TRUTH, JUSTICE, AND PERFORMATIVE KNOWLEDGE:

Chokri Ben Chikha's Theatrical "Truth Commission" on (Neo) colonial Injustices

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Abstract

Chokri Ben Chikha, performance artist and historian, spent four years of research on colonial environments on World Exhibitions, especially on the World Exhibition of Ghent (Belgium) in 1913. In Ghent, villages with natives from the Philippines and Senegal were exhibited. Eventually, a Filipino died from the cold climate, thus causing upheaval. The "authentic" villagers were actually on tour; they behaved, just as Barnum & Bailey's did, as troupes of popular, "educational" entertainment. But they also constituted loci where colonial relationships were performed.

In April 2013, Chokri Ben Chikha and his brother Zouzou made a theatrical performance based upon Chokri's research: De Waarheidscommissie or "truth commission." They created this particular kind of commission in order to investigate the facts about what had happened during the Ghent World Fair of 1913, and contemporary cultural practices that presumably reproduced these hierarchical north-south relationships, willingly or not, such as postcolonial performance, and "orientalist" entertainment. This 'truth commission' and its witness stand included both experts and actors. They developed scenarios for judgment, compensation and reconciliation in contexts of historical and contemporary (neo)colonial misdemeanor. Finally, the audience was invited to decide about the best solution.

What could be the epistemological plus-value of this performative treatment of past and present injustices? In different contexts, truth (and reconciliation) commissions have proven to play a crucial role in political transitions. The specific performative nature of these commissions was often decisive for their impact on these processes. This paper focuses on the question of whether or not, and to what degree, an artificial event, using artistic means, is able to enhance insights in these efforts of "truth & reconciliation," especially when dealing with historical injustice.

Keywords

Belgian imperialism, human zoo, performance studies, postcolonialism, transitional justice, truth & reconciliation, world exhibitions

About the Author

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Chokri Ben Chikha is a Belgian theatre director with Tunisian roots. Last December 2014, he successfully defended a PhD thesis in the Arts that dealt, in both a creative and reflective way, with the phenomenon of the “human zoo”—the exhibition of so-called “exotic people” in cardboard replicas of their natural environment, their villages. As part of his research, Chokri Ben Chikha created, together with his brother Zouzou Ben Chikha, the theater performance *De Waarheidscommissie* (“The Truth Commission”). *De Waarheidscommissie* takes place in the *cour d’assises*, the room for jury trials for serious crime, of the old “palace of justice” in Ghent.

De Waarheidscommissie, in its final performative form, was the result of a lasting research process by Chokri Ben Chikha and a team of scholars, writers, dramaturges and actors. The process included the collection of archival material about the “exotic villages” in Ghent 1913 and other world exhibitions, discussions about the presence of ethnic difference in contemporary performance, and an analysis of the “format” of a truth commission as a political and legal instrument. In this paper, the focus will not be on this research process, but the performance itself, and the question of “performative knowledge.” What kind of plus-value does a performance, structured as an investigative commission aimed at truth-finding, generate? Is it thinkable that contemporary political actors deal with the (ambiguous) findings of such a performance? Chokri Ben Chikha explicitly situates his exercise in a political context. A first aspect is the working through of a traumatic past—the scars of colonialism—as they are reflected upon by authors such as Frantz Fanon (Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*) and Paul Gilroy (Gilroy, *After Empire*). Ben Chikha touches here the issue of the ‘double conscience’: the post-colonial subject continues to be a ‘bastard’, since the colonial cultural model did not disappear, socially nor mentally (Ben Chikha, *Wat is de kritische waarde* 110). But he also deals with the contemporary representation of cultural diversity, in daily life, on the level of policy and on the arts scene. This question of plus-value is thus posed in a double sense: The first sense is the possibility of restorative justice with regard to post-colonial transition. The second sense is the possibility of memory, i.e. how history deals with these facts—the exhibition of ‘natives’—futile as they are, compared to acts of genocide and similar horrors in colonial times. In other words: Does a performative approach put these processes of restoration in a different light, or does the ‘performative knowledge’ thus acquired influence attitude and behavior of political actors? And, secondly, does performance deal differently with these acts of colonialism than classical, political debate? Does it contribute to a shared culture of memory?

The construction of *De Waarheidscommissie* (Ben Chikha 2013) was simple: it was composed of an introduction, a series of testimonies, cross-examination, conclusive suggestions by the commission, and an epilogue. The commission

was composed of five experts with very diverse backgrounds. President Herman Balthazar is a retired history professor and the former governor of the province of Eastern Flanders—an intellectual and a politician. Omar Ba is coordinator of African organization in Ghent and a Belgian with Senegalese roots. Marijke Pinoy is a professional actress. Camille van Uytvanghe owns a newsstand in a popular neighborhood in Ghent. Liesbeth Clara organizes workshops on cultural inclusion. This last member is the only fictional character; the others participate under their own name, and with their real background—even when they participate in a scripted performance. In front of the commission, on the witness bench, two Senegalese men and a Senegalese woman are seated, representing their ancestors, who were once exhibited at the Ghent World Fair. The president opens the debate with a speech in which he tries to explain the work of his commission. Reminding audiences that the term “truth commission” has, since the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a strong moral impact, he speaks about the necessity to rewrite history continuously.

Wij willen deze beelden van Senegalezen en Filippino's redden van de vergetelheid. Wij vragen dat zij tot een gedeelde of zelfs tot een collectieve herinnering zullen behoren. Het hangt af van onze bereidheid—van ons allen, niet alleen van deze commissie—om onze huidige omgang met de puinhopen van het koloniale verleden te vergelijken met die feiten van toen. [We want to save these images of Senegalese and Filipino people from oblivion. We demand that they should belong to a shared or even a collective memory. It depends from our readiness—from all of us, not restricted to the members of this commission—to compare our actual dealings with the ruins of the colonial past with the facts at that time.] (Ben Chikha, *De Waarheidscommissie* 3)

The political status of the commission regarding its dealing with the past should be acknowledged, since it will decide what should be remembered and what should be forgotten. The Senegalese are welcomed and the president refers to the mortal remains of an ancestor, who died in Ghent, exhibited in the courtroom.

Het besef dat wij invloed hebben op vergetelheid en herinnering, dat besef is even verhelderend als ontnuchterend. Wij moeten ons hoeden voor ijdelheid. Wij zijn de hoofdrolspelers niet, dat zijn de getuigen. Net als die symbolische getuige achter mij. Het zijn de resten van Madi Dialy, overleden in 1913, hier in Gent. [The awareness that we can influence oblivion and reminiscence, this awareness is both clarifying and sobering. We should look out for vanity. We are not the main characters, the witnesses are. Just like this symbolic witness, here behind me. These are the remains of Madi Dialy, passed away in 1913, here in Ghent.] (Ben Chikha, *De Waarheidscommissie* 3)

They honor him with dances and chants. After the ceremony, the president presents the members of the commission and he sums up the investigative questions of the commission:

1. *De tentoongestelde dorpen op de expo van 1913: waren het zoos humans of was er sprake van interculturele uitwisseling?* [Were the exotic villages of the world fair of 1913 'human zoos' or can we consider them as a form of cultural exchange?]
2. (...) *Wat is de erfenis van de zoo human?* [What is the legacy of the 'human zoos'?]
3. (...) *Wat reikt deze commissie ons aan voor de toekomst?* [What can this commission offer for the future?] (Ben Chikha, *De Waarheidscommissie 2*)

These are not the questions a "real" truth commission faces, as these are usually created in the framework of the transition from a dictatorial to a democratic regime. The South African TRC never asked whether apartheid was evil or benign, since the legitimacy of the transition itself was based upon the inhumane nature of apartheid. The TRC judged historical acts of violence in the context of apartheid. The TRC testimonies were elements in the construction of a reconciled nation and a therapy to heal individual and societal trauma (Moon 115–138).

Chokri Ben Chikha's 'fictive' commission, however, asks whether contemporary uses of cultural difference do not continue the traumatic relation between the western world and, in this particular case, Africa. The TRC concentrated on the excesses, not on the social scars, open wounds, and structural ruptures a regime, based upon racial humiliation, had left on South African society (Castillejo-Cuellar 23). The issue of the continuity of a culture of neocolonialism will be constantly present in the performance.

The first, historical part ("Deel I: Verleden") confronts two visions of the past. An expert informs the commission and the audience about the facts on the human zoos in 1913. This story tells the audience of the bare facts about the presence of the Senegalese and Philippine villages in Ghent, about the commercial mechanisms behind these "human zoos"—a popular and global form of entertainment in early twentieth-century Europe; about the humiliating comments on their "primitiveness" in local papers. A famous Flemish writer, the socialist Cyriel Buysse, is quoted comparing them with "mongoloids" and "monkeys." The academic also gives details about their medical conditions and their tragic fate after the closure of the exhibition. Three people died during the world fair, and most of the Filipinos and Senegalese were left without food or shelter while waiting for the journey home. A hint about context is given, referring to the case of Saartjie Baartman, the so-called "Black Venus," an object of both scientific and popular voyeurism in the early nineteenth century (Holmes, *The African Queen*). The actress in the commission wonders about the neutrality of the professor, considering the responsibility of science itself in creating racial prejudices. The scientist accepts this responsibility, and the discussion is closed

for the time being. A more vicious comment comes from a member of the “Cyriel Buysse society,” denouncing the atmosphere of political correctness of this “truth commission.” The source of the comment explains the racist remarks of the writer as representative of the spirit of the age. He observes that the official “constructivist” paradigm most contemporary historians adopt is quickly exchanged for a claim of immovable objectivity, a claim the same historians usually denounce if used by a powerful establishment (Osiel 115). He goes even one step further, pleading for “amnesty,” a term ferociously rejected by the African member of the commission. As a legal and as a political term and concept, “amnesty” has special connotations, in different contexts. In Belgium it refers to Flemish nationalists asking for impunity for their spiritual friends who collaborated with Nazi Germany during World War II. In the broader context of transitional justice, it refers to the South African TRC’s power to grant amnesty for perpetrators of politically motivated acts of violence in return for telling the truth.

In the next testimony, the figure of Saartjie Baartman returns, in a dance performance, on a small stage built in the back of the courtroom. Dancer Chantal Loial, born in Guadeloupe, and choreographer Koen Augustijnen, have created a performance dedicated to Saartjie Baartman that is half-impersonation, half-commentary, visually situated in a grey zone between clichés about African bodily expression and European romanticism. Marijke Pinoy, the actress in the commission, feels immediately insulted. In her eyes, Loial’s performance reproduces power relations between white producers and black performers, even when she is clear about her full-hearted participation in Augustijnen’s dance piece. Koen Augustijnen gets angry, takes off his clothes, and spreads them on the floor as a “red carpet” Loial should walk upon. The president interrupts the incident and insists upon the serenity of the debates. Augustijnen, now calm, concludes by proposing to make the issuing of visas for African artists much less bureaucratic.

This scene anticipates, in a polemical setting, the normative questions formulated in the beginning: what lessons can we learn from the historical experience with “racist voyeurism” in Ghent in 1913? Chokri Ben Chikha refers, using the Saartjie Baartman polemic, to Exhibit B, a performative exhibition of tableaux vivants by South African artist Brett Bailey, in which he shows scenes of colonial horror, including an impersonation of Saartjie Baartman as a statue. Apart from its tremendous emotional impact, this “exhibitive performance” ignites a debate about African performers representing their historical exploitation. The “privilege of art” isn’t considered as a plausible defense (Kuyl, *De Waarheidscommissie*).

The commission retires for a brief moment, and the Senegalese dance and sing, which causes indignation among the witnesses: they are there because they can entertain the audience with their exoticism. When the commission returns, the

second part begins (“Deel II: Heden”). The president reflects upon the issue of stereotyping:

*Is de naïeve onschuld een excuus of moeten we dit nuanceren? Want zowel de parodie—“iedereen heeft die grap begrepen”—als de onschuld—“we wilden niemand beledigen”—kunnen zich heel comfortabel achter naïviteit verschuilen. [Is naive innocence an excuse, or should we expound on this? Because both parody—“everybody understood the joke”—and innocence—“we didn’t intend to insult anybody”—can hide very comfortably behind naivety.] (Ben Chikha, *De Waarheidscommissie* 13)*

Neocolonialist imagery continues to be used in advertising, but are these phenomena, even when they appear out of the sphere of marketing, really as naïve as they are perceived to be by the general public? The scientist shows an excerpt from the Flemish TV program *Toast Kannibaal*, a reality show with Flemish families who are confronted with ways of living far from their (sub)urban civilizations. The fragment is extremely humiliating. Flemish visitors try to convince the villagers in Papua New Guinea, traditionally dressed of course, that a compact disc is both a mirror and a magical fetish. The Senegalese witnesses feel directly attacked and react by staging their own commercial show. They try to sell so-called tribal art, in fact nothing but touristic kitsch. The cultural chasm is transformed into a marketed relationship. The difference between both lies in the perceived naïveté of the consumer. The Senegalese denounce the abuse of exoticism, but they affirm their own insight into the mechanism by taking advantage of the exotic desires shared by all humans.

After the economic argument, Marijke Pinoy intervenes, in an attempt to redefine the commission as a “truth commission” as we know it. Following Martha Minow’s analysis of transitional justice, she distinguishes four options for truth commissions:

1. They can judge and punish
2. They can create an environment for stories of injustice to be told and promote societal healing through them
3. They can raise material and/or virtual monuments, in order to fix memories
4. They can pay reparations, based upon the simple law of liability: who causes damage by his fault, pays a reparation. (Minow 9–24, my summary)

Pinoy elaborates on the fourth alternative (reparations) and makes a calculation for a sum to be paid to the Senegalese descendants, based upon the evolution of wages and prices since 1913. Her exercise results in the quite colossal amount of almost €12.000.000. The president adds her proposal to the list of suggested measures.

The next intervention is the most direct political scene of *De Waarheidscommissie*. Witness Mourade Zeguendi presents himself, truthfully, as a Belgian actor with Moroccan roots. Zeguendi is mostly cast as a Moroccan brawler, but he has also become a role model for youngsters of Mahgrebine origin in Brussels. He calls himself a “professional Moroccan.” Zeguendi shows a fragment from an instructive film, made by the Flemish government to inform Moroccan immigrants. The film stereotypes Moroccans as always drinking tea, wearing kaftans, and being uninformed about basic social rules in Belgium. In Belgium one puts one’s garbage on the street just before a garbage truck arrives. In Belgium one keeps quiet in the streets after 10 p.m. In Belgium one doesn’t beat one’s wife. Zeguendi denounces, with all the aggression of his own stereotype as a “professional Moroccan,” these implicit prejudices about anti-social behavior. But commission member Liesbeth Clara—the only fictive character—defends vigorously the official film. The only way to pass this message, she claims, is by using stereotypes. So the question of whether or not stereotyping has any pedagogical value is now posed from a contemporary perspective. Some historians are in agreement about this, regarding the historical ‘human zoos’ (Bergougniou, Clignet and David 275–276). They maintain that stereotypes and stereotypical frameworks (the “villages noirs” on tour, in Europe and North-America) could be instructive and even emancipating. Here it becomes clear that this argument continues to have political significance. But Zeguendi interrupts her apology when she reduces his critique to personal frustration. The president intervenes to stop the incident, and Zeguendi returns shortly after with a pragmatic proposal: in order to prevent negative stereotyping, schoolbooks should include stories of racist exhibitionism, then and now.

Finally, Omar Ba intervenes, trying to refocus on the historical injustices under scrutiny. He also favors revision of colonial history, not by “enlightened” white historians, but by the Africans themselves:

Je me demande s’il n’est pas temps que l’Afrique ai sa commission de vérité sur ses questions, liées à sa mémoire. Et que les Africains arrêtent de lire l’histoire qu’on a écrite sur eux. Mais qu’ils écrivent, lisent et apprennent leur propre histoire. Tenir un livre Blanc, vierge. Il est temps de rétablir la dignité de vos ancêtres en écrivant votre histoire et celle de vos ancêtres. [I ask myself if time hasn’t come that Africa has its truth commission on the issues, connected with its memory. And that Africans stop reading history written about them. But that they write, read and learn their own history. Keep a White Book, virgin. It is time to re-establish the dignity of your ancestors, in writing your history of that of your ancestors.] (Ben Chikha, *De Waarheidscommissie* 20)

His speech is directed to the Senegalese witnesses: it is their responsibility, he insists. The president thanks Omar Ba for his “wise words.” Before closing the

session, he announces a filmed intervention of Daniel Termont, the mayor of Ghent, who apologizes officially for the injustice the city of Ghent committed to the Senegalese and Philippine participants in the world exhibition of 1913. Finally, President Balthazar hands the report to Chokri and Zouzou Ben Chikha, who have been present all the time, as the directors of the spectacle. They can now openly take over the performance, and they give it a curious twist. They observe that the Senegalese are not that happy with the outcome of the proceedings and they wonder what their problem might be. The Senegalese ask for their passports back, which were held back by the producers, in order to prevent their escape to an illegal circuit. In fact, such a procedure is only normal in the context of human trafficking or dubious construction firms. The city of Ghent stood bail for the producers' promise that the African performers would return home in due time. The Senegalese simply want the passports back, immediately. The Ben Chokhi brothers propose to organize a vote among the audience. Of course, the very liberal audience votes in favor of the Senegalese.

The day of the last performance, two Senegalese performers left their apartments before dawn. They travelled to Italy, and they even contacted Senegalese friends in Belgium to replace them for the last evening of *De Waarheidscommissie*. Chokri and Zouzou Ben Chikha could have cancelled the performance, but instead they chose to work with the replacements, and hardly any spectator noticed it. Reality overtook fiction, and even though the audience never learned anything about these final events, it sheds a different light on this performance about (mis) understandings between cultural contexts. The message from the mayor of Ghent, recorded beforehand, was part of the script. But the hidden reality of the desire to escape from temporary legal stay by taking advantage of the "official" participation in a political performance project is something completely different. Now that the playful performative shifts between fiction and reality are over, the situation is deadly serious. The paper will now return to the basic questions about the performativity of truth commissions. What is the relationship between official truth commissions and justice for (mass) violence in a recent or a distant past? What concept of history is used, consciously and unconsciously, in the context of this type of investigative and sometimes judicial process? And finally, what plus-value comes from a project with the specific performative status such as *De Waarheidscommissie*? What is learned here about the relationship between performance and political action?

The very idea of a truth commission, as an instrument of transitional justice after an era of politically-motivated violence, originates from frustrations about strictly legal structures to heal societal wounds after a traumatic period. Tribunals have to decide according to a binary and perpetrator-oriented logic: guilty or not guilty. They treat personal liabilities, while the larger structure of crime can only

serve as a backdrop, not as the object of inquiry themselves. When dealing with political violence, this judicial treatment of transition runs three major risks:

1. The retroactivity of the penalization. Individuals might not be aware that they act against a law during the “criminal” regime, so punishing them goes against the sacrosanct principle of *nulla poena sine lege* (no punishment without a law)
2. The politicization of the legal process. In the direct aftermath of the violent regime, no independent judiciary structures are available. Their build-up is precisely a part of the reconstruction of rule of law, i.e. an aspect of the political agenda of the victorious party.
3. The selectivity of the punishments. In most transitions, it is not possible to call all the perpetrators before a court. More than often the selected defendants are not representative of the moral climate during and after the violence. (Minow 30–31, my summary)

The South African TRC is a relatively transparent case, according to Minow’s criteria. Its most famous “amnesty branch” could decide on the political character of acts of violence, and subsequently grant amnesty to the perpetrators, both from the side of the Apartheid regime and from the side of the oppositional ANC. There was no retroactivity issue, since existing South African criminal law was the norm. The political status of the TRC was clear, as it was founded by an act of parliament.

The amnesty procedure itself was a compromise meant to enhance societal reconciliation, and Nelson Mandela himself urged for special inquiries into the violent culture within the ANC (Minow 54). Amnesty itself was a tool to reduce selectivity, even when the system was based upon the willingness of the victims to report and of the perpetrators to come forward. Only the real hard cases—e.g. perpetrators without any trace of acknowledgment of the facts or moral remorse—would be then be left to be treated as regular criminal cases.

The complete amnesty procedure of the TRC was televised and every session was the object of fierce debate, so the narrative impact on societal healing was considerable. But due to the quasi-legal procedure, the TRC was structurally not competent to judge the larger motives, mechanisms, and consequences of apartheid as a racist system. Paradoxically, the TRC promoted so-called narrative truth that should lead to catharsis, but this truth was rarely translated into a comprehensive story of human rights (Castillejo-Cuellar 17).

In the cases of Argentina and Chile, mandates of truth commissions were much more restricted by political compromises, and the history of their often impeded inquiries is one of the sources of tension between contingent political factors and the continuity of legal claims, tensions which in the case of Chile were endemic within the political culture since 19th century independence (Loveman and Lira, “Truth, Justice, Reconciliation, and Impunity”). Considered more generally, both

truth commissions and regular legal procedures show, in the aftermath of societal trauma, a common characteristic. They both function as “social dramas,” to use the term coined by anthropologist Victor Turner to describe cultural performances of disruption, self-examination, and reconciliation by means of legal and ritual procedures (Turner 61–88).

But it is not only from an external, ethnographic point of view that this legal performativity justice is remarkably significant; it belongs to the hybrid political-judicial nature of transitional justice itself. Legal scholar Mark Osiel points to the performative aspect of what he calls “liberal show trials” after mass atrocity, and his observation can also be applied to truth commissions. But this performative “efficiency,” it exists, is also related to another tension, different from the clash between political power balances and the rule of law—namely the tension between history and law. In the context of societal trauma and its aftermath, politicians, lawyers, and historians insist upon the importance of collective memory. In contrast to the legal treatment of the trauma however, collective memory and historiography alike are not interested in closure as such. Collective memory implies the reassessment of a nation and by a nation, after an era of structural violence and/or injustice. This collective memory shares with academic history the absence of vantage points (Osiel 220). These discourses have to decide themselves about the point where the story started and about the finality of their narration. The more comprehensive their stories, the less history can be judgmental. “Pure” legal judgments can even distort the healing process taking place on the level of collective consciousness (Osiel 229). But there is another side to the issue, from the historian’s point of view. Historians too, says Charles S. Maier, have to learn lessons from the “cruel 20th century,” by acknowledging that they draw bottom-lines, just as judges do (Maier 267–268). If the discourse of truth commissions and comparable quasi-legal mechanisms demonstrates anything, it is the centrality of the victim in the cathartic process these societies need. When a historian, according to his deontology, creates a larger context, he does not justify violence—or the “culture of violence” as some Latin American truth commissions have tried to do (Oglesby, “Educating Citizens in Postwar Guatemala”)—but he seeks (academic) consensus, including oppositional voices about the authoritarian system that facilitated this violence. He is never sure that a just settlement, along with a generous discourse is preferable in the fresh democratic context, compared to a culture of silence, especially in endogenous situations where victims and perpetrators are not clearly distinguishable and where they are forced to live together after the rupture. But historical account, as judgmental as it might be, shouldn’t constitute a risk for cohesion in a democratic society (Maier 274–275). However, this collusion between the historian and the lawyer—with the truth commission as their mediator and, at the same time, their middle term—could obscure an even more fundamental issue, i.e. the issue of time experience by all those concerned with both the working

through of past trauma and the reconstruction of the “new society,” as philosopher Berber Bevernage explains. He analyzes three cases—Argentina, South Africa, and Sierra Leona—where a brutal rupture was observed between the finality of the truth commissions and some concrete victims of political violence (Bevernage, *History, Memory, and State-Sponsored Violence*). He observes a fundamental difference between “irreversible time” (a notion of time that makes official and discursive closure possible) and “irrevocable time” (a notion of time experienced by victims of fatal injustice). This distinction is most painfully visible in the attitudes of the “mothers of the Plaza de Mayo” in Argentina, whose most radical spokeswomen refuse to recognize any definitive statement about the deaths of their relatives, not before the whole structure of violence is laid bare. And even then, the “disappeared” should continue to haunt a society that can hardly come to terms with its episodes of violence. Bevernage tries to conceive a different concept of time, which can take into account this deep and almost insoluble conflict. The recognition of different “regimes of historicity” (Hartog, *Régimes d’Historicité*), as many historians do in fact, is a first move, the acceptance of political “undecidability,” by victims and politicians, together with a continuous revision of so-called facts, is the next (Bevernage 173–174). The books are never closed.

This being said, what about the claim of performative knowledge by *De Waarheidscommissie*? Chokri Ben Chikha’s truth commission does not take place in the context of the process of transitional justice. In contrast with most truth commissions, because it thinks in terms of ruptures between historical periods and political-legal regimes, *De Waarheidscommissie* links anecdotes of a distant past—the villages at the Ghent world exhibition, 1913—with actual policies that reveal the continuity of a colonial attitude, but which only do so past surface analysis. The indignation about dancer Chantal Loial and the rage of the “professional Moroccan” Mourade Zeguendi reveal precisely this hidden aspect. The timeframe used by the Ben Chikha brothers to contextualize Ghent 1913 is radically different from a political one, which is forced to take “healing” measures by judging or by fixing (provisional) official truths. There is no trauma in Belgium about colonial crimes, let alone about “minor” excesses like the human zoos. For the spectator, however, this non-existing trauma can become a part of his unease about the actual policies treated in the course of the play: the commercial and the artistic representation of the colonial past as a form of exhibitionism, the precarious nature of the legal and cultural acceptance of immigrants, including their “native” descendants, in this part of the world. The final scene about the passports reveals the undecidability—the structural impossibility to take a ‘just’ decision, especially when it is a requirement of the (legal, political, moral) situation—of both morals and politics in these kind of issues.

The most visible result from *De Waarheidscommissie*, as a process and as an actual performance, is the official apology of the mayor of Ghent, Daniel Termont. It may be criticized as a gratuitous gesture, but it also exemplifies an important mechanism in democratic politics. In general, democracies are based upon excuses for the past, not as a sufficient basis, but as a necessary condition. In this case, the gesture could be seen as purely symbolical. In Antwerp, more than ten years ago, the mayor apologized for the cooperation of the local police in SS-raids in Jewish quarters, in 1942–43. His declaration was not applauded by all sides, and some wounds were hardly healed. This gesture was the result of a ground-breaking study of anti-Semitism in Antwerp, as it was present there since the 19th century. If a theatrical performance, such as *De Waarheidscommissie*, results in a public apology about an unknown part of history, then this is a plus-value, a result of performative knowledge. Without the performance of Chantal Loial, without the outburst of Mourade Zeguendi, the presented knowledge about ethnic stereotyping and its colonial and orientalist roots would undoubtedly have led to different conclusions. And a traditional Ph.D. thesis about the same subject would probably not have resulted in the mayor's declaration.

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