

Film as Decolonial Dialectic: Review of “One Table, Two Elephants,” a cinematic ethnography by Jacob von Heland and Henrik Ernstson (2018, 84 minutes, CPH DOX Copenhagen)

By Ruben Hordijk

‘This film is a result of many hands, feet, minds and hearts’

This 2018 film tells the story of, or, better, brings together many stories surrounding the mountain that in Khoi is called ‘where the clouds gather’, officially labelled and internationally known as Table Mountain. *One Table, Two Elephants* is not a ‘normal’ documentary but a *film as (ethnographic) research*. It is a playful and heterodox portrait of Cape Town that undoes documentarian logic and anthropological gazing, showing the ongoing legacies of Apartheid (poverty, segregation, epistemic erasure, colonial mindsets) as well as practices of decolonization of mind and body. *In the midst of colonial legacies and erasure, the film partakes in (rather than documents) creative acts of memory.*

This cinematic ethnography contrasts the work of natural conservationists that try to save the indigenous flora and fauna of ‘Table Mountain’ against ‘alien intruders’ (understanding Nature as separate from culture and history, with humans’ role to preserve or recreate its original state) with the artistic and community work of a Khoi educator who is learning the Khoi language and hip hop artists who fuse hip hop and indigenous dance styles.

I would like to discuss the film in the context of the [2019 DemPrac seminar](#), as an example of what during the seminar was called *film as decolonial dialectic*. The seminar, centered around Marxist and decolonial ecological perspectives on the relation between nature and capital, explored the possibilities of film: can film, despite its material and financial embeddedness in a profit-oriented market of the circulation of images and information, create a rupture or ‘in-between’ space? Can film, as a collaborative endeavor, harbor and cultivate other knowledges, practices, memories, futures and temporalities that interrupt the capitalist flow of production and consumption?

This is not a dialectic in Sartre’s sense, which takes anti-racism as the antithetical movement against European supremacy as a contingent and vanishing point toward a race-free future that evolves around the struggle of the universal category of class. The one-two of *One Table, Two Elephants* does not follow the dialectics of a single totality (thesis-antithesis-synthesis). It is a decolonial dialectic, which Ciccariello-Maher might call *ana-dialectical*. Based on Dussel’s work on *analectics*, the philosophy of the Other instead of the Hegelian-Marxist *dialectics* of a Eurocentric universal totality, *ana-dialectics* refigures totality as an ‘open-ended totality’ with plural non-Western historical-cultural-political resources and a project of creating multiple unpredictable futures.

This decolonial dialectic, through collective effort and creativity, pries open the logic of the One (One Nature, One History) and shows the differences and plurality that are simultaneously inside and outside of the movement of hegemonic history - insisting, persisting, existing through and against it. These differences are a constitutive part of the making of this hegemonic *uni-versal* history but are never fully exhausted by it (the *pluriverse* that carries and is simultaneously negated by the universe).

These creative acts that do not conserve or preserve pasts erased and covered over by official state history. These acts enact the erased pasts in new hybrid forms, making memory-work not a melancholic search for a lost object of the past but a category of future, of futuring. Difference persists, exists and insists in the cracks of the single story of Nature/History, both enabling it and harboring the possibility of different futures.

It should be said that my interpretation of the decolonial dialectic might force a too narrow frame onto a work that itself remains much more open and less preachy: it does not put forward any straightforward argument or narrative but shows complexities and layers that can continue to be unpacked from different angles and with different foci.¹

One Table: the power of naming

'It's sad that landowners allow their lands to get invaded like this'

'Table Mountain', the name given by a Portuguese in 1503, continues to cover over other names, stories and histories that are embedded in the rocks. After violent histories of displacement and erosion of land, the indigenous flora and fauna of the 'Table Mountain' park are in danger. Nature must be protected from the alleged ignorance of people who do not understand the value of nature and from the 'aliens' that replace the indigenous plants. The language of nature conservation reiterates colonial divides between knowledge and ignorance, with impoverished locals being reframed as the problem and in need of education rather than being at the losing end of violent histories. The work of conservationists employs the same techniques of mastery over Nature in order to preserve it, continuing old politics of naming, mapping and representing.

Two Elephants: creation and creativity as memory-work

'the story is captured in the mountain itself, it is a map'

But, of course, as Bradley van Sitters, a Khoi and San historian and educator tells us, the mountain has other names, names that are much older than the recent arrival of Europeans. The other name, 'where the clouds gather', is embedded in stories and histories that highlight the relationality between Khoi and the mountain, between cultures and natures.

Although the film follows different educators and projects, I would like to focus on one particular scene where Bradley van Sitters relates his attempt to learn the Khoi language as an example of a decolonial dialectic. 'I may not learn it [the Khoi language] perfectly, but I learn it anyways!', Bradley von Sitters shares. The first thing he learned from his teacher was a song: *tchokochoko tiski, oski sarami*, which he translates as 'oh mama how I miss you, how I long to see your face...'

The song is a lament and lullaby that was created by the children who were separated from their parents in different train compartments, Bradley van Sitters continues. The separation of the generations was part of the colonial division of labor, with the children and parents being put to different types of work. The song follows the rhythm of the sound of the locomotive on the tracks (*tchokochoko tiski...*). It is the sound that the children would listen to since it was the only thing that still connected them to their parents.

The severance of the generations 'broke the intergenerational storytelling,' Bradley von Sitters explains. But from the severance of the intergenerational story, from a story of loss and longing, a song emerges, a broken fragment that becomes the beginning of Bradley van Sitter's re-learning of the Khoi language, story and culture.

The rhythm of the train becomes the rhythm of the song: the locomotive can be read as the ultimate expression of the project of modernity/coloniality, as a conquest of time and space based on a racist

¹ Since I have never been to South Africa myself, I'm sure I didn't pick up on many important dynamics and layers.

dichotomy of humanity and history on the one hand and indigenous people and nature on the other, imposing a particular temporality/temporalization and space/spatialization that breaks different relational understanding of time, space, history and nature.

This temporal-spatial imposition is part of the colonial-capitalist division of labor that disciplines bodies in the name of a single history of civilization. But this project of modernity/coloniality can never achieve its closure: the locomotive breaks the time of the other, but the other's time, space and story becomes reconfigured in the very rhythm that undermines it. The rhythm of the locomotive becomes the rhythm of a memory, a song that holds an impossible memory and carries the promise of a future different from the envisioned end-station.

From the colonial severance of relationality, a new poetics of relation emerges. This is beautifully expressed in the project to fuse indigenous dance and hip-hop by the educators and dancers of Emile Jansen, Leeroy Philips and Stefan Benting from Heal the Hood and Mixed Mense, and the educational work for the children to decolonize mind and body through movement. Bradley van Sitters and the other educators and artists in the film, as well as the filmmakers, participate in cultivating plural worlds and the promise of different futures through creative memory-work. Unlike the conservationists, the film does not aim to 'conserve' anything. Rather than a search for the lost object, the film partakes in creative acts of memory: amidst colonial legacies and erasure, traces of indigenous cultures are re-enacted and re-created, partaking in the plural worlding undoing the colonial logic of the One.

About the creators:

Jacob von Heland and **Henrik Ernstson** are researchers and filmmakers who are born in Sweden but have worked scholarly and professionally in southern and eastern Africa for more than 15 years. They have been collaborating on urban and environmental research and filmmaking since 2014 through the *Situated Ecologies Platform* and the *KTH Environmental Humanities Lab*.

Credits: *One Table Two Elephants*

Created by: Jacob von Heland and Henrik Ernstson. **Photography:** Johan von Reybekiel. **Sound:** Jonathan Chiles. **Production coordination:** Jessica Rattle and Nceba Mangesi. **Funded by:** The Swedish Research Council Formas with support from the Marcus and Amalia Wallenberg Foundation. **Produced by:** Telltales Film and [The Situated Ecologies Platform](#) in collaboration with the KTH Environmental Humanities Laboratory and the African Centre for Cities at the University of Cape Town.

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von Heland, Jacob, and Henrik Ernstson. 2018. *One Table Two Elephants*. Copenhagen: Cinematic ethnography and documentary film, 84 minutes, Color, HD, Dolby 5:1. World Premiere in competition at CPH:DOX Copenhagen International Film Festival, March 20, 2018. <http://bit.ly/1T2E-film>.