

## SPLIT THE VILLAGE

*Katt Lissard*

*Katt Lissard is participating in a community discussion at Oil and Cotton*

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*A project reimagines itself amid a fractious election, a series of strikes and the debate over intangible cultural heritage*

*Split the Village* was conceived as an experiment in using performance and installation to capture the essence of place, to create a transitory cultural archive. The project's inspiration is a 14-kilometer stretch of the Phuthiatšana River in rural Lesotho, southern Africa. An area slated to be flooded in late 2013 or early 2014 when the Metolong Dam is complete. Multidisciplinary and collaboratively constructed, the project revolves around the increasingly controversial notion of "intangible cultural heritage" (ICH) – the practices, representations, knowledge and skills that communities, groups and individuals recognize as a part of their heritage.<sup>1</sup> In the case of the Phuthiatšana, this includes: stories, songs

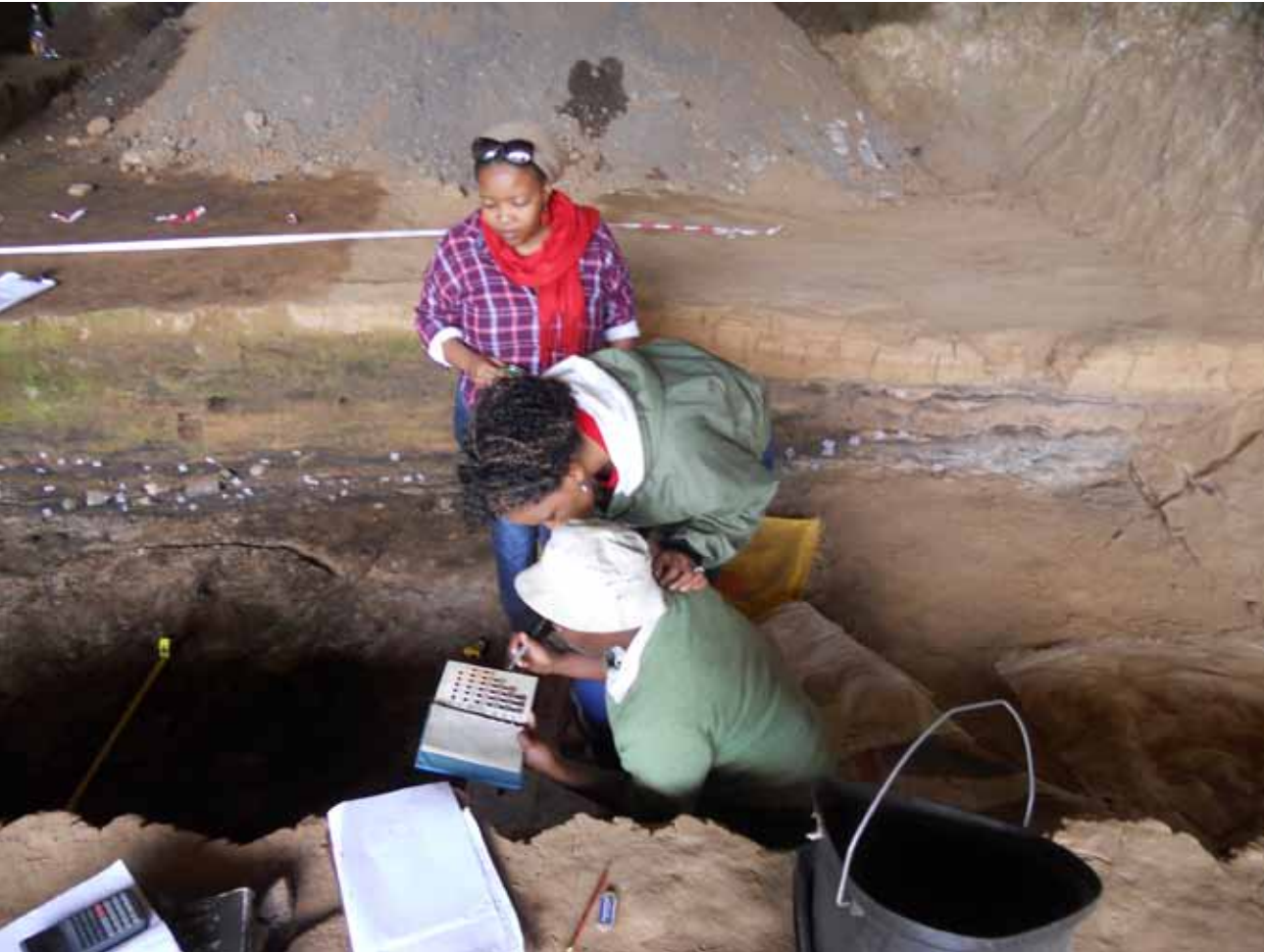
and dances associated with the river; sites of ritual and spiritual power in the river gorge; local knowledge of river plants and herbs; as well as the community's "map" of the landscape itself, which will be irrevocably transformed once the flooding begins and the mnemonic devices (both tangible and intangible) that people rely upon to "place" themselves vanish. While *Split the Village* is not necessarily "about" the Phuthiatšana or the Metolong Dam, the fated tract of river valley serves as the theatrical jumping off point for the project. Starting with the call-and-response echo of river chasm conversations, the pattern of communally chiseled footpaths, and the tall tale of a runaway coffin, the goal is to create a provocative, performance experience and a variety of alternative archives that explore the global impact of local loss.



Qhela, a Phuthiatšana River Valley plant, which grows in an area that will be flooded due to the construction of the Metolong Dam. Photograph by Rachel King

*Overleaf* A section of the Phuthiatšana River Valley, all of which will be submerged once the Metolong Dam is complete. Photograph by Katt Lissard





National University of Lesotho theatre students Motšeliseli Mohapeloa and Likeleli Mofilikoane assisting Lineo "Sheriff" Mothopeng, a graduate of the archeology training program, at a Metolong excavation site. Photograph by Katt Lissard



Removing rock art for preservation from an area of the Phuthiatšana River Valley that will be flooded when construction of the Metolong Dam is complete. Photograph by Lineo "Sheriff" Mothopeng

Work on *Split the Village* began in early 2012. This included researching dam construction and relocations, making contact with the archeology team working at the Metolong sites<sup>2</sup> and connecting with my theatre students and cultural heritage, history and development studies colleagues at the National University of Lesotho, where I spent most of the year as a Fulbright

Scholar. The project's promising start was quickly overwhelmed by a fractious national election and a series of strikes on campus – an all-consuming combination, fascinating and essential, that pulled everyone into the action. Much was put on hold, including *Split the Village*.

It's been a fruitful pause, loaded with questions, reconsiderations and new ideas for how to move the project forward. All emphasizing the importance of flexibility and "being present." The realities on the ground and the realities of community often transform a project's original framework.<sup>3</sup> While *Split the Village* re-visions itself, the debate over ICH continues to develop. The original impulse of the project is very much in synch with the perspective offered in a recent article by two archeologists involved at Metolong: "In a situation where an entire landscape (and its constitutive culture) will be lost, mitigation ('safeguarding') entailed in documentation must be a similarly holistic project and must account for impacts on daily practices, memories and narratives embedded in place, and cultural aspects of economic practices."<sup>4</sup> It's this holistic framing of place that *Split the Village* seeks to uphold.

Despite the interruptions, construction of the Metolong Dam goes on and the impending flood hovers over the valley. The heartbreaking removal of key pieces of rock art for preservation, which would have disappeared under the water, left scars behind that have been filled in with graffiti – contemporary markers of place that are also destined to vanish.

<sup>1</sup> As defined by the 2003 UNESCO Convention on Safeguarding Intangible Heritage.

<sup>2</sup> The idea of Split the Village, to generate an artistic response to the community, cultural and environmental destruction of dam building, has benefitted from the work of a team of on-site archeologists in the lead-up to completion of the Metolong Dam. Since 2009, the core team from St. Hugh's College, Oxford, led by Charles Arthur, has been a key part of the Metolong Cultural Resource Management Project and has worked closely with faculty and students from the National University of Lesotho and with the surrounding communities. That involvement included a training program for young archeologists within Lesotho, which resulted in the formation of The Lesotho Heritage Network (lesothoheritage.org) founded by program graduates.

<sup>3</sup> Through a development residency at IRT Theater in New York in May 2013, I began creating a performance piece, *Surrogate Traveler*, that tries to capture the unpredictable "wild ride" process of *Split the Village*.

<sup>4</sup> Nic Eoin, Luiseach and Rachel King. *World Archaeology* (2013): How to develop Intangible Heritage: the case of Metolong Dam, Lesotho, *World Archaeology*, DOI: 10.1080/00438243.2013.823885

