McDONALD INSTITUTE CONVERSATIONS

# The pasts and presence of art in South Africa

## Technologies, ontologies and agents

Edited by Chris Wingfield, John Giblin & Rachel King

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*with contributions from*
Ceri Ashley, Alexander Antonites, Michael Chazan, Per Ditlef Fredriksen, Laura de Harde, M. Hayden, Rachel King, Nessa Leibhammer, Mark McGranaghan, Same Mdluli, David Morris, Catherine Namono, Martin Porr, Johan van Schalkwyk, Larissa Snow, Catherine Elliott Weinberg, Chris Wingfield & Justine Wintjes

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# *Acknowledgements*

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Chris Wingfield
John Giblin
Rachel King

# *Chapter 4*

# Relocated: potting and translocality in terminal Iron Age towns and beyond

Per Ditlef Fredriksen

'She stopped making pots after she moved'. This factual assertion by an elderly potter in the Limpopo Province in South Africa is of a kind I have heard several times. It is not uncommon for experienced potters to refer to apprentices in the past tense in this way, relating to relocation and discontinuation in the same sentence. The simple statement hints at a complicated set of socio-environmental challenges that the apprentice (in rural South Africa still usually a daughter or granddaughter) must overcome when moving away. Regardless of reasons (often including marriage), the relocation means that the apprentice must resume craft activities in a new social and material context. In addition to being uprooted from familiar surroundings and having to set up in unfamiliar workspaces, it often involves getting access to local sources of clay and temper and making the necessary adjustments to these new materials. Having learnt and practiced in her teacher's spaces only, the transition can turn out to be too difficult.

A typical answer to inquiries into why such disjuncture is so frequent is that the learner left 'too soon'. This relates to the underlying tension in all potting practice, as noted by ethnographer and archaeologist Olivier Gosselain (2011, 223); between the need to reproduce links to the initial source of knowledge (teacher and learning arena) on the one hand, and the unavoidable changes the potter experiences as she goes through ensuing life stages on the other. Interestingly, in the aftermath of relocation one step in the ceramic manufacture process can be identified as particularly vulnerable. The same elderly potter in Limpopo made clear that her apprentice had struggled because 'she could not get the shapes right'.[1] Shaping operations require the acquisition of sophisticated skills, eventually leading the apprentice into a much more formal phase during which a tight bond between teacher and apprentice is formed. Gosselain (2011, 214, 218, 221) refers to this critical threshold as the *second stage of learning*, after which the apprentice has gained the necessary skill and confidence to master the craft independently. Significantly, Gosselain notes that shaping techniques seem to change at a slower rate and relate more often to some form of group affiliation than other steps in the manufacturing process. Although usually conservative and acting as a strong stabilizing factor, the shaping stage may also create conditions for sudden shifts in techniques. In this manner, Gosselain underscores that not only is the learning of technical repertoires woven into daily experience and rehearsal (see Fredriksen & Bandama 2016, 492–5) but also that learning is vulnerable to factors that influence the transmission between generations and may result in abrupt changes or disjuncture of ceramic practices.

This vulnerability is related to the kind of knowledge acquired. As anthropologist Tim Ingold (2000, 369) notes, it is highly personal; partly intuitive, largely implicit, and deeply embedded in the particularities of experience. The only way for the apprentice to learn the challenging shaping methods is to sit next to a skilled teacher and copy her repeated rhythmic motions (Fig. 4.1). Such form-making, writes Ingold (2000, 372), 'involves a precise co-ordination of perception and action that is learned through copying the movements of experienced practitioners in socially scaffolded contexts'. However, as the learning process is vulnerable to premature relocation, it becomes important to understand the dynamics that follow when the scaffolds are removed too soon.

In this chapter I discuss this aspect of the transmission of technical skills. The reverberations of relocation, hinted at above, are relevant from the perspective of understanding the pace of change of ceramic material culture over time, and grasping these dynamics may therefore provide novel insights, not only into the work of present-day ceramic artisans, but also for that of past

**Figure 4.1.** *Skilled hands shaping a pot. An experienced potter in the Limpopo Province at work. Photograph Per Ditlef Fredriksen.*

potters – for archaeological material from prehistoric and historic time periods. The following exploration rests on two closely interrelated working hypotheses. The first is that the vulnerability of sophisticated craft practices, due to the increased mobility of their practitioners, is materially visible over time as disjunctures and breaches in archaeological ceramic sequences. Consequently, there is a need to trace connections, formed through objects, materials and craft knowledge, as networks were made, remade and transformed in the aftermath of relocation. The second hypothesis is, quite simply, that in turbulent times with increased mobility there is an increased emphasis on material culture to connect people and places across distances. In present-day South Africa, relocation is a core issue. However, the profound significance of mobility can only be grasped by understanding the region's recent and deeper pasts. These two hypotheses will be explored in a historical archaeological case study of the Magaliesberg valley region in northern South Africa during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries AD. The terminal phase of the Iron Age[2] in southern Africa (*c.* AD 1300–1840) was characterized by political centralization and swift demographic aggregation into dense urban settlements. For town dwellers, this meant new ways of organizing daily life, including craft activities.

The aims of this piece are twofold. The first is to direct attention to the process of *making* in the way we conceptualize and analyse the work of ceramic artisans. An outcome of this for archaeologists is the need to shift their focus from the traditional, rather narrow concept of *style,* to the notion of *recipes* for making. An important aspect of the recipes notion is that it takes potential difference in technical repertoires into account. The second aim is to demonstrate the potential of working recursively between archaeological, historical and anthropological source material, and on this basis to present a refined approach to ceramic craft mobility, knowledge transmission and workspace dynamics. This approach is informed by my own field studies of memory work with potters, still active in southern Africa.

## Craft identity and household spaces in the terminal Iron Age

The archaeological record and historical sources, written and oral, suggest that the Magaliesberg valley region (Fig. 4.2) and adjacent areas to the west and north were characterized by a high degree and mobility and translocality between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Over only a few decades,

settlements went from being dispersed and scattered homesteads to densely packed and stonewalled towns, often referred to as 'mega-sites'. At their peak, the largest towns, such as Kaditshwene and Molokwane, hosted somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 people. Research over the last fifteen years has established that the mega-sites developed in the second half of the eighteenth century. This means that the study area had only recently experienced an accelerated sociopolitical change at the time when the first recorded European visitors arrived in the early nineteenth century, and the process lasted until the region was disrupted by the establishment of the Ndebele state under Mzilikazi in 1827 (see Hall 2012 for a detailed account).

Offering favourable conditions for agriculturalists, and rich in minerals such as iron and copper, the Magaliesberg region saw several waves of settlement relocation, mostly from regions to the south. For example, in the oral history of some of the groups that settled in the study area, a mythical origin at the specific site of Ntsuanatsatsi in the Free State Province figures prominently. Such links in oral history have been found to resonate with archaeological evidence (Maggs 1976; Hall 2012; Hamilton & Hall 2012; Huffman 2007, 2017). At various times and on different scales, newcomers interacted with firstcomers (*sensu* Kopytoff 1987) and, in several known instances, moved on to settle elsewhere. Consequently, the processes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries should be seen against a backdrop that is geographically wider and temporally deeper. Moreover, reverberations of these processes reach far beyond the study area. This primary area was an inland nodal point in long-distance trade networks, and felt the effects of the Indian Ocean trade as well as the Atlantic commerce via Cape Town.

The archaeological record, oral history, as well as written accounts attest to the complexity of the processes of political centralization and interaction among various identity groups. The processes have been studied by archaeologists and historians, and recent work has demonstrated that the previously assumed 'Tswana' labelling of mega-sites, based on historical observations of Tswana-speakers at specific sites and the continuity of similar settlement practices

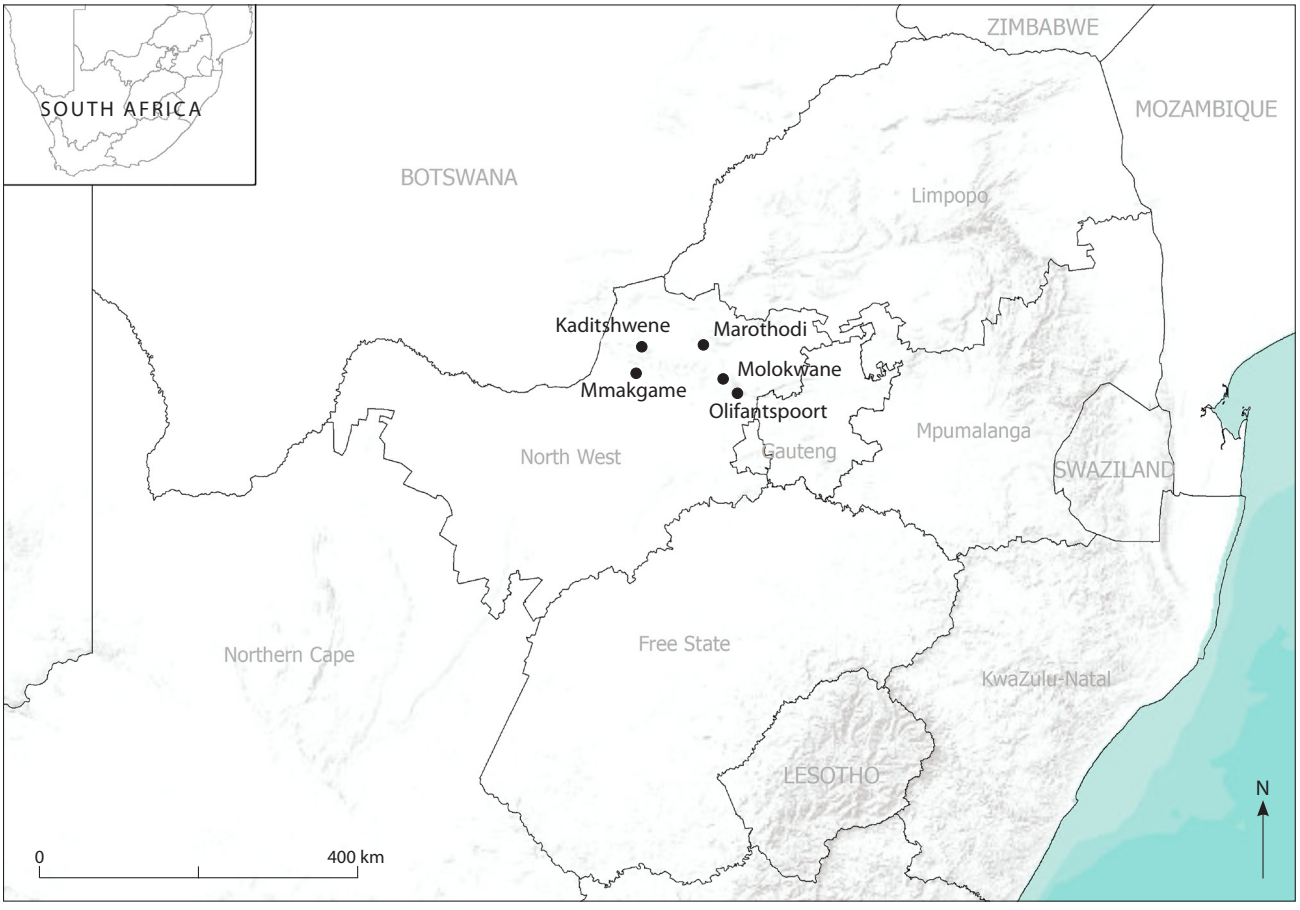


**Figure 4.2.** *The study area and sites named in the text. Map by Mncedisi Siteleki.*

into the present, is overly simplified (Hall 2012; Hall *et al.* 2008; Hamilton & Hall 2012). Importantly, the status of current research based on ceramic assemblages at settlement sites (for overview see Fredriksen 2012, 11–21) makes clear that ceramic craftwork was performed by women, for the most part in domestic spaces associated with women. At the level of the household, therefore, inquiries into identity are inextricably linked to the question of gender dynamics. More recent archaeological work has addressed the changing gender roles of craftspeople, especially the relationships between potters and metallurgists (Hall *et al.* 2006; Anderson 2009). For example, attempts have been made to understand why some cultural distinctions persisted into colonial times, by exploring increased metal and ceramic craft specialization in relation to the needs of a regional political economy (Hall 2012), as mining and metallurgy especially would have contributed to economic growth and population increase.

The aggregation of population implies substantial shifts in household organization, which, in turn, had implications for the organization of daily life. Archaeologically, this can be detected in the increased use of dry-stone walling to compartmentalize settlements, channel movement and restrict access and visibility. The ethno-historic and archaeological records attest to the broader social context within which craftspeople now lived and worked (e.g. Boeyens 2016; Boeyens & Hall 2009). However, the implications for social practices and subsistence activities remain underexplored. The few studies that do exist (e.g. Hall 1998, Fredriksen 2007) have pointed out that ceramic crafts underwent a significant shift in parallel with the centralization process.

The pottery style known as *Moloko* (Fig. 4.3) emerged in the archaeological record during the fourteenth century AD (Huffman 2007, 183–209). For the pre-urban period, up to the eighteenth century, its makers mastered a flourishing variability of shapes and used a wide range of décor patterns that included the red-white-black colour triad. From around AD 1700, densely decorated and stylistically rich pots were replaced by less complex and more standardized vessels, and new ceramic fabrics that used tempers were introduced. Significantly, the mixing of tempers into ceramic clays was a novel technological feature and is only found in post-AD 1700 assemblages. These ceramic changes have been related to transformations of household dynamics and spatiality, specifically changes to gendered labour and increased craft specialization, within the overall demography of a rapidly transforming agropastoral society (Hall 1998; Huffman 2007; Fredriksen 2007, 2012).

A defining characteristic for the terminal Iron Age is *translocality* (as defined by Greiner & Sakdapolrak 2013, 376). The mega-sites were relatively short-lived, perhaps not for more than one to three generations. This puts learning and knowledge transmission under strain. New technological landscapes had to be learned and understood, new clay sources had to be brought into use, new and unknown materials incorporated into the process of making things. It was an ongoing process of entangling and disentangling with the surrounding

**Figure 4.3.** *Example of Moloko pottery.* Uitkomst *type from the site of Marothodi. Photograph Per Ditlef Fredriksen.*

environment. This put learning and knowledge into motion (Fredriksen & Bandama 2016), which may not only have fuelled the pace and redirected already ongoing dynamics, but also caused tensions.

**Approaching making in everyday workspaces**

> *Technical virtuosity is intrinsic to the efficacy of works of art in their social context, and tends always towards the creation of asymmetries in the relations between people by placing them in an essentially asymmetrical relation to things* (Gell 1992, 52).

Alfred Gell's now classic anthropological treatise of art as technology is a salient departure point for my approach. In it, he pointed out that valued objects, made by artisans, visualize and underpin already existing social asymmetry, being 'surrounded by a kind of halo-effect of resistance' (Gell 1992, 48). This resistance radiates from the skilled capacity of the artisan and the beholder to construe the making process as enigmatic and thus 'enchanted'. Significantly, Gell centred analytical attention on the *emergence* of objects and the artisan's *performance* during the process of making. This resonates with Ingold's (2000, 2013) more recent argument for a shift of focus to include not only *artefact* but also *artifice.* This is not the kind of generalizable knowledge that is covered by modernist notions of technology. Rather, knowledge of making includes the skills acquired through personal experience, enabling the skilled craftsperson to find her own way in a world of human and nonhuman others, bestowing her with a specific identity (Ingold 2000, 369).

This modelling of learning and motor habits places the human body at the centre of analysis (Robb & Pauketat 2013), where material traces of technical acts are incorporated into socio-material networks at different scalar levels, as defined by the archaeologist Carl Knappett (2011, 61, 98, 124). The *micro level* is where proximate or face-to-face interactions take place, such as the household and its ties to the surrounding landscape. This is the primary analytical level in this approach, but must be intercalated into wider contextual frames: the *meso level* of interaction between households in a single community and between communities in a region, and the *macro level* of regional interactions.[3] Since at least the mid-1990s archaeologists in southern Africa have understood the importance of crafts for analysing interaction at the household level (e.g. Hall 1998, Lane 1998, Segobye 1998, for overviews see Pikirayi 2007, Fredriksen, 2012, 19–21), but such studies are still few and far between. The lack of models and syntheses that intercalate small-scale dynamics into broader regional and inter-regional perspectives, is at least partly due to the challenges involved in building robust bottom-up models. To change analytical scale is to change the perception of social life, and to move between scalar levels demands a framework for interpretation that allows for shifts in balance between qualitative and quantitative data processing.

In two recent reviews of the subject (Fredriksen 2015; Fredriksen & Chirikure 2015), informed by Ingold's perspective on making, I have described the components of future culture-historical settlement models. Such a model must acknowledge (1) a sensitivity to difference between scales of analysis and (2) the need for a critical stance with respect to template settlement models that elide contextual differences, such as the structuralist Central Cattle Pattern (CCP) model (Huffman 2007, 23–53), with its static and potentially ahistorical view of the relationship between the human mind and the material world. Broadly speaking, this kind of scientific effort may be described as a long-term study of socio-nature (Guattari 2000; Meskell 2012), a study that entangles the seemingly separate and unacknowledged agencies of politics, economics, culture, nature and ideology, that make and remake lived-in landscapes and settlements. Significantly, the effort rests on the recognition that it is not just humans who move and shape understanding and perception. Recent archaeological studies of mobility in African contexts emphasize the intimate connections between the human condition and the many nonhuman forces and agencies at play, thus recognizing the multi-layered processes that take in everyday lives (for the most recent discourse overview, see Ashley *et al.* 2016). In my opinion, this alternative view implies a dual critical approach that reflects the twofold aim of this chapter. I will here outline its two interrelated principles in brief.

The first tenet is the conception of making as a process by which artefacts emerge in a unique context in place and time, and therefore *not* as an already fixed design being transcribed onto a material. This has implications for the ways that archaeologists think about and handle pottery assemblages. The most influential definition of ceramic style among scholars working on the Iron Age in southern Africa has a firmly established focus on combinations of three dimensions: vessel profile, overall design layout and motif categories (Huffman 2007, 111). Although it is understandable that visible (and thus more readily categorizable) surface design has priority, this focus also misses potentially vital analytical dimensions.[4] As indicated, in the chain of operations and choices made by artisans it is not decoration but raw material selection and shaping techniques that are most

resistant to change. These two are acquired through repeated practice during early learning, and thus reflect more enduring facets of identity. For example, it has been demonstrated that patterns in vessel-building techniques closely correspond with social boundaries such as those of language groups, specialist groups and gender (e.g. Gosselain 2000; Kreiter *et al.* 2017). Aspects such as paste compositions (mixtures of clay and tempers) and shaping methods are not necessarily visible to the naked eye, and ceramic studies are therefore in need of support from various types of laboratory analysis. Accordingly, social dynamics and material connections can be studied by identifying context-specific *ceramic recipes*. Informed by the notion of technological style (Lechtman 1977) and the broader archaeological and anthropological discussion of the relationship between ceramic production, social boundaries and organization of production (Gosselain 2000; Arnold 2000, 2011; Michelaki *et al.* 2015; Roux 2015; Kreiter *et al.* 2015), recipes are defined as particular combinations of specific ceramic pastes, building techniques, and ornamental elements (Fredriksen *et al.* 2014, 126–7). Technological change can thus be identified on a household level, enabling us to gain a better understanding of the spatial organization of production behaviour and ceramic use (Kreiter *et al.* 2017).

The recipe concept also has a significant temporal dimension. By attending to the changing affordances of materials and legacies of past actions (Fowler 2017, 96, 102), the performance of making through repeated acts can be described as a context-specific gathering of objects and people that cites previous events. This recurrent citation is fundamental to the process of making and remaking social memory (Lucas 2012, 195–201). This ability to cite people, places and events in the past through choices of pastes and techniques may create, for example, subtle social geographies of pottery that can be identified via sophisticated microscopic studies (Wilmsen *et al.* 2009; Wilmsen *et al.* 2019). It is a form of *material memory* (Olivier 2015; Fredriksen & Bandama 2016) that connect people and places across distances, perhaps in particular during times of turbulence and translocality.

The attention to memory brings us to the second tenet of my approach. This relates to the arenas for craft learning. In our case the primary arena is the household. Skills are acquired through repetition in inhabited workspaces and, following archaeologist Laurent Olivier (2015), this means that at the most basic everyday level, innovation and change are introduced through repetition, allowing what is new to be inscribed in what came before. Inhabited spaces such as dwellings and work places 'owe their existence to the repetition of individual acts and transformations that allow them to remain functional. Once abandoned, they die' (Olivier 2015, 69). In other words, workspaces have a pulse. Craft transmission is inextricably linked to its spatial setting, and therefore also vulnerable to changes to these settings.

Seeking to fine-tune the approach in a way that is equally sensitive to the contexts of apprenticeship and learning (Miller 2012, 225–33, figure 11.1) and to various modes of transmission during intensification of ceramic production (Roux 2015), I have conducted two preliminary studies of ceramic technology and the transmission of craft knowledge at the micro-scale of households. The focus in both studies is the vulnerability of ties between knowledge and the spatial arena for learning and transmitting this knowledge, especially in relation to processes that include clay and soil in the surrounding landscape (*cf.* Fredriksen 2011; Salisbury 2012). The first is the study of present-day dynamics that I have referred to above (Fredriksen & Bandama 2016). The second, to which I now turn, is a small-scale pilot survey of archaeological material from the Magaliesberg region.

**Recipes and relocation: the use of mica in terminal Iron Age potting**

Work by Simon Hall with colleagues (Hall 1998, 2012; Rosenstein 2002; Hall *et al.* 2008; Kruger 2010; Fredriksen 2017) has identified significant changes in paste compositions, which underscore the importance of thinking of style as more than surface décor. Inspired by the concept of technological style (Lechtman 1977), their work reveals that the mixing of various tempers into the clay is a post-AD 1700 Late Moloko innovation, and a significant technological change. Before this, the clays were selected based on natural composition. The shift thus implies the need to procure raw materials from more than one source. This novelty, especially the addition of mica-rich tempers (Fig. 4.4), may be viewed as a functional adjustment to intensified and scaled up production, and thus an efficient alteration of ceramic manufacture in high-density towns under more pressure to use resources sustainably. The properties of mica, durability, mechanical strength, and thermal stability, make the resulting ceramics better suited for direct-heat boiling. This indicates a change in relation to cooking practices. However, rather than simply signalling a suite of mechanical and technical strategies, such a change may also represent new social dynamics and practices (*cf.* Roddick & Hastorf 2010, 166).

Specifically, mica tempering seems to be embedded and to connect people and places through material means in subtle ways. The distribution patterns that

**Figure 4.4.** *Shimmering muscovite mica inclusions in a Moloko pottery sherd. Photograph Per Ditlef Fredriksen.*

emerge make it possible to trace connections and networks in the aftermath of relocation. For example, mica is found in ceramics classified as *Buispoort* (Huffman 2007, 203–6; see Fig. 4.4), unearthed at the mega-sites Molokwane, Kaditshwene, Olifantspoort and Mmakgame (Fig. 4.2). This type is associated with western Tswana groups such as the Hurutshe and Kwena. Conversely, no mica inclusions have been identified in the Tlokwa ceramic assemblage at the contemporary site of Marothodi. Here, the dominant ceramic style is representative of the *Uitkomst* type of pottery (Huffman 2007, 431–3; see Fig. 4.3), which is part of the Fokeng cluster that came into the study area from a different direction, from the south-east. This absence of mica tempering is also significant from a wider stylistic perspective, not least since Tlokwa ceramics are decorated with comb stamping and this attribute is absent from *Buispoort* ceramics (Hall *et al.* 2008).

Interestingly, in Frans Kruger's analysis of so-called *Doornspruit* type homesteads that are believed to have a Nguni origin, dating to the Ndebele under Mzilikazi from the 1820s, a significant number of sherds have muscovite mica inclusions (Kruger 2010, 136–43). As we have seen for the site of Marothodi, the Tlokwa did *not* use mica in their ceramics. It can therefore be argued that this is *not* an Nguni attribute. Kruger (2010, 144–76) explores two possibilities for the presence of micaceous temper at his homestead clusters. The first is trade, that the ceramics were produced by Sotho-Tswana elsewhere. The second is that it can be ascribed to Ndebele assimilation, subjugating people, and embedding refugee groups. Once the Ndebele polity was established, Sotho-Tswana women could have married into it. Consequently, women incorporated into Ndebele society may have introduced the use of muscovite mica. On this basis, Kruger argues that mica tempering may have been a way for Sotho-Tswana women to express their prior identity in a subtle way, enabling less overt learned habits of manufacture to persist.

If we return to my two working hypotheses, this discussion may offer new pathways into tracing and understanding material culture and identities across complex political landscapes and through time. Although I would argue that Kruger's interpretation may somewhat overstate the conscious acts of resistance through potting, this is nonetheless an instructive departure point for future work. Not least since shaping techniques, as we have seen, are generally more deeply embedded in the social identity of potters than decoration. So why not start to trace and map ceramic pastes and recipes, and not just décor styles?

Importantly, using material science in this way could provide a tool for making sense of the less decorated ceramics. And, when seen in relation to the occupation history of individual settlement sites, we can start mapping indications of stress and possible breaches in transmission in a political landscape characterized by a high degree of conflict and translocality. This tracing of pastes would be a form of provenancing that links together learning arenas, through teacher/apprentice bonds, into *genealogies of craft recipes.* This can be a valuable addition to the more traditional provenancing of clays and tempers to sources in the landscape.

The distribution of post-AD 1700 micaceous ceramics demonstrates the value of tracing connections in the ways that objects were made, by indicating an increased emphasis on material culture for connecting people and places from the turbulent eighteenth century onwards. Moreover, studies so far suggest that the mobility of the people who made the pots is a significant factor, thereby underscoring the need for an interpretative framework informed by anthropological insights into the dynamics of relocation. This means that complex and context-specific social dynamics should be taken into consideration when studying each archaeological site, including processes of assimilating and merging newcomer and firstcomer groups and individuals through, for example, marriage and new ways of co-dwelling at settlements.

## Concluding remarks

As we have seen, present-day examples may serve as a fruitful departure point for discussion of dynamics relating to the performance of potting, including the material traces we have from deeper pasts. In the historical example of terminal Iron Age settlements from northern South Africa, a suite of profound changes occurred within the time frame of only a generation or two. For archaeological ceramic sequences spanning several decades and centuries, the occurrences of shifts, gaps or discontinuities indicate the need to look for relevant factors that may have caused changes to ceramic practice and its underlying transmission dynamics, and thereby also one's identity as a potter. Rapid shifts may suggest that learning processes have been under more than the usual strain; that there has not been sufficient time for the individual potter to acquire the necessary skills and confidence before critical changes to her life situation and circumstances occur. Repeated rhythmic motions are the very pulse of the workspace, and if the social scaffolds of the familiar learning arena are left too soon, then the ceramic practices and networks of making that unfold there may weaken and even die.

## Notes

1. The conversations with this potter took place in April 2015, as part of fieldwork in the Greater Letaba municipality (see Fredriksen & Bandama 2016, 494–97).
2. The introduction of the term Iron Age was an explicit borrowing from European archaeology and carries a problematic heritage (see Hall 1984, Maggs 1992). Several scholars have expressed reservations about its use and alternatives have been put forward, including Farming Communities (Mitchell 2002, Bonner *et al.*, 2008). However, a number of researchers based in southern Africa have found the term to remain useful as a short label for a larger concept. The term has been locally appropriated and re-defined as part of a critically aware knowledge production (for discourse overview see Fredriksen & Chirikure, 2015), rendering it significantly detached from its original meaning. Consequently, current conventional use of the Iron Age term in southern Africa refers to a regionally distinct amalgam of settled village life, food production and, notably, crafts activities such as the working of metals and pottery making (for a wider discussion see e.g. Hall 1984, Maggs 1992, Bonner *et al.*, 2008, 8–9, Bandama 2013, 14, Fredriksen 2015, 161).
3. According to Knappett (2011, 98–123), this meso-scale of socio-material interaction and networks is the level for analysis of cultural mobility and transmission of knowledge within *communities of practice* (for recent literature overview see Roddick & Stahl 2016).
4. Not to forget the important practical point that undecorated ceramics are deemed 'undiagnostic' and therefore found to be worth much less than decorated ceramics and perhaps 'worthless'. As any excavating Iron Age archaeologist can attest, the time, energy and museum storage space devoted to this material is considerable.

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# The pasts and presence of art in South Africa

In 2015, #RhodesMustFall generated the largest student protests in South Africa since the end of apartheid, subsequently inspiring protests and acts of decolonial iconoclasm across the globe. The performances that emerged in, through and around #RhodesMustFall make it clear how analytically fruitful Alfred Gell's notion that art is 'a system of social action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it' can be, even when attempting to account for South Africa's very recent history.

What light can this approach shed on the region's far longer history of artistic practices? Can we use any resulting insights to explore art's role in the very long history of human life in the land now called South Africa? Can we find a common way of talking about 'art' that makes sense across South Africa's long span of human history, whether considering engraved ochre, painted rock shelters or contemporary performance art?

This collection of essays has its origins in a conference with the same title, arranged to mark the opening of the British Museum's major temporary exhibition *South Africa: the art of a nation* in October 2016. The volume represents an important step in developing a framework for engaging with South Africa's artistic traditions that begins to transcend nineteenth-century frameworks associated with colonial power.

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