MAKING ART FROM UNCERTAINTY: Magic and Its Politics in South African Rugby

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In 1986, the historian Herman Giliomee, working in collaboration with the rugby player Tommy Bedford, published an essay in *Die Suid-Afrikaan* exploring the ideological similarities between South Africa's predominant rugby style and the political style of the ruling National Party. Writing during the country's so-called state of emergency, the seeming fact that the apartheid state responded to South Africa's international isolation with increasingly conservative positions troubled the authors. Could the same, they wondered, be said about the nation's rugby? "In South Africa," they decided, "the whole approach is: there is a crisis; we cannot take any chances, [we must] be disciplined, [and] follow the authority figure. This is how we operate our politics, this is how we play our rugby" (Bedford and Giliomee 1986, 56).

Though they offered their answer tongue in cheek, it did claim an explicit connection between the performance of rugby and the performance of politics in apartheid South Africa. In this claim, the authors were hardly alone. A number of scholars have noted that, while the sport of rugby may have arrived in southern Africa as a British colonial practice, it quickly became a preferred (even privileged) avenue of expression for the white, male, Afrikaner identity characteristic of the apartheid regime. Multiple social institutions produced and confirmed this association, including the country's segregated educational system, its military, police, and correctional services, and the Dutch Reformed Church (Coetzee 1988; Grun-

dlingh 1994; Holdstock 1990; Morrell 2001). If many state-sanctioned rugby teams in South Africa adhered to the mandate to "follow the authority figure," then the young men who played on these teams encountered this approach both on and off the field.

This passage from Bedford and Giliomee, however, includes a second connection—arguably more provocative than the first—between rugby and politics. On both sides of the authors' formulation, the condition demanding conservative response is "crisis." For the apartheid regime in the 1980s, the sociopolitical crisis was clear: the state faced opposition, violent and nonviolent, from groups both within South Africa and beyond its borders. The call to make South Africa "ungovernable," issued by the African National Congress in 1984, meant to produce precisely this condition. The source of rugby's crisis, in contrast, goes unarticulated. What produced rugby's crisis situation? What new analytical possibilities emerge if we explore the crisis that rugby seemed to entail?

With such questions in mind, this essay argues that rugby's crisis emerges not from any particular moment of play or opponent on the field, but from conditions inherent to the sport itself. The actual performance of rugby, as participants well know, is marked less by certainty and deliberative action than by unpredictability and spontaneous responses to rapidly changing circumstances.[1] Players, coaches, and teams must negotiate this unpredictability if they wish to participate at all, and these negotiations grant the sport the capacity to influence the world around it, shaping possibilities and entering into existing political conversations with its own voice. With this dialectic in mind, I draw inspiration from the writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Franz Boas, as well as from Theodor Adorno's reconsideration of Walter Benjamin's famous notion of artistic aura, and propose that we can describe rugby's inherent crisis in just these terms: art and aura.

If rugby does elevate unpredictability as its defining structural principle, then unpredictability can likewise be reframed as the sport's unique aesthetic *problem*, one with which all parties involved must contend. By opening this small space of uncertainty, I therefore suggest, we can gain insight into not only the political salience of rugby in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa but also into how we might theorize sports in relation to other forms of creative expression. In particular, this perspective shows that rugby's layering of unpredictable instant atop unpredictable instant produces not only occasions for violence and injury in South Africa but moments of magic thick with political significance as well.

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Nominally representing the city of Pretoria and northern Gauteng Province in South Africa's professional rugby geography, one team—called the Bulls—has gained a reputation for playing what in Afrikaans is termed *maak vas* (perhaps best translated as "secure," implying both safety and tightness). This sort of rugby is premised on a strategy of efficient organization and physical dominance, and the coaches have composed strategic sequences of action, called patterns, to guide their teams. All Bulls players are expected to learn these coordinated actions designed to be equally useful on all parts of the field. Within a given pattern, the player holding the ball can choose between two or three preconceived options, but the strategy discourages breaking from the pattern and trying something completely new. Coaches deem such off-the-cuff actions problematic because the team will struggle to organize itself into a functional whole if its members operate independently. Plus, one particular coach added, a prepared action is inherently superior to a spontaneous reaction, because prepared actions allow players to anticipate the future movements of their teammates. With this knowledge in hand, a player can act more decisively than one who must recognize and accommodate a teammate's independent decision. In response to the spontaneous, unprecedented situations that rugby continually offers up, then, Bulls players are instructed to respond with safe, predictable actions.

In addition, when a team chooses to run tightly controlled patterns, novelty becomes damaging. Teammates do not expect spontaneity from each other, so that which surprises the opposition also surprises one's teammates, perhaps even more. As a result, once an organization has embraced patterns and dominance, it effectively forecloses all other styles of play. Maak vas perpetuates itself.

This commitment to patterns manifests in every Bulls practice. Indeed, this is necessarily the case, because this strategy requires the team to run its patterns as perfectly as possible. Players spend the majority of their field sessions performing a very small range of tasks over and over again. They practice their patterns repeatedly, running into teammates holding cushioned bags, so that they can identify and eliminate errors in form. This kind of repetitive action, coupled with the recruitment of players considered well prepared (physically and mentally) for this particular strategy, seeks to school players in coordination. It is no coincidence, then, that the words Bulls players and management use most regularly to describe their style include *dominant, precise*, and *structured*. One coach told me bluntly that the Bulls attempted to "control everything," and that "people know

it's coming but it's how we execute that makes the difference. With the Bulls we dictate. If our opponents try to play [a free-flowing] game, we kill it and bring it back to our style." Another coach, who spent much of his rugby career as a Bulls player, refers to his players as *masjiene*, machines.

This description of players as machines may be more significant than the coach intended. The Bulls management feels confident that its strategy, properly executed, will reliably produce identical results. They assume this to be the case not only at the level of the final result, but in every discrete action on the field as well. The same sequence of patterns, run on different fields against different opponents in different weather conditions, should nevertheless look and unfold identically. The players are expected, in effect, to train and perform mechanically with the hope of someday becoming (literally) automatic.

Though spontaneous actions may seem like problematic thorns in the hooves of the Bulls, professional rugby matches have become so tightly contested that spontaneity can prove vital to success. Teams no longer play five to ten matches each year, but twenty to thirty. Each is televised and all are immediately dissolved into statistics, allowing teams to analyze each other for their tendencies. If the Bulls introduce any sort of innovation, all their future opponents will have recognized and prepared for it within a matter of days, quickly negating its advantage. In this competitive environment, the tiniest errors grow in significance, because unexpected opportunities arise in the moments immediately following those errors. One Bulls coach recalled such a situation, describing how an opposing player made a mistake and "suddenly the whole field was open." This phrase captures something of the power of the surprising creation of possibility out of nothingness that makes uncertain moments so crucial. In response to such open situations, the Bulls coaches have concocted a special strategy that (temporarily) permits their players to make their own spontaneous decisions. They call this strategy "magic."

This term, articulated by a team that wants to produce masjiene, is significant. It indicates that the Bulls could do everything perfectly, control the game entirely, but that a window of possibility inevitably remains. The right player, with the right skills, in the right situation, and equipped with every additional qualifier, can still take a moment of rugby and build something incredible and improbable out of it. As Alfred Gell's work suggests, this notion of magic is hardly unique to this particular South African rugby team. Considering gardening as a technical activity, Gell (1992, 57) writes, "The idea of magic as an accompaniment to uncertainty does not mean that it is opposed to knowledge, i.e. that

where there is knowledge there is no uncertainty, and hence no magic. On the contrary, what is uncertain is not the world but the knowledge we have about it. One way or another, [the garden] is going to turn out as it turns out; our problem is that we don't yet know how that will be." Rugby will likewise "turn out," and the Bulls find magic only in the precise instant when that turning out escapes their grip.[2]

When the Bulls acknowledge magic in these moments, they give a name to the same element of rugby that Bedford and Giliomee termed a "crisis" at the beginning of this essay. Magic, in effect, is how they respond to rugby's inherent uncertainty—its capacity to act on them, to shape them, and to disrupt their plans.[3] In these respects, magic shares a fundamental similarity with Theodor Adorno's definition of artistic aura. Unlike Walter Benjamin (2003, 253), who found aura in an artwork's unique physical existence and in its singular movement through history, Adorno (1997, 33) argued that aura emerges during the process of the artwork's making, when it first forces us to distinguish between itself and our seeing of it (see also Buck-Morss 1977, 154). In a Western European artistic tradition, this constitutes the point when an artwork begins to take shape as a monad distinct from its creator. Artworks may be human-made objects, but they are also, as Fredric Jameson (2007, 204) has noted, uniquely blind to the world. They are blind, he writes, "both because we see [them as objects] and because [they] cannot look back at us, or indeed out at any empirical reality." As such, they stand in defiance to our gaze (cf. Taussig 1993, 265n9; Buck-Morss 1989, 194), demanding a measure of autonomy as social and historical productions. We can feel something of this defiance in singular pieces of material art (such as paintings and sculpture), but it is perhaps even more apparent in works recreated from a template (such as a theatrical script or a score), because we can watch as aura transforms these templates into something discrete and new in every performance.

This is what Adorno (1997, 79) means when he writes, "Artworks have the immanent character of being an act." Howard Becker (1984, 302) has put this situation even more clearly when he observed, "Similar artworks also have differences: no two play performances are alike, and they may have different characters as a result"; "ignoring the changes does not mean that they do not persist." Paintings and dramatic performances are united in their ability to exhibit themselves with the suddenness of an act—that is, with the suddenness of their coming into existence—whether that act appears in a congealed form (as in a painting) or in an apparently immediate one (as in drama). This openness and contingency

of objectification for Adorno (2007a, 41) protects a live Beethoven symphony from appropriation (see also Bernstein 2001, 115). Once the openness of artistic production can be repeated over and over mechanically, however, artworks "become vulgarized" (Adorno 2007a: 40). Mechanical reproduction destroys the artwork's aura; the act loses its immediacy.

Given the similarity between this conception of aura and the Bulls' notion of magic, it is no surprise that Adorno's pessimistic reading of mechanical reproduction captures well the political dimensions of the Bulls' postmatch video sessions. In such sessions, coaches call to account players who deviated from an expected sequence of play. A coach will often play the footage of an error through to the end and then show it again, pausing just before the spontaneous decision was made. This freezing of time is designed to reproduce the feeling of possibility in the instant of its emergence, and the player is expected to justify his actions to his coach and teammates. Generally, of course, the player will have no ready response (because he, and everyone else, realized his impulsive choice as a mistake moments after he made it), and he will sit back in his chair, chastened. In this way, and with the aid of increasingly precise video technology, coaches can both police mistakes and splice successful sequences of play into new fantasy performances that offer glimpses of a fully realized maak vas script.

While it might be tempting to analyze these video sessions, and the Bulls' response to magic, in terms of rugby's increasing professionalization, Bedford and Giliomee's observations invite a more nuanced argument. Rugby Union only became an officially professional sport in 1995, but the Bulls have played some variation of maak vas strategy since the early 1960s. Then known as the Northern Transvaal Rugby Union (NTRU), the team drew its players on an invitation-only basis from the strongest amateur clubs in and around Pretoria. Until the early 1990s, three of the most consistently successful clubs in the region were the army, the police, and the correctional services. Given that the apartheid state required a massive police, military, and prison system to keep its policies afloat, the strength of these teams during this period is not surprising. Not only did these teams provide the NTRU with many of its most famous players; they also shaped its response to the sport's uncertainty.

Following the institution in 1967 of two years of mandatory military service for white males over the age of eighteen, and even more so after the declaration of a state of emergency in 1985, potential players flooded these clubs. High schools from around the country sent young white men to Pretoria for training, and those talented at rugby often received preferential treatment from their superiors. As

more than one former soldier-cum-rugby player told me, the most skilled players in the army were never sent to South Africa's border for active duty, and few players left base at all. In one often-repeated story, a veteran player approached the coach of the NTRU in the 1970s, a brigadier general in the police named Buurman van Zyl, to tell him that he planned to retire from rugby. Van Zyl listened to the player's story and, when he had finished, responded with a question: "Do you want the long grass or the short grass?" The player took his meaning: Did he want the long grass of serious military service, combating an unknown insurgent threat in Angola or South-West Africa (Namibia), or the short grass of the rugby field? The player chose the short grass and continued to play. As this example shows, not only was rugby in some ways exchangeable with military service but the sport was also used as leverage to keep players in certain regions of the country. Pretoria, home to the Afrikaans University of Pretoria, as well as of the headquarters of the army and the police, emerged as the epicenter of this logic.[4]

As institutions, the police, the correctional services, and the army could not tolerate uncertainty or spontaneity. Both in terms of geography and individual bodies, apartheid ideology coded spaces of uncertainty and fluidity as dangerous. These order-keeping institutions had the express purpose of controlling such spaces and limiting the actions possible within them. Setting aside, for the moment, the question of whether or not such spaces could ever be controlled or limited in practice, not to mention how these institutions of order actually operated (cf. Cock 1991; Cock and Nathan 1989), this ideological relation to uncertainty governed the manner in which these clubs, and by extension the NTRU, encountered uncertainty on the rugby field. Sporting spaces, like social ones, required control and stabilization through dominant force.

Described in these terms, maak vas rugby has received a detailed theoretical explication elsewhere—in Franz Boas's *Primitive Art*. In this work, Boas (2010, 10–11) posits that anthropologists might consider technical mastery, rather than formal "sophistication," a universal index of artistic accomplishment, and he argues that mastery lies in the artist's ability to execute an abstract, mental model in a particular, material work of art. Consider the similarity between this notion of the artist and that of the authority figure described at this essay's beginning: The authority figure, a coach-artist, seeks to impose his mastery on the production of rugby by controlling the resources on which the sport depends, disciplining his performers and shaping their production toward an ideal maak vas performance. Furthermore, Boas (2010, 148) theorized that ideal forms—be they perfect lines,

geometric patterns, or figurative works—did not stem from inherent racial capabilities, as evolutionists generally supposed. Instead, these ideals derived from a group's specific cultural history and the habits of movement and dexterity in which that history adhered. We might say the same about why the Bulls privilege maak vas. The team's social history provides many of its players and coaches with an apparently logical response to the problem of rugby's magic.

Technique may be culturally and historically situated for Boas, but masterful artistic production is only desirable because the uncertainty of that process allows raw artistic materials to resist their own perfect objectification. As Boas (2010, 156) writes,

> The work is laid out in the mind of the maker before he begins and is a direct realization of the mental image. In the process of carrying out such a plan technical difficulties may arise that compel him to alter his intentions. Such instances can easily be discovered in the finished product and are highly instructive, because they throw a strong light upon the mental processes of the workman.

This striking quotation may indicate the place of uncertainty in Boas's theory of art, but it also contains an even more important point: namely, it suggests that anthropologists may find it rewarding to study the space *between* an ideal form and its material realization, because artists leave behind traces of human creativity as they negotiate between their preferred mental images, the uncertainty of artistic production, and the raw materials on which they work. Like imprints made in clay, we can use these traces to reconstruct the minds that produced them. Maak vas rugby, as I show below, can be analyzed in a similar way.

First, however, we must reckon with the ideal maak vas script. Considering maak vas in terms of technical mastery, it becomes apparent that there is something persuasive, comforting, and perhaps even beautiful about the Bulls at play. When everything goes by design, the team overwhelms its opponent, and makes no mistakes, the performance can unfold so smoothly that it appears preordained. Such a performance manages to represent, if just for a few moments, the utopian dream of dominating uncertainty—the possibility of complete human control over a fundamentally unpredictable world. So influential is this aesthetic among the Bulls staff and players that the team has a second strategic response for the most chaotic and unpredictable of situations: a plan called "default." This strategy, in direct opposition to magic, targets uncertainty and destroys it, transforming the openness of possibility into the safest and least complex of the Bulls' strategies.

In doing so, it trusts in the promise of maak vas in even rugby's most desperate moments.

Opting for default in the face of rugby's inherent uncertainty may reinforce the Bulls' particular ideal form, but the inevitable gap between ideal and execution raises an important question: What should we make of magic? Not only does a complete commitment to maak vas render magic difficult to rehearse, but the very existence of magic seems to belie the Bulls aesthetic as well. Specifically, naming magic appears tantamount to admitting both that uncertainty is actually inherent to rugby—rather than a stylistic gesture that can be added or sub-tracted—and that players can never truly become masjiene. Each action by each player continually produces a new unpredictable situation, demanding another novel response, and no amount of discipline and precision can bring maak vas to permanent fruition. More damning still, if the Bulls *did* try to squeeze uncertainty from rugby's live performance once and for all, they would alter the sport's fundamental character. Rugby, in effect, would perform its own magical flourish and escape, transforming itself into an entirely different sort of activity. Bulls matches would look like video sessions performed live, with players of both teams carefully synchronizing and tempering their actions to ensure that the Bulls' pat-terns unfolded exactly as planned. With this in mind, why does magic exist? Why is default not the only response for all eventualities? Why recognize a condition that, for ideological purposes, might better remain unnamed?

Though magic might appear problematic, because it hints that the perfor-mance of maak vas entails its own failure, Boas's reflections on the limits of technique help us appreciate the ways that the South African state turned rugby's uncertainty to its advantage. First, if we consider magic from the perspective of the institutions that built the NTRU's rugby, it becomes clear that rugby's in-herent uncertainty made the sport into a subtle barometer of a player's ability to follow commands and perform under stressful conditions. He would encounter a barrage of uncertainty and violence during each practice and match, and coaches would identify and discourage any irresponsible and spontaneous actions. Adorno (2007b, 89) noticed this dimension of sport as well, writing that apparently "free" sporting moments are examples "not [of] play but [of] ritual in which the subjected celebrate their subjection. They parody freedom in their readiness for service, a service which the individual forcibly exacts from his own body for a second time." In the interstices of order, in moments of magical possibility, a commitment to order could be demonstrated most definitively.[5]

Second, because each decisive action on the field produces new uncertainty, every moment became an opportunity for the apartheid state to perform, and thereby renew, the spectacle of its own authority. If state power is itself never stable or certain, one can see why this continual subduing of uncertainty would have some value—it continually realized the apartheid state's particular and particularly brutal "state effect" (Mitchell 1991). If rugby could be depended on to reliably offer up small doses of uncertainty, the team from the Northern Transvaal would systematically crush it out.[6] Several other ethnographers of the apartheid state have recognized its dependence on the dialectic of certainty and uncertainty as well, albeit in other respects. Deborah Posel (2001) and Leo Kuper (1954), for example, observe that it was the capriciousness of apartheid's racial categorization—its inconsistencies and its subjectivity more than its immoral bureaucratic rationality—that produced its mystique, and Stephen Ellis's (1998, 275) account of the rise and fragmentation of the state's so-called Third Force demonstrates this dialectic on two distinct levels: First, the existence of the Third Force itself, which conducted in relative silence the state's dirtiest work, and second, the discursive "cultivation of ambiguity," which allowed senior apartheid officials to convey illicit orders to their underlings without explicitly implicating themselves in the process. Taussig (1992, 16), who recognized a similar phenomenon during Colombia's state of emergency, carries this line of analysis further still. He argues that states do not simply use uncertainty but need and produce it for themselves. It is this intimate relationship with uncertainty, he suggests, that gives state terror its particularly "sinister quality." If this holds true, and extrajudicial uncertainty sustains the authority of any state, then it comes as no surprise that the apartheid regime's policemen, soldiers, and prison guards were supplied with a strategy that played with the boundaries of discipline and order.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, however, has shown us that the seed of magic that maak vas requires is fecund enough for us to grow alternative aesthetics. For Lévi-Strauss, technique marked only the beginning of art's significance. Responding directly to a Boas essay about the aesthetic significance of split representation, Lévi-Strauss (1967, 255) observes that objects and their masterful embellishment often take shape simultaneously. A vivid example of this phenomenon, he argues, comes in the patterning of facial tattoos in the Maori tradition. The tattoo is, of course, tailored to the shape of the face and the experiences and family history of the person tattooed, but Lévi-Strauss recognized that the face is conceptually tailored to the tattoo as well. The face, he writes, is "predestined" to be tattooed because it realizes its social existence only through tattooing (Lévi-Strauss 1967,

256). This element of contingency, he suggests elsewhere, obtains in any object's decoration. A wood carving, for example, takes shape as a result of "the size or shape of the piece of wood the sculptor lays hands on, in the direction and quality of its grain, in the imperfections of his tools, in the resistance which his materials or project offer to the work in the course of its accomplishment, in the unforeseeable incidents arising during work" (Lévi-Strauss 1966, 27).

This contingency (resulting not just from the limitations of human technical ability but also from the intersection of human, raw materials, and productive situation) proves vital to Lévi-Strauss's supposition that art is situated between scientific and mythological thought. He demonstrates this by means of his famous analogy of the Engineer and the Bricoleur. In *The Savage Mind*, Lévi-Strauss characterizes the Engineer as a figure representing a mode of scientific thought that uses cognitive structures to produce events in the manner of an experiment. This resembles Boas's conception of art: an artist has an ideal form in mind, locates the proper tools and raw materials, develops the necessary skills, and attempts to realize that form in a piece of recalcitrant material. For his theorization of art, however, Lévi-Strauss (1966, 22) places the artist between the Engineer and the Bricoleur, who cobbles together structures from an experienced series of contingent and particular events.[7] This marks a crucial shift, because it allows the artist to draw on the Engineer's mastery and deliberation, as well as on the Bricoleur's willingness to engage the sensible world in a series of open encounters. It is this tension and synthesis that makes artworks cognitively potent for Lévi-Strauss (1966, 25), capable of expressing mythological thought in a semi-deliberate fashion. Art, then, is contingent because of the materials used, but *also* because it is only possible to know what one has been making when one finally finishes it, having traversed the process of artistic creation.

In other words, this critique of Boas suggests that the gap between ideal and material, abstract and particular, is precisely what distinguishes art from other human endeavors. This is why Boas finds such a rich vein of analytical possibility in the attempts of artists to rescue their projects of technical mastery: the magic of artistic creation, for Lévi-Strauss, lies in exactly those imprints in clay. Danie, a man who coached rugby in the Western Cape—a provincial hotbed of liberal opposition during apartheid—approached the sport in just this way. He called magic rugby's "mysterious character," and he argued that magic gave rugby the capacity to resist the implementation of an outside structure by a coach. At its worst, Danie said, an imposed structure becomes a barrier between the player and his or her abilities. The player will want to perform some action only to be

consciously restrained by a responsibility within the team. Rugby, Danie reminded me, demands spontaneous decisions. Time and space take shape simultaneously on the field, and the time it takes a player to recall and implement a set structure can result in lost space and a missed opportunity. The intuitive move, he had therefore decided, might (for all its spontaneity) be more effective in the moment than the one that a coach had imposed.

To teach his teams to react spontaneously, Danie envisioned a one-meter-by-one-meter square surrounding each of his players. Danie described what a player could do within this "magical space" as the player's "skill set," and he saw it as his responsibility to both expand this skill set and improve each facet. His practices, rather than focusing on repetition to perfection as the Bulls' sessions generally do, emphasized creativity and inventiveness. This became most clearly articulated in one particular exercise, in which two offensive players responded to each other's instinctual reactions as they confronted a single defender. Rather than the offensive players deciding in advance which pattern to use to catch the defender unawares, Danie told them to answer to each other's improvised decisions. During the exercise, he urged players to employ whatever little individual tricks or feints they liked. If they wished to try something new, he asked them to do so—even if it resulted in failure. Danie advocated no overarching structure and taught neither offensive nor defensive patterns. Instead, he recognized and embraced the uncertainty of the game's inherent conditions, its magic.

Training players to build their performances from a series of open encounters may have satisfied Danie, but the Bulls coaches dismissed his strategy outright. Rejecting it as "not winning rugby," they observed that this approach seemed to increase both possibility and risk. In an environment with already small margins of error, they argued, coaches had to mobilize all available physiological, statistical, and economic resources to stack the deck in their favor. Danie, by contrast, questioned whether the metaphorical deck could ever be stacked. What other coaches saw as his strange unwillingness to control his players—that is, to impose on them an ideal aesthetic form—in his mind amounted to a recognition of the true state of things: no control was to be had in the first place. All Danie could do was prepare himself and his players to recognize magical moments and turn them to their advantage.

While the Bulls management tends to believe that the only way to ensure success is to preempt uncertainty with coordinated actions, Danie's perspective is notable because it accepts failure as a real—perhaps unavoidable—possibility. As a result, Danie and the players who share his mind-set seem to regard spon-

taneous acts on the rugby field as situated, *creative* acts. Two young players expressed this clearly as they watched a particularly inventive and open match on television. After pronouncing excitedly how much he was enjoying the game, one explained that he liked the style because it "gives the players the freedom to do what they want." Just as he was enunciating the word *freedom*, though, his friend sat up on the couch and pounded a fist against his chest. "Freedom of speech, yo!" he quipped, interrupting his teammate's statement. In maneuvering from freedom in rugby to freedom of speech, the player in question did more than riff on his friend's word choice. More likely, his statement marked an earnest (and spontaneous) sentiment: he considered rugby a form of self-expression. Such a connection is possible, however, only if one re-imagines actions on the field as spontaneous reactions emerging from the body, emanating from (and producing) the author's embodied conception of self. Rather than trying to eliminate uncertainty, then, this creative logic depends on it. This is sporting performance as contingent, uncertain, and dependent on context, rather than stable, structured, and abstract. This is athlete as artist not athlete as master technician.

Like the strategy adopted by the Bulls, this perspective also bears the weight of social relations and history. Many of the players and coaches who espouse this style were once affiliated (or knew their fathers and uncles to be affiliated) with nonwhite leagues under apartheid. Teams in these leagues often played on run-down fields, in front of large and politically conscious crowds. Describing the situation in one region of the country, Abdurahman Booley (1998, 206) writes, "After matches, players (leaving their rivalry behind on the field) would sit with administrators to strategise ways of overcoming the oppressive regime, particularly after the banning of people's organisations. In this way an easy transition was made from the sporting arena of the playing field into the political arena of the struggle against apartheid." As this quotation suggests, anti-apartheid protests often transformed rugby participation into an unavoidably political act.

The aesthetic shape of that participation was no less of a concern. One of my informants presented this phenomenon to me in terms of a binary distinction: First there was the village club that affiliated itself with the apartheid regime. It practiced what he, derisively, called *stampkar*—"bumper car," another term associated with maak vas—rugby. The team was unimaginative and conservative, he told me, and it relied on structure and violent domination to compete. Its players, he explained, "were *boere boeties* [little brothers to the Afrikaners]! They did what the whites did!" In opposition to this stampkar style stood the style adopted by this man's team. Not only did it play a free and open style, taking

risks and using the strengths of individual players to its advantage; the team saw it as politically significant to do so. The rugby field offered a stage on which these men could perform their freedom.[8]

Whether they became aware of the politics of rugby's magic by choice or coercion, it is precisely this perspective that parents have handed down to their children. As a result, many young players of colour recognize, in ways that few white South African players can, the extent to which the patterns they run, the tactical options imposed on them, and the manner in which they are coached draw their inspiration from the political logic of apartheid. Furthermore, these legacies chafe most in moments of extreme uncertainty on the field, when a player feels that an organization's response to magic forbids him from expressing himself creatively.

It is not surprising, then, that players who feel strongly about their rights to self-expression and ones who are drawn (whether by professionalism or up-bringing) toward maak vas often antagonize each other at the level of style. One young player told me that his primary school taught him an open and expansive style of play, but that this style "clashed" with that of his white teammates several years later. What started as a difference in aesthetic preference grew, during each uncertain moment and game, into a full-blown conflict as teammates continually operated at cross-purposes. Players inclined toward creativity took chances their more dominance-oriented teammates thought unwise and selfish, and those dom-inance-oriented players would ignore their teammates' calls to pass and played it safe in return. Ultimately, this player said:

> One guy just started yelling at us, all the coloureds. Then the coaches just walked away and told the captain to sort this out, and we came together and talked. Our captain is coloured, and this white guy, he says to my captain, "I don't want to be a part of this team." So I said to him, "Well you don't have to be a part of this team, just F-off," you know? And then he starts to cry, and then [another white player], he wants to hit our captain, and so there was a big fight.

Without a theory that accounts for rugby's uncertainty and the social conditions of its production, one might dismiss this disagreement as a conflict between South African racial stereotypes. Indeed, many at this player's school remembered it as such, describing the groups of players either as selfish thugs or as conservative racists, depending on their politics. This, of course, does little more than natu-ralize race in the bodies that rugby puts into motion. Such a conflict could similarly

be blamed on the way that rugby's physical violence "raises emotions," or the excessive emphasis that South African society places on rugby performance. These latter explanations prove nearly as unsatisfactory as the first, however, because they overlook the fact that both physical violence and rugby's popularity themselves result from the uncertainty that the sport offers up for display. When rugby is awarded a measure of autonomy, or a capacity to shape the historical and social sentiments that enter into and emerge from it, it becomes clear that rugby's own conditions drew this historically and politically overburdened conflict to the surface.

<p align="center">***</p>

While people often assume that sports contain little in the way of true political possibility, these conflicting responses to rugby's uncertainty suggest that, if rugby cannot necessarily depict the content of political possibility, it can perhaps represent its form—*its openness and deep contingency*. A painter, in this regard, may stand before a blank canvas and try to conceptualize a novel political arrangement—certainly a daunting challenge—but that arrangement often congeals when it comes to fruition in paint. The next moment in a rugby match, and a moment five minutes to come, by contrast, is entirely unknowable and cannot be determined until the instant prior to its realization; each player, coach, and spectator must address these open possibilities using whatever social, historical, and economic resources they have at their disposal. Though it would be uncritical to claim that such representations of political possibility can bring us *closer* to a truly open political moment than any other form of representation, I close this essay with the suggestion that rugby may offer a different and often-overlooked lens through which to analyze how South Africans represent, debate, struggle over, and manipulate those magical moments as they come into existence.

The Bulls, and players schooled in their tradition, try to overcome this uncertainty and use it to demonstrate their capacity to shape the world to reflect an ideal image. Sometimes, for a few intoxicating moments, they are successful. On such occasions, the Bulls seem to be a step ahead of time itself, authoring events and controlling their own destiny. More often, though, the Bulls' patterns fall short of this ideal script. Rugby's magic intervenes, with physics inviting all manner of injuries and small miscues doubling themselves again and again, until even the semblance of structure has collapsed. In such magical moments, the Bulls' coaches and players find that they have to contend with what Ian Hacking (1990, 10) has called "the ancient and vestigial" presence of chance in the world.

The Bulls may disavow this sort of chance when they turn to default, but history suggests that they willingly acknowledge it in magic when it is politically expedient to do so.

It is this residue of chance that undergirds both the Bulls' magic and Adorno's aura, because magic and aura both constitute attempts to name (and thereby represent) the world's inherent uncertainty. For Hacking and the Bulls, this uncertainty makes for the deep contingency that becomes quantitatively knowable when human action seeks to control or eliminate it. In Adorno's work, this quality—which, as in Benjamin's formulation, first made itself known in religious ritual—is precisely that which exceeds the artist's plans during the making of art. Given this underlying similarity, it seems appropriate that Hacking (1990, 10) suggests that this ancient element found "its most subtle and many-layered expression" in an artistic work: Stéphane Mallarmé's poem, "Un coup de dés" ("A Throw of the Dice").

Mallarmé's answer to chance, Hacking (1990, 10) notes, is not to try to tame it, but to "transcend" it. We could describe Danie's coaching strategy as transcendence as well. Rather than acknowledging rugby's magic only in the moments when he has nowhere else to turn, Danie builds his team around it. If rugby is nothing but a series of open encounters that enjoin urgent responses, he reasons, then his players must learn to react quicker, smarter, and more confidently. In committing himself fully to this strategy, though, Danie actually adheres to a far more dogmatic aesthetic theory than the one the Bulls employ. Danie demands allegiance neither to himself nor to a final result, but instead to *rugby* and its inherent conditions, and both he and rugby refuse to compromise. The dogmatism of this strategy, in fact, provides yet another reason why it resonated so widely among those players who sought to challenge and undermine the apartheid state. Not only does this aesthetic allow players to play with creativity, inventiveness, and a kind of freedom but it also disdains the compromises that sustained that brutal regime. For Danie, there is no last-minute retreat to the safety of default. There is only magic, and the acute absence of any default form renders uncomfortably transparent the politics of South Africa's historically dominant aesthetic. In this respect, Danie's aesthetic theory aligns particularly well with Adorno's own. As Adorno (2007c, 180; emphasis added) writes in his essay on art and political commitment, "It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives, but to resist *by its form alone* the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men's heads."

ABSTRACT

This essay examines the intersection of the politics of post-apartheid South Africa and the politics of playing rugby. It traces the sport's history through its manifestations in the apartheid state and the anti-apartheid struggle, but it also shows that South African rugby counts for more than the sum of these histories. Drawing inspiration from the writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Franz Boas, as well as from the aesthetic theory of Theodor Adorno, the article argues that rugby contains an inherent dimension of unpredictability that allows it to recombine and challenge the symbols and sentiments assigned to it. Considered in this way, rugby acquires a measure of autonomy as a social production, shaping possibilities and entering into existing political conversations with its own voice. Acknowledging this small space of unpredictability, then, carries important implications for how we theorize sporting performances in relation to other forms of creative expression. Rugby players, coaches, and teams, for their part, are well aware of the sport's autonomous dimension, and they know that they must negotiate the uncertainty of the sport if they wish to participate at all. These social actors regard uncertainty as a problem to be solved, and they conceptualize and work through rugby's layering of unpredictable instant atop unpredictable instant in socially and historically specific ways. As a result, the negotiations between South Africans and their rugby become a powerful heuristic for post-apartheid social life, and they produce not only violence and injuries but also moments of magic thick with political significance. [sport; art and aesthetics; performance; South Africa]

NOTES

1.   A number of other scholars have remarked on the structural importance of uncertainty to the sports and related forms of embodied practice they study. Writing in terms of the relationship between uncertainty and sporting participation, for example, Heather Levi (2008) has noted of *lucha libre* that professional wrestling is generally regarded as more scripted than it actually is. The lingering presence of uncertainty in fact makes wrestling both difficult and dangerous. Similarly, Rebecca Cassidy (2002, 166) has observed that the thoroughbred industry in Newmarket, UK, "can be extrapolated from the basic uncertainty that governs which horse will finish first, second and third (and last!)." Greg Downey (2005, 123) has shown how "cunning" ("a combination of wariness, quick wit, savvy, unpredictability, playfulness, viciousness, aesthetic flare, and a talent for deception") takes shape within the performance of capoeira; and Eric Worby

(2009) has directed our attention to the play of unpredictability in post-apartheid Johannesburg and its soccer fields. Others have highlighted the importance of sporting uncertainty to spectatorship. Thomas Carter (2008) and Roger Magazine (2007), in particular, draw our attention to the ways that fan narratives about the teams they support emerge from conditions of social instability in Cuba and Mexico, respectively. In doing so, these important works offer tantalizing hints about why sports draw spectators during unpredictable times.

2. This notion of magic resonates with other influential definitions as well. While E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1937, 439) characterized witchcraft as the social force that produces unfortunate events, for example, he also proposed that magic both prevents such situations and neutralizes their effects. Witchcraft, then, may name the *cause* of misfortune, but magic (for the Azande as well as the Bulls) allows its socially permissible redress. Michael Jackson, meanwhile, has carried this resonance to its logical conclusion. Elaborating on Michael Taussig's (1980) analysis of the figure of the devil in Colombian folk magic, Jackson (1998, 54) has suggested that magical medicines should be theorized as one of a broad range of strategies that human societies deploy in response to crises of "control and closure." In this regard, he, like Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (2002), considers magical and scientific reason to address similar concerns about causality, certainty, and chance.

3. George Gmelch (1971) has made a similar point about the proliferation of "magical" rituals in baseball. He notes that pitching and hitting, aspects of the sport heavy with chance, seem to attract many more protective rituals than fielding, which is comparatively more reliable. Though I take my cue on the relationships among chance, sport, and magic from Gmelch's influential essay, I will complicate his analysis in three specific ways in the coming pages. First, the present article suggests that on some occasions, activities like fielding—which, Gmelch observes, is performed successfully more than ninety percent of the time—can be rendered all the more magically problematic for their apparent certainty. Second, while Gmelch notes that rituals of magic are common even among groups that regard themselves as scientifically rational, I will examine some of the ways that this rationality draws on magic in order to sustain itself. Third and finally, I take magic as an indicator of the structural necessity of uncertainty to rugby's live performance. This structural magic, which Gmelch acknowledges but does not examine in detail, constitutes sport's artistic aura.

4. As one anonymous reviewer of this essay rightfully observed, it would be an exaggeration to claim that every player who passed through the NTRU (to say nothing of every player in South Africa) was equally committed to this *maak vas* philosophy. The inclusion of University of Pretoria players alone would seem to undermine the influence that these institutions of order held over the team's preferred strategy. One player who represented both the University of Pretoria and the NTRU, for example, stressed to me that the university played what he called open and creative "student rugby," influenced by their student tastes and interests. Perhaps more significant than this observation, though, was the fact that this same student player, when invited to play for Buurman van Zyl and the NTRU, was told that the "games were over" and that he was going to play "proper" Northern Transvaal rugby or not play at all. Given this example, it seems appropriate to conclude that, despite important exceptions, maak vas gave (and still often gives) vivid and coercive expression to the preferred aesthetic of the apartheid regime.

5. Though such a project lies beyond the scope of this essay, an investigation of rugby's contribution to a white, male "habitus" (Bourdieu 2007) in South Africa under apartheid might find the sport's magical uncertainty a useful starting point.

6. If the NTRU did seek to quell uncertainty in this spectacular fashion, then encounters with rugby's inherent unpredictability would seem to resist theorization as an emergent "structure of conjuncture" (see Sahlins 1981). Players and coaches within the Bulls organization are well aware of the challenges that rugby's inherent conditions continually pose, and maak vas, magic, and default are specifically designed to address them. Only

because the sport offers a structured encounter with uncertainty, then, can these historically and socially situated responses be arranged and, in the case of maak vas and default, practiced ad infinitum.

7. If art sits squarely between the Bricoleur of myth making and the Engineer of scientific thought, Lévi-Strauss (1966, 32) suggests that games are explorations in a purely scientific mold. Though his analysis may reflect the final result of a sporting contest, viewing a game as an uncertain *process* shows its similarity to Lévi-Strauss's artist. Also, while we may recognize that sporting rules do shape the form that this uncertainty takes, we might also argue that those rules operate much like the artistic genres that organize the latent uncertainty present in art. In both instances of production, uncertainty continually challenges and even threatens the constraints of genre until genre boundaries break down or change altogether (see Becker 1984; Fabian 1998; Williams 1977). Yet because the rules of sport are more or less explicitly codified, because an appointed expert generally polices those rules during the act of production, and because team sports are collaborative products that require at least superficial acknowledgment of these rules, sports may exhibit stronger tendencies toward fixity than many artistic forms.

8. Though this dichotomy may prove persuasive in theory, it likely became overdrawn in practice. If this informant's neighborhood club did play a *stampkar* style, such a choice did not imply that they were "brainwashed" (as this informant also claimed). Many coloured players on apartheid-affiliated teams, for example, served in the South African army's "Coloured Corps," and players on such teams might well have developed their stylistic preferences in the same manner as many white young men—under the institutional influence of the military and its preference for controlled, disciplined, certain rugby. Even so, this perception of a fundamental distinction remains analytically significant, because it serves as a reminder of the transparency of rugby's aesthetic politics for players like this one. When a style was read as stampkar rugby, it was—and often still is—akin to marking it with the stain of the apartheid state.

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