How Do We Make A World?

Objectivity, Alterity, and Humanism
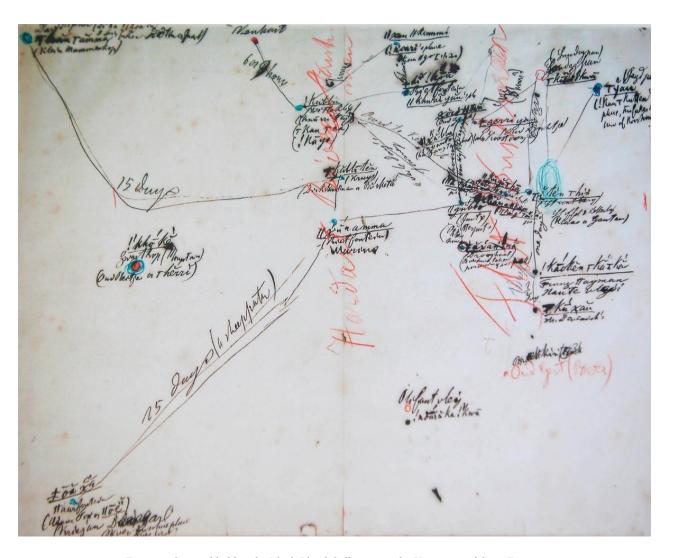

Figure 1. Original held in the Bleek-Lloyd Collection at the University of Cape Town.

I

Let's start with an artifact (figure 1). What do you see? A tangle of lines; writing; perhaps just scrawls — it's hard to tell. Some spots of color, turquoise and crimson, pop out. After a moment, you realize that two of the lines are labelled: "15 days," the upper one says; "15 [or 25] days," the lower one. Some of the words are still bewildering, but others seem a little more familiar with some knowledge of Dutch. Indeed, if you've travelled in the Karoo (the great desert of South Africa) you might even recognize some place names still used today: "Kenhar[d]t" in the top center, "Klein Mummenkoep [Lemoenkoep]" in the top left, and "Olifant[s]vlei" in the bottom right, for instance.[1] Travel times, place names: a map, perhaps?

Indeed, this is one of the many materials created by Wilhelm Bleek, a German philologist, and his sister-in-law Lucy Lloyd between 1865 and 1875. This sketch in particular was created by Bleek in conversation with //Kabbo, a prisoner in Cape Town who spoke /Xam, a San language of the Karoo.[2] During the colonial period, the non-Bantu-speaking indigenous people of the Cape — collectively known as the Khoi-San[3] — were systematically exterminated by European settlers. This violence reached its peak at the end of the eighteenth century in the San genocide. Commandos of Dutch settlers indiscriminately massacred indigenous people of the Cape, both independently and with explicit authorization from the Dutch East India Company (VOC). San men were generally murdered on sight, while women and children were captured and forced to labor under harsh conditions. //Kabbo himself was arrested by British authorities

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[1] This map is discussed in detail in Deacon, "'My Place Is the Bitterpits.'"

[2] / represents a dental click and // a lateral click. This orthography was in fact created by Bleek and Lloyd.

[3] The San ("Bushmen") were distinguished from the Khoikhoi ("Hottentots") along occupational lines: the San were hunter-gatherers while the Khoikhoi herded cattle. "Khoi-San" was invented as a single category because of a purported linguistic relationship that is no longer supported by most linguists; see Güldemann, *The Languages and Linguistics of Africa*, 106–7. I nevertheless use this name as a shorthand for the social formations that have emerged through colonialism, which fundamentally changed pre-colonial modes of subsistence and societies.

and brought to the Cape after one of these raids; Bleek later recorded him as saying that

"starvation was that on account of which I was bound."[4] Settlers saw the Khoi-San as vermin. In

1797, John Barrow (an English traveler) recorded that:

> The name of Bosjesman [Bushman] is held in horror and detestation; and a farmer thinks he
> cannot proclaim a more meritorious action than the murder of one of these people. A boor from
> Graff Reynet [Graaf-Reinet] being asked in the secretary's office, a few days before we left the
> town, if the savages were numerous or troublesome on the road, replied, he had only shot four,
> with as much composure and indifference as if he had been speaking of four partridges.[5]

As one Dutch official in 1805 recounted:

> According to the unfortunate notion prevalent here, a heathen is not actually human, but at the
> same time he cannot really be classed among the animals. He is, therefore, a sort of creature not
> known elsewhere.[6]

Even those sympathetic to the cause of the Khoi-San thought their extermination was a foregone

conclusion. One nineteenth-century historian wrote that it was a "mere matter of time in an

unequal struggle between the primitive bow and arrow, with which they fought, and the deadly

gun in the hands of their invaders."[7]

In this view, still hegemonic today, what the Bleek-Lloyd Collection offers are the "last

words of an extinct people."[8] Through the stories that Bleek and Lloyd recorded, this story goes,

we can hear //Kabbo tell us of an enchanted world — one where rain animals unburdened their

loads, traveling amongst the sun and moon and stars; one where trees thirsty for this rain are men

fastened to the ground by a maiden; one where water smells the fragrance of the earth in

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[4] Quoted in Bank, *Bushmen in a Victorian World*, 153.

[5] Barrow, *Travels*, 85.

[6] Landdrost Alberti to Governor Janssens, 12 June 1805 (B. R. 68, pp. 280–1, Cape Archives). Quoted in Du Toit, *Afrikaner Political Thought*, 84.

[7] Stow, *The Native Races of South Africa*, 397.

[8] This is the subtitle of one 2004 book on the Bleek-Lloyd collection: Bennun, *The Broken String: The Last Words of an Extinct People*. For a comprehensive and critical introduction to these views see Gordon and Douglas, *The Bushman Myth*.

appreciation.[9] The fabric of this world was ripped apart by colonialism; in the words of "The Broken String," a much-referenced story recounted to Bleek by Diakwain (another /Xam prisoner), "men broke the string for me / and now / my dwelling is strange to me."[10] Yet versions of these stories are still told by people in the Karoo who speak a San language today.[11] Especially since the end of apartheid in South Africa, many groups have emerged to make claims on behalf of the Khoi-San, variously employing tropes of strategic essentialism, cultural continuity, and brutal rupture. At the very least, it is clear that an uncomplicated story of the San as "living fossils" fails to capture the contours of assimilation and extermination that the Khoi-San experienced from the eighteenth century onwards. Yet the Bleek-Lloyd Collection is still seen as the reliquary of a lost world, a world shattered by modernity.

//Kabbo's map seems to come from another world. This alterity can be interpreted in two ways, neither of which have served the Khoi-San well. On the one hand, the San genocide was clearly caused by Dutch settlers' refusal to see the Khoi-San as fellow humans, let alone as equals.[12] The sketch Bleek and //Kabbo made is not even legible as a map, because it relates to a completely different space — a different world. The opposite response is to see the Bleek-Lloyd Collection as representative of Khoi-San culture, no more quaint than English settlers' teapots or Xhosa traditional dress. In this reading, //Kabbo's map refers to precisely the same world experienced by everyone else — thus, the place names in /Xam, English, and Dutch can be treated as strictly equivalent labels affixed to the same dot. This collapse of alterity into multiculturalism is at the foundation of the assimilationist project the Khoi-San endured after

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[9] These are all fragments of stories recorded in the Bleek-Lloyd collection. For specific references see Parkington, Morris, and de Prada-Samper, "Elusive Identities: Karoo |Xam Descendants and the Square Kilometre Array," 735.
[10] Diakwain and Farmer, "The Broken String."
[11] de Prada-Samper, *The Man Who Cursed the Wind*.
[12] Excellent overviews of the San genocide and this incipient racism are provided by Adhikari, *The Anatomy of a South African Genocide*; Penn, *The Forgotten Frontier*; Newton-King, *Masters and Servants*.

genocide. It is perhaps most clear in the post-apartheid "rainbow nation" of South Africa, where claims of indigeneity abound yet are precisely made to serve the project of building a nation.[13]

One narrative recognizes the radical difference of the Khoi-San to condone their extermination; the other recognizes the essential commonality of the Khoi-San to endorse their assimilation. The legacy both these narratives have bequeathed is a world that (to borrow the words of "The Broken String") is no dwelling for the Khoi-San. The question then arises: how can we assert both common rights and uncommon differences?

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This is a question that I navigate by thinking with the work of the twentieth-century political theorist Hannah Arendt in relation to the recent intellectual movements grouped under the "ontological turn." The common problematic articulated through both these philosophical resources and the objects of the Bleek-Lloyd Collection revolves around the intertwined issues of humanism and alterity, especially apparent in their violent legacy of genocide. A particularly useful set of resources to tackle these preoccupations comes from thinking critically about "world-making" — one mode of which is politics, which for Arendt is how we should live together in our plurality. My own articulation of world-making comes to focus on a renewed objectivity, which emerges in conversation with recent alternative approaches to the same problematic of humanism and alterity.

One such alternative is represented by the collective contribution of scholars in anthropology such as Eduardo Kohn, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and Philippe Descola (all of

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[13] Recent scholarship on "Khoi-San revivalism" highlights tropes of strategic essentialism within broader political and social debates in South African society. I treat these themes at length in Chapter 3 of the larger thesis. For insightful research, see especially Bam, "Contemporary Khoisan Identities in the Western Cape and Campaigns for Social Justice"; Verbuyst, "Claiming Cape Town"; Sato, "Khoisan Revivalism and Land Question"; Brown and Deumert, "Language, Desire and Performance among Cape Town's Khoisan Language Activists."

whom have worked in the Amazon).[14] Where anthropologists once abetted colonialism by arguing that subject peoples were essentially different — "a heathen is not actually human,"[15] as the Dutch official put it in 1805 — they came to presume common humanity as monogenism prevailed. By the time human difference was explained by culture, not race, anthropology assumed the task of recording the "last words of an extinct people." Cultural artifacts like //Kabbo's stories were written in sand, soon to be washed away by modernity if they were not preserved through ethnography. Bleek and Lloyd deeply valued the difference of their interlocutors — but this cultural difference was seen as epiphenomenal, a kind of adornment on common human essence.

The ontological turn refuses this understanding of difference as confined to the domain of culture. Viveiros de Castro and Kohn would tell us that when reading //Kabbo's stories, we ought to entertain the possibility of a world where indeed men, the moon, and springboks interact as equals. Thus, Viveiros de Castro urges us to shift from multiculturalism to multinaturalism — what he calls "a representational or phenomenological unity which is purely pronominal or deictic, indifferently applied to a radically objective diversity."[16] Rather than impose our own ontology onto the stories //Kabbo tells, we should at the very least behave "as if" they were representations of a real world. Where the stories in the Bleek-Lloyd Collection were seen as the figments of an extinct people's imagination, worth preserving for what they can tell about a culture, we should now affirm that //Kabbo's stories should be respected because they may reveal something true about the structure of the world.

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[14] See especially Kohn, "Anthropology of Ontologies"; Viveiros de Castro, "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism"; Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Kohn distinguishes this "narrow ontological turn" (ibid., 316) from broader movements that I discuss below.

[15] Landdrost Alberti to Governor Janssens, 12 June 1805 (B. R. 68, pp. 280–1, Cape Archives). Quoted in Du Toit, *Afrikaner Political Thought*, 84. See above, note 6.

[16] Viveiros de Castro, "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism," 478.

The new turn to ontology refuses a relativist subjectivity in order to urge, rather strangely, a new objectivity. This shift is more apparent in the ontological turn in science and technology studies and particularly in the work of Bruno Latour (on whom many anthropologists today draw). Latour's own ontological turn emerged from his contribution to the strong program in the sociology of knowledge. For Latour, facts were once taken to

> refer to some objectively independent entity which, by reason of its "out there-ness" cannot be modified at will and is not susceptible to change under any circumstances.[17]

Through his ethnography of the Salk Institute, Latour demonstrated, by contrast,

> not just that facts are socially constructed[, … but] that the process of construction involves the use of certain devices whereby all traces of production are made extremely difficult to detect.[18]

In the course of the next fifteen years, Latour took pains to distinguish the position he and others developed in "science studies" from three distinct lines of critique:

> the first group will extract our concepts and pull out all the roots that might connect them to society or to rhetoric; the second group will erase the social and political dimensions, and purify our network of any object; the third group, finally, will retain our discourse and rhetoric but purge our work of any undue adherence to reality — *horresco referens* — or to power plays. In the eyes of our critics the ozone hole above our heads, the moral law in our hearts, the autonomous text, may each be of interest, but only separately. That a delicate shuttle should have woven together the heavens, industry, texts, souls and moral law — this remains uncanny, unthinkable, unseemly.[19]

Latour's project is, in effect, to make a common world out of these seemingly separate domains of facts, power, and discourse. This project is deeply anthropological in its unified approach.[20] Latour's interest remains the social domain, but without

> limit[ing] in advance the sort of beings populating the social world. … The task of assembling the

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[17] Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*, 174–75.

[18] Ibid., 176.

[19] Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 5.

[20] As he puts it: "Once she has been sent into the field, even the most rationalist ethnographer is perfectly capable of bringing together in a single monograph the myths, ethnosciences, genealogies, political forms, techniques, religions, epics and rites of the people she is studying." Ibid., 7. As is well known, Latour developed his approach to science studies in part through his early work as an ethnologist in Côte d'Ivoire.

collective is worth pursuing, but only after the shortcut of society and 'social explanation' has been abandoned.[21]

On the one hand, Latour pushes against the removal of the social by objectivity. On the other, he cares equally about redefining the realm of the social to include more than (human) subjects. The new objectivity recognizes that truth is indeed social, but *this* realm of the social includes actors who were once labeled as merely "natural."

Latour's move is analogous to the course correction urged by the ontological turn in anthropology: first, an over-emphasis on nature (race, objectivity); then, a swing to solely consider culture (cultural explanations of difference, social construction of knowledge); then, the synthesis, a "flat ontology."[22] Latour's Actor-Network Theory thus aims

to render the social world as *flat* as possible in order to ensure that the establishment of any new link [between actors] is clearly visible.[23]

The creation of reality happens on a level playing field, with all actors — including people, animals, bacteria, and more — as parts of a network. In this view, the objects of the Bleek-Lloyd Collection are not the relics of a bygone race; nor are they mere ornaments, indicators of cultural differences that bring us together in our common humanity. (This is the position adopted by the new South Africa, whose coat of arms is based on a famous example of San rock art.[24]) Rather, //Kabbo's map and the other objects are making the world together with other actors. To find the truth is not to adopt the scientist's stance of representing the objects of the Bleek-Lloyd Collection; nor is it a stance of multiculturalism, where the Khoi-San are welcomed to the

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[21] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 16.

[22] As far as I am aware, this term was first used in DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, who writes that a "flat ontology" is "one made exclusively of unique, singular individuals, differing in spatio-temporal scale but not in ontological status." Graham Harman applied this term to Latour in Harman, *Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Political*.

[23] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 16.

[24] See Barnard, "Coat of Arms and the Body Politic: Khoisan Imagery and South African National Identity."

"rainbow nation" insofar as their culture is represented by the artifacts. Instead, the objects are taken on their own terms as actors, alongside anthropologists, scientists, and people who claim Khoi-San descent today. This is a politics of making a world together.

To view the Bleek-Lloyd Collection with this lens is to undertake a project that intermingles science, anthropology, and philosophy. For if neither the scientist nor the anthropologist nor the philosopher has privileged access to truth in a flat ontology, then their goals are much the same — to create reality through interaction with others. The voices of people like //Kabbo are now taken seriously as interlocutors, not just as informants; //Kabbo, myself, and Latour are co-conspirators in making the world. We answer squarely philosophical questions — what is truth? what is the structure of the world? — together, through the interaction of //Kabbo's map and my paper and you, the reader. To discover (or create) truth, or the good, is to practice being with an other — one mode of which is what Hannah Arendt would call politics. It is this project of philosophy as a politics of radically plural interlocutors that I pursue in my work.

II

The ontological turn, as I have sketched it, comes to ground a search for truth in making a world with others. This is reminiscent of other philosophical projects that came to realize the foundational importance of being with others. Not least among these is the tradition of phenomenology, especially as it was revised and contested in post-World War II Europe by "Heidegger's children" (many of them Jewish).[25] In this intellectual tradition, the "world" designates precisely the irreducible structural feature of being-with-others. In this section, I trace

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[25] To borrow a turn of phrase from Wolin, *Heidegger's Children*.

the evolution of this category of concern from Martin Heidegger to his student, Hannah Arendt. The "world" as she understands it resembles the "flat ontology" I read Latour as offering, with a critical corrective: for Arendt, world-making is an eminently political activity.

Martin Heidegger found the Other in his lifelong search for an answer to the question of Being. Heidegger told us that before we answer ontic questions (what is a map? what is the structure of the world?) we must address the ontological question (what is it *to be*?). The question of Being, he says, has been forgotten in the ruckus about the nature of beings. Heidegger's method of answering this question — what is the meaning of Being? — is to proceed from a "vague average understanding of Being" that "must already be available to us in some way" (25).[26] This basic entity is *Dasein* (being-there); Heidegger's method is to follow the phenomena that *Dasein* perceives. Heidegger writes that

> *fundamental ontology*, from which alone all other ontologies can take their rise, must be sought in the *existential analytic of Dasein*. … Dasein functions as that entity which in principle is to be *interrogated* beforehand as to its Being. (34–5)

In this phenomenology of *Dasein*, Heidegger at first uses "world" as a rough synonym of "environment." He writes:

> The answer to the question of the "who" of everyday *Dasein* is to be obtained by analysing that kind of Being in which *Dasein* maintains itself proximally and for the most part. Our investigation takes its orientation from Being-in-the-world — that basic state of *Dasein* by which every mode of its Being gets co-determined. … In our 'description' of that environment which is closest to us — the work-world of the craftsman, for example, — the outcome was that along with the equipment to be found when one is at work [in Arbeit], those Others for whom the 'work' ["Werk"] is destined are 'encountered too.' (153)

In other words, my understanding of Being is dependent on the world around me. Quite simply, how I am depends on what is around me. The question is to elucidate this relationship, which

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[26] This and following parenthetical citations are to Heidegger, *Being and Time*. I reproduce the editorial additions made by Macquarrie and Robinson (in square brackets) and follow their lead in only reproducing the punctuation (including italics and capitalization) found in the German original, Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*.

requires a more careful understanding of "world." Heidegger notes that the world is comprised

not only by what is at hand (say, a hammer) but also *who* is around me (say, who I am building

the chair for). Yet this not a simple terminological distinction:

> the Others who are thus 'encountered' in a ready-to-hand, environmental context of equipment, are not somehow added on in thought to some Thing which is proximally just present-at-hand; such 'Things' are encountered from out of the world in which they are ready-to-hand for Others — a world which is always mine too in advance. (154)

The world does not just incidentally include Others — they are in an important sense constitutive

of *Dasein*. Thus, Heidegger writes:

> This Being-there-too [Auch-*Dasein*] with them does not have the ontological character of a Being-present-at-hand-along-'with' them within a world. This 'with' is something of the character of *Dasein*; the 'too' means a sameness of Being as circumspectively concernful Being-in-the-world. (154)

There is a "sameness of Being" between *Dasein* and the Others, who are not just there *too* but are

there *with Dasein*. Here we arrive at the most crucial passage:

> 'With' and 'too' are to be understood *existentially*, not categorially. By reason of this *with-like* [*mithaften*] Being-in-the-world, the world is always the one that I share with Others. The world of *Dasein* is a *with-world* [*Mitwelt*]. Being-in is Being-with Others. Their Being-in-themselves within-the-world is *Dasein-with* [*MitDasein*]. (155)

The world matters for Heidegger because it is fundamentally constitutive of *Dasein*; in this role,

it is always already a world *with* others, a *Mitwelt*. This is the meaning of "world" that Arendt

takes from Heidegger.

Heidegger here is rubbing up against the same problem of alterity that confronted both

anthropologists (what do we do with the Bleek-Lloyd Collection?) and historians of science

(what do we do with microbes?). The *Mitwelt* Heidegger describes is much like the world

//Kabbo found when he spoke to Wilhelm Bleek and the world John Barrow described in his

travels. In all cases, the experience of being *is* the experience of being with others. Heidegger's

contribution is that this question is squarely philosophical in a way that Viveiros de Castro and

Latour sometimes hesitate to admit. *Mitsein*, being with others, is not just categorical or

contingent ("Being-present-at-hand-along-'with'" [154]) but *existential*. As Heidegger writes,

"the world is always the one that I share with Others" (155).

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Yet Heidegger ultimately shies away from this fundamentally pluralistic understanding of

the world. Indeed, this is precisely the criticism that Hannah Arendt levels at him. When Arendt

repeatedly emphasizes that the nature of the world is its plurality, she is reiterating Heidegger's

point that the world is always already a world shared with others. But Heidegger would say that

Mitsein, as central as it is, serves the higher purpose of telling us about the nature of the world.

What matters ultimately for Heidegger is not being-with-others but the question of Being that

Mitsein helps us answer — a question that is finally about the self. Thus Arendt writes that

> the essential character of the Self [that is, *Dasein*] is its absolute Self-ness, its radical separation
> from all its fellows. … Death alone removes [man] from connection with those who are his
> fellows and who as "They" constantly prevent his being-a-Self. Though death may be the end of
> *Dasein*, it is at the same time the guarantor that all that matters ultimately is myself.[27]

Being-with-others, Arendt says, is not fundamental to Heidegger but rather a way into a better

understanding of lonely existence. This failure to engage seriously with the other, Arendt argues,

is at the root of Heidegger's never-disavowed endorsement of Nazism. As Seyla Benhabib puts

it, Arendt suggests that Heidegger's "inability to articulate the condition of plurality made

Heidegger susceptible to promises of false solidarity in an authoritarian movement."[28] Arendt

establishes an immanent — not contingent — relation between Heidegger's ontology and his

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[27] Arendt, "What Is Existential Philosophy?," 181.

[28] Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 104–5. I agree with Benhabib that this is the implicit
criticism Arendt makes of Heidegger, but her complicated relationship with her teacher and erstwhile lover means
there is no smoking gun in the written record. For other particularly insightful discussions of this issue, see
Taminiaux, *The Thracian Maid and the Professional Thinker*; Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger*. I deal with this
relationship at length in chapter 1 of the longer thesis.

Nazism.

For Arendt, this relation is indicative of a much broader problem with philosophy. Philosophers exhibit an "attraction to the tyrannical [that] can be demonstrated theoretically in many of the great thinkers," from Plato to Heidegger — a result of philosophy's fundamental aversion to politics (with Kant being "the great exception").[29] In particular, philosophers shy away from plurality, on which politics is premised:

> Politics is based on the fact of human plurality. God created *man*, but *men* are a human, earthly product, the product of human nature. Because philosophy and theology are always concerned with *man*, because all their pronouncements would be correct if there were only one or two men or only identical men, they have found no valid philosophical answer to the question: What is politics? … *man* is apolitical. Politics arises *between men*, and so quite *outside* of *man*.[30]

Heidegger recognized "being-with" (*Mitsein*) as an irreducible structural feature of *Dasein*'s mode of being. But he ultimately sets this aside for the solitude of philosophical meditation on being-unto-death. Arendt pushes us towards a different path, one where we follow Heidegger to *Mitsein* but then realize that we find ourselves in the realm of politics.

Arendt's response to Heidegger furnishes the resources we need in order to come to terms with the politics of the ontological turn.[31] Anthropology, like philosophy, theology, and psychology, is concerned with *man* (*anthropos*). Anthropology, Arendt urges us, should deal rather with *men* (*anthropoi*). An ontological anthropology moves beyond seeing the anthropologist as providing any sort of access to an informant's truth; instead, both anthropologists and their interlocutors are co-conspirators in the creation of truth. Furthermore,

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[29] Arendt, "Heidegger at Eighty," 431.

[30] Arendt, "Introduction *into* Politics," 93–95. Italics in original.

[31] The criticism that the ontological turn is concerningly apolitical has become a commonplace, one that associated movements such as new materialism, posthumanism, and other versions of alternative ontologies have undertaken to correct. For an elaboration of the critique from an anthropological perspective see, for instance, Ramos, "The Politics of Perspectivism"; Bessire and Bond, "Ontological Anthropology and the Deferral of Critique"; Graeber, "Radical Alterity Is Just Another Way of Saying 'Reality.'" I deal with this matter in more detail in chapter 3 of the larger thesis.

this pursuit of truth is not driven by an ultimately lonely philosophical goal (like Heidegger's).

Rather, we make a world together; indeed, world-making is essentially a mode of being with

others. This is what Heidegger recognizes in his metaphysics, and it is also what scholars of the

ontological turn like Viveiros de Castro and Latour describe in their analysis of the construction

of truth. For Arendt, finally, the most important mode of world-making is politics. In the same

vein that Arendt critiques Heidegger yet finds in his work the ingredients for a radical (and

idiosyncratic) politics, thinking with Arendt allows us to recuperate the valuable interventions of

the ontological turn while maintaining an astute focus on politics.

Both Heidegger and Latour would be able to help us make better sense of the objects of

the Bleek-Lloyd Collection as scholars. Yet only with Arendt can we tie a better understanding

of //Kabbo's map to something of real political value (rather than a supposedly "apolitical"

search for truth, in which the "ontological turn" is merely a refinement of methodology). In

particular, this political value is not an *end* of world-making, but rather consists *in* it. Arendt

warns us against instrumentalizing politics, for

> if it were true that political action pursues ends and must be judged according to its expediency, it would follow that politics is concerned with things that are not political in themselves but superior to politics, just as all ends must be superior to the means by which they are accomplished. It would also follow that political action will cease once its end is achieved, and that politics in general … will at some point disappear entirely from human history.[32]

It is *in* the fray of politics that we create and sustain the world:

> If a political action … does not achieve its goals — which it never does in reality — that does not render the political action either pointless or meaningless … because in the back-and-forth of exchanged speech — between individuals and peoples, between states and nations — that space in which everything else that takes place is first created and then sustained.[33]

Working with the Bleek-Lloyd collection is a kind of world-making. We can affirm both

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[32] Arendt, "Introduction *into* Politics," 194.
[33] Ibid., 193.

common rights and uncommon differences because, for Arendt, a commitment to political ideals

implies an expansive ontology: politics is a mode of world-making.

III

At its core, Arendt's work aims to give dignity to politics as a fundamental capacity of

human beings. What Arendt offers, then, is an anti-instrumental politics that is nonetheless firmly

founded in a pluralist ontology — one that I have argued resembles recent proposals that have

been advanced under the rubric of the "ontological turn." Yet in this turn to politics as human

activity we need to reckon also with matters beyond politics and beyond the human. One step in

this direction is to push Arendtian politics beyond the Western humanist tradition. In this section,

I begin by reckoning with Arendt's antiblackness and associated critiques articulated by Frank

Wilderson and Fred Moten, before returning to the Bleek-Lloyd collection to discuss the

resources we can draw from Arendt's reading of Kant's aesthetics.

This antiblackness is apparent in the infamous passage in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

(in the section on imperialism in Africa) where Arendt herself discusses the indigenous people of

the Cape — that is, the Khoi-San. She writes that:

> What made them different from other human beings was not at all the color of their skin but the
> fact that they behaved like a part of nature, that they treated nature as their undisputed master,
> they had not created a human world, a human reality, and that therefore nature had remained, in
> all its majesty, the only overwhelming reality — compared to which they appeared to be
> phantoms, unreal and ghostlike. They were, as it were, "natural" human beings who lacked the
> specifically human character, the specifically human reality, so that when European men
> massacred them they somehow were not aware that they had committed murder.[34]

Arendt's point in this passage is to condemn the racism of the Boers, whom she absolutely

despises — but in passing she derides the Khoi-San as less than human. Arendt's words

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[34] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 192.

uncannily echo those of early British travelers like John Barrow, who similarly condemned the

Boers' massacre of the Khoi-San yet persisted in seeing them as, at best, a "prehistoric" people

on the way to extinction.[35] It is easy to perceive in this refusal of solidarity (in favor of a liberal

assimilationist tradition the British exemplified) what Fred Moten calls

> an antiblackness that infuses and animates Arendt's work, something perhaps not best understood as belonging to her, but rather as that to which she, along with many others, both black and white, neither black nor white (more than merely), belongs. … [That is,] Arendt's belonging to — her having been given to or conscripted by — a modernity, and more specifically, a modern intelligence … for which the antiblack racism to which it is not reducible is, nevertheless, constitutive.[36]

This antiblackness is more than racism (hence why it appears in "many others, both black and

white, neither black nor white"). To some extent, it is true that Arendt is merely replicating

uncritically her sources, who themselves were dismissive of the Khoi-San even as they derided

Boer racism.[37] But I argue that her dismissal of the Khoi-San points to deeper issues with her

philosophy. This criticism is analogous in many ways to Arendt's own critique of Heidegger:

many have attempted to account for his Nazi proclivities as a regrettable but excusable allegiance

to the *Zeitgeist*, but Arendt argued that his politics revealed deep problems with his philosophy.

Most importantly, this realization enabled Arendt to develop her own thinking in ways that were

ultimately profoundly generative. Something similar, I believe, can be done with Arendt's

antiblackness.

For Afro-Pessimists like Frank Wilderson, the liberal subject necessarily excludes the

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[35] Barrow, *Travels*. See above, note 5.
[36] Moten, *The Universal Machine*, 66.; Ibid., 253. n. 3.
[37] Arendt's primary source was de Kiewiet, *A History of South Africa*. De Kiewiet grew up in South Africa and Rhodesia as a first-generation Dutch immigrant, before moving to the United States to pursue an academic career and ultimately become president of the University of Rochester. For more information on de Kiewiet, see Glotzer, "C. W. de Kiewiet, Historian of Africa"; Saunders, "The Writing of C.W. de Kiewiet's *A History of South Africa Social and Economic*"; for more on Arendt's discussion of the Khoi-San, see Klausen, "Hannah Arendt's Antiprimitivism"; Temin, "'Nothing Much Had Happened.'"

Black:

> If the position of the Black is … a paradigmatic impossibility in the Western Hemisphere, indeed, in the world, in other words, if a Black is the very antithesis of a Human subject … the proposition that the state and civil society are elastic enough to even contemplate the possibility of an emancipatory project for the Black position — disintegrates into thin air.[38]

In Wilderson's reading, the Western liberal subject is not elastic enough to include the Khoi-San. In other words, the answer to the kind of antiblackness we find in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is not to further push at the bounds of the subject.

Perhaps strangely, this is a position I think Arendt would agree with. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt takes the fact of human plurality as the *sine qua non*, quite literally the very condition for the world to exist at all. What she elaborates in *The Human Condition* is not the plurality of human subjectivity, but rather the importance of work and action in creating something *out there*, in objects we fashion together. Thus, Arendt writes that:

> The objectivity of the world — its object- or thing-character — and the human condition supplement each other; because human existence is conditioned existence, it would be impossible without things, and things would be a heap of unrelated articles, a non-world, if they were not the conditioners of human existence.[39]

Indeed, Arendt says that reality itself

> is not guaranteed primarily by the "common nature" of all men who constitute it, but rather by the fact that … everybody is always concerned with the same object. If the sameness of the object can no longer be discerned, no common nature of men … can prevent the destruction of the common world, which is usually preceded by the destruction of the many aspects in which it presents itself to human plurality.[40]

If a plurality of human subjectivities is the very condition of the world, it is objectivity that prevents its destruction. It is here in particular that we see Arendt develop a more capacious understanding of world-making, one that encompasses but is not limited to politics. Making art is

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[38] Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 9.
[39] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 9.
[40] Ibid., 57–58.

also a mode of world-making. Arendt writes that:

> The "doing of great deeds and the speaking of great words" will leave no trace, no product that might endure after the moment of action and the spoken word has passed … [thus] acting and speaking men need the help of *homo faber* in his highest capacity, that is, the help of the artist, of poets and historiographers, of monument-builders or writers, because without them the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell, would not survive at all.[41]

Thus, for Arendt, making art sustains the world in its plurality. It is thus objectivity rather than an expanded subjectivity that provides a possible response to Afro-Pessimism.

To write with the Bleek-Lloyd Collection in mind, then, is not to read from //Kabbo's map another subjectivity, but rather to turn to the things themselves. Take, for instance, the famous poem from the Bleek-Lloyd Collection called "The Broken String" (included in the appendix). This poem exerts a pull on its readers that has resulted in its seemingly ubiquitous reproduction. Some attribute the attraction of this poem to its status as "the repository of a vast amount of oral lore" of the Khoi-San, of whom "nothing was left … but their stories."[42] We must reject this trope of the Khoi-San as living fossils, recognizing the vital continuity of the Khoi-San to the present day. Yet I also want to suggest that there is something in the object itself that exerts this pull, something not reducible to its politics. This is not a claim about aesthetic pleasure, for that would be merely subjective; rather, this is a judgment of beauty.

Such judgments of the beautiful are a key element of Arendt's late thought. She presents this theme in the posthumously published *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, which was intended as the third part of her unfinished *The Life of the Mind*. Arendt has a strong distaste for Kant's actual political philosophy due essentially to his presumption of shared rationality[43] —

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[41] Ibid., 174.

[42] Diakwain and Farmer, "The Broken String."

[43] She wrote that his works of political philosophy (as commonly understood) "cannot compare in quality and depth with Kant's other writings." Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 7.

how he makes not *men* (plural) but *man* (singular) the subject of politics. Yet she feels affection

for his aspirations; Arendt argues that Kant is ultimately committed to making the philosopher "a

man like you and me, living among his fellow men, *not* among his fellow philosophers."[44] She

understands this spirit to be best expressed in a famous passage from Kant's autobiographical

writings, where he writes that

> I would find myself more useless than the common laborer if I did not believe that [what I am
> doing] can give worth to all others in establishing the rights of mankind.[45]

To offer such "worth … in establishing the rights of mankind," Arendt dives for pearls in a most

unlikely bed: Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.[46] It is in his treatise on aesthetics,

Arendt believes, that Kant recognizes the irreducible plurality of men, and hence here where we

can find the source of a genuine political theory.

For Kant, judgments of the beautiful are the result of a coincidence between my faculty

of understanding (what I see the mountain as) and my faculty of imagination (what I imagine the

mountain to be). Because they rely on coincidence of faculties, judgments of the beautiful are

only subjectively valid. Yet judgments of the beautiful differ in substance from judgments of the

pleasant or agreeable. Beauty is a subjective judgment that *demands* or *imposes* (*zumuten*)

universal assent.[47] What are the grounds for such "expectation of a universal assent"?[48] The

answer is a favorite Arendtian theme: common sense (*Gemeinsinn*, *sensus communis*). As Kant

writes:

> Thus only under the presupposition that there is a common sense (by which, however, we do not
> mean any external sense but rather the effect of the free play of our cognitive powers), only under

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[44] Ibid., 28.

[45] Quoted in ibid., 29. The translation and the editorial addition in square brackets are Arendt's own. For the original passage see Kant, *Observations*, 96.; Prussian Academy edition 20:44.

[46] This is the metaphor (borrowed from the *Tempest*) she used in Arendt, "Walter Benjamin."

[47] This word has also been translated as "require" or "impute." See the editorial comment by Paul Guyer in Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, xlviii.

[48] Ibid., 124.; Prussian Academy edition 5:240.

the presupposition of such a common sense, I say, can the judgment of taste be made.[49]

This sense is "the least that can be expected from anyone who lays claim to the name of a human being"; taste, responsible for judgments of the beautiful, "can be called *sensus communis* with greater justice than can the healthy understanding."[50] Indeed,

> one could even define taste as the faculty for judging that which makes our feeling in a given representation *universally communicable* without the mediation of a concept.[51]

Subjective judgments of the beautiful become objective by appeal to what is common — the in-between, an Arendtian world.[52]

It is this kind of "world" that Arendt wants to recuperate from Kant, a category of "world" that can usefully complement what the pearl she retrieved from Heidegger. It is with this concept of the world that we can begin to imagine an Arendtian cosmopolitanism. As Étienne Tassin argues, Kantian cosmopolitanism is for Arendt nothing other than

> *a globalization of worldlessness*, a systematization of the destruction of the world under the cover of its economic and techno-scientific domination.[53]

By contrast, an Arendtian cosmopolitanism is

> first of all a resistance to worldlessness, to the triple destruction of the world — political, techno-scientific, and economic.[54]

Arendt finds in Kant a political philosophy whereby political visions are both fundamentally plural *and* objective. The world is to politics what taste (the *sensus communis aestheticus*) is to the beautiful:

> that which makes our feeling in a given representation *universally communicable* without the

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[49] Ibid., 122.; 5:238.

[50] Ibid., 173–75.; 5:294–5.

[51] Ibid., 175.; 5:295. Italics in original.

[52] For a valuable explanation, see Pollok, *Kant's Theory of Normativity*, 100–101.

[53] Tassin, *Un monde commun*, 18. In the original: "*mondialisation de l'acosmisme*, une systématisation de la destruction du monde sous couvert de sa domination économique et technoscientifique." Italics in original.

[54] Ibid. In the original: "La cosmopolitique ainsi entendue est d'abord une résistance à l'acosmisme, à la triple destruction politique, technoscientifique et économique du monde."

mediation of a concept.[55]

In other words, by appealing to the common world we can make a politics that does not presume a common rational subject; this is how we can begin to assuage Wilderson's worry about the expansion of subjectivity.

What does it mean for the world, like common sense, to be the ground for objective judgments that are grounded in plurality? Something like this happens if we follow the reception of "The Broken String." This poem has brought together contradictory political views. On the one hand, Saskia van Schaik used the poem as the title of her 2010 film *The Broken String: The Story of a Lost Language* — which interviews only white historians and curators, to the exclusion of actual descendants of the Khoi-San.[56] By contrast, José Manuel de Prada-Samper includes "The Broken String" among stories he documents as told by contemporary people in the Karoo to argue that Khoi-San culture has in fact persisted.[57] Fundamentally plural political actors are brought together around things in common: in particular, a poem. This poem demands something from all the actors drawn to it; perhaps something like beauty. This demand does not presume a common world in the old sense of objectivity — where those who come around it share a background or worldview. But neither does the poem's demand of beauty make sense in a relativistic, multicultural world; there, judgments of beauty would be purely subjective. Instead, the poem brings plural actors together to *make* a common world through their interactions with each other and with objects.

It is this new kind of objectivity as a politics truly founded in plurality that I have attempted to sketch in this essay. I began and ended with the objects of the Bleek-Lloyd

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[55] Ibid.

[56] Schaik, *The Broken String: The Story of a Lost Language*. See, to a similar effect, Bennun, *The Broken String: The Last Words of an Extinct People*.

[57] de Prada-Samper, *The Man Who Cursed the Wind*.

Collection. My goal has been neither to instrumentalize them in the production of political theory nor to bring Latour and Arendt as helpers conscripted to understand the objects. Rather, I have pursued a project of philosophy as a politics of radically expanded interlocutors. I, as much as //Kabbo, Latour, and Arendt, begin in my own subjectivity (we are *people*, not a singular *person*). We may not agree at all in our political worldviews. But, like van Schaik and de Prada-Samper, we come together in the act of making a world together — in other words, the act of taking a risk together, of realizing a world that is a commons shared by people. We are co-conspirators in the act of world-making.

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Appendix: "The Broken String"

Nuing-kuiten my father's friend
was a lion sorcerer
and walked on feet of hair.
People saw his spoor and said:
"The sorcerer has visited us.
He is the one who treads on hair.
This big animal prowling
was Nuing-kuiten."

He used to travel by night—
he did not want to be seen
for people might shoot at him
and he might maul someone.
At night he could go unseen,
after other lion sorcerers
who slink into our dwellings
and drag out men.

The sorcerer lived with us
hunting in a lion's form
until an ox fell prey to him.
Then the Boers rode out
and shot my father's friend,
but he fought those people off

and came home to tell father
how Boers had wounded him.

He thought father did not know
he was wounded in his lion form.
Soon he would have to go
for he lay in extreme pain.
If only he could take father
and teach him his magic and songs,
father would walk in his craft,
sing his songs, and remember him.
He died, and my father sang:

"Men broke the string for me
and made my dwelling like this.
Men broke the string for me
and now
my dwelling is strange to me.

My dwelling stands empty
because the string has broken,
and now
my dwelling is a hardship for me."

Source: Diakwain and Harold Farmer, "The Broken String," Poetry *194, no. 1 (2009): 64–66,*
https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/52405/the-broken-string.