which traces of those worlds could be recuperated, the *Athlone in Mind* project sought to engage it as a question. Leading visual artists with intellectual, conceptual, biographical and artistic connections to Athlone and its surrounds were invited to produce contemporary art works responding to the provocation of what it would mean to imagine Athlone otherwise, as a question. Writers who were invited to contribute essays to the book accompanying the exhibition responded to a similar provocation. The development of the digital platform with the exhibition and book likewise opened a way to think about the townships of the Cape Flats as sites of thought and aesthetic imagination that both exceed and reconfigure apartheid's spatial and social determinations.

The exhibition featured the works by internationally acclaimed and award-winning video artist, Berni Searle, 2015 Standard Bank Young Artist Award winners, Hasan and Husain Essop, Sasol New Signatures Competition of 2016 award winner, Zyma Amien, CHR Artist in Residence, Dathini Mzayiya, and winner of Deutsche Bank's Artist of the Year 2017 and founding member of the Gugulective, Kemang wa Lehulere. The exhibition was installed in the richly symbolic space of the old military recruitment rooms at the Castle of Good Hope to coincide with the CHCI annual meeting.

If the artworks explored the fluidity of thinking of place, not as a destination but as a question, the essays contributed to a book accompanying the exhibition that explored the question discursively. Edited by CHR Researcher and UWC doctoral graduate, Kurt Campbell, the volume included essays by Gabeba Baderoon, Lindelwa Dalamba, Michail Rassool and Premesh Lalu. Each contribution posits Athlone as the proper name under which socio-cultural landscapes reorient concepts of memory, time and politics towards a more open and less overdetermined horizon of possibilities than inherited scripts of place and history suggest.

The digital platform that Campbell developed stands as a new engagement to encourage reconceptualisation of space beyond inherited modes of partitioning that so afflicted South African society. The digital platform allowed for imagining space 'otherwise' in a virtual reconfiguration of apartheid's spatial designations. The exhibition deployed a number of i-beacon transmitters that circulated the website, exhibition and book to anyone in possession of a smart phone. The augmented reality (AR) application allowed selected video and audio clips of the artists talking about their works to appear on smartphones when positioned in close proximity to images in the book with the AR mark authored by a free downloadable software application. The extent to which the CHR had grown into a national and international contributor to reshaping the study of the humanities in a context of rapidly expanding technological objects is testimony to the astute judgement of Brian O'Connell. He understood that to overturn the cynical reasoning of apartheid that resulted in racially and ethnically separate universities, the creation of spaces for the flourishing of a new discourse about the human condition as it was shaped by its local, national and global entanglements was urgently required.

In the final analysis

What had Brian O'Connell enabled in 2006, when – against national and international trends and attitudes in higher education – he committed himself to the establishment of the CHR at UWC? Put succinctly, he laid the foundations for the humanities to be named the priority project by his successor, Tyrone Pretorius, during his tenure as Vice-Chancellor, and to commit an incoming executive to recognise the central role played by the humanities in both forging a critique of apartheid and imagining a future beyond (Pretorius, 2017). In support of this vision, the CHR ensured that the promise of the humanities would buoy the commitment made by Prof Pretorius in his inaugural address as Vice-Chancellor to build the international profile of UWC and deepen its public commitments to forging a post-apartheid future. In both respects, the humanities would prove crucial for shaping the broad commitments that allowed UWC to survive the dreaded aftermaths of apartheid rule. As Brian O'Connell understood, despite apartheid's instrumental rationality, the study of the humanities provided a much needed resource of knowledge for staving off the drift towards an ever-increasing precarious condition of life in the wake of apartheid.

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With the support of two successive Vice-Chancellors, Prof Brian O'Connell and Tyrone Pretorius, the CHR has matured into a coherent expression of the potential of the humanities to shape how we might produce forms of a liveable life in difficult times. It has emerged as an exemplary space for interdisciplinary reinvention of humanistic traditions involving a spectrum of researchers and scholars, drawing on early career scholars and established faculty researchers. Since its inception, the CHR has increased its staff complement from two to a total of six full-time faculty members, including two research chairs, two administrators, eight next-generation scholars and nine early career fellows. Thirteen CHR fellows have been appointed to academic positions at UWC. A further 15 fellows have taken up employment at South African universities including UCT, Wits, Stellenbosch, Free State as well as public institutions such as IZIKO Museums of South Africa, Robben Island Museum, the South African Historical Archive and Durban Art Gallery. Several others now occupy academic and research positions in universities and public institutions in Africa, Europe, America and Asia.

A total of 233 graduate students and artists in residence have been supported through the CHR's fellowship programme across various academic departments in the Faculty of Arts at UWC. With the support of the UWC Executive Management, the Director led a team of dedicated researchers in writing a winning proposal that resulted in the CHR being awarded the first DST-NRF national flagship award in South Africa. CHR researchers published 27 monographs, edited scholarly volumes and special issue journals, and more than 120 articles in peer-reviewed academic journals and book chapters. Beyond academic publications, the CHR has contributed to national and international debates on the future of the humanities through public opinion pieces, exhibitions and exhibition catalogues, documentary films, public dialogues and performances, including the annual Barrydale Reconciliation Day Parade in partnership with *Net vir Pret*, Ukwanda Puppet and Design Collective and Handspring Puppet Company. The annual CHR winter school has drawn together an impressive array of research partners in an ongoing collaboration over a period of nine years. The Winter Schools consolidated partnerships with the research programme of the SARChI Research Chair in Social Change at the University of Fort Hare, the Interdisciplinary Centre for the Study of Global Change (University of Minnesota), and the Jackman Humanities Institute (University of Toronto).

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We should not underestimate the contribution of Brian O'Connell's leadership to achieving these milestones in the humanities at UWC. Under his leadership, and the trust he placed in the Director and staff of the CHR, the humanities flourished as an independent and critical discourse at UWC. All the while, the CHR remained open to the future even as it insisted on drawing out lessons for thinking our way out of the hideous inheritance of apartheid. O'Connell's leadership style lies at the foundation of the flourishing of the CHR. That leadership style exemplifies the best traditions of a generous form of life to which the humanities have historically aspired. The humanities will bear the traces of the depth of understanding that O'Connell brought to the office of the Vice-Chancellor. It will also bear the shape of the gift of the CHR which he encouraged and nurtured in the spirit of his self-effacing but effective leadership.

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