The *Mbokodofication* of Black Women: An Autoethnographic Study of Post-Dramatic Stress and the 'Strong Black Woman' Trope

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A minor dissertation submitted in *partial fulfilment* of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Arts in Theatre & Performance

Faculty of the Humanities

University of Cape Town

2020

University of Cape Town

COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Igama lamakhosikazi malibongwe. This work is for the long line of women who have come before me, my contemporaries and those who will come after. I dedicate it especially to the life and memory of Uyinene Mrwetyana – you did not die, you multiplied.

I also dedicate this to the teachers in my family. My grandmothers, uFlorina Philisiwe Ngcobo noTabea Nomagcino Cele; my late grandfathers, uAlpheus Zenzele Ngcobo noDouglas Ndoda Cele. I am everything you have taught me.

To my parents – Fuze, Mapholoba, Mashiy'amahle ngath' azoshumayela, Nyuswa! MaNdosi; MaMagaye, Nkom' esengw'ilele ngoma umaimile iyakhahlela – ngiyabonga Mah noBaba. Akukho engiyikho ngaphandle kwenu. Thank you for the foundation. Thank you for the books.

To my brother, who has loved, supported and fought for me since the day I was born – thank you for reminding me always to finish what I start.

I also owe a great debt of gratitude to Liz Mills and Alexandra Halligey, who pushed me to take this chance on myself - against my will and for my own good. I'm forever grateful.

To my supervisor, Dr. Mbongeni Mtshali – Mkhaya, izandla zidlul' ikhanda. Ngiyabonga. Hlabangan'elimhlophe okwezihlabathi zolwandle. Khondlo!

And Prof. Mark Fleishman, my co-supervisor – thank you for your unrelenting rigor and kindness. Your guidance has made all the difference.

A special thank you to every member of the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies at the University of Cape Town who has had a hand in my process. Thank you for your support, thank you for your patience.

La mafelelo, ke leboha mongakobo e bohale – your tireless support and belief in me has seen me through. Thank you.

ABSTRACT

This study introduces into performance discourse the *mbokodofication* of Black women – that is, the production of the 'Strong Black Woman' trope, specifically in the South African context.

To this end, the study traces the genealogy of the tropes of Black womanhood that have emerged throughout the history of the South African literary canon, analyzing them critically for their varied contributions to the (mis)representations of Black women, both on stage and in the world.

Employing the joint methodologies of Practice as Research and African Feminist Autoethnography (which I propose as a variant of Black Feminist Autoethnography specifically contextualized to Black African women), the study unpacks the psychological effects of *mbokodofication* on Black women performers who, through this phenomenon, become locked into the Sisyphean task of portraying trauma and having this trauma re-inscribed to them through the mimetic style of performance imposed by the dramatic paradigm. The ways in which the dramatic paradigm reproduces coloniality are explored and code-switching is proposed as a potential aesthetic liberator for performers who wish to obfuscate and make visible certain elements of Black womanhood from the violent colonial gaze and thus protect themselves from post-dramatic stress.

The study follows the trajectory of my research enquiry and performance practice to explicate the dramaturgical process which brought into being my thesis production, *Malibongwe*, and, in the end, proposes the work as a post-mbokodoist manifesto.

CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

> "… Twenty thousand women singing *Nkosi Sikeleli Afrika*, you should have heard the echoes in the Union Building. There was nothing like that sound, it filled the world. Then we sang a song of the women, "*Strijdom, wathint' abafazi, wathint' imbokodo, uzokufa* – Strijdom, you have tampered with the women, you have struck a rock, you have unleashed a boulder, you will die!" (Albertina Sisulu, quoted in Pollard, 1999: 109)
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> "The involvement of the women in the struggle for freedom meant that, like their male counterparts, they needed to harden themselves like rocks so that the apartheid machinery would not break them, but they would break it. The females' bodies, unlike their male counterparts who were taken to Robben Island… had to bear the brutal force of the apartheid state, which disenfranchised their families, tortured and violated their bodies." (Ramantswana, 2019)

On August 9th 1956, some 20 000 women, led by Lilian Ngoyi, Rahima Moosa, Motlalepula Chabaku and Albertina Sisulu marched to Pretoria's Union Buildings – the seat of then president JG Strijdom – to protest the Apartheid government's pass laws[1] - a movement that was decades old as 43 years prior, Charlotte Maxeke had led women in burning their passes in front of municipal offices.

This movement led by Black women on the front lines changed the course of history for women in general and for Black women in particular – with comparable displays and performances of courage and fortitude earning a generation of women who have followed the title of '*imbokodo*'. The Nguni word for 'rock' or 'boulder', '*imbokodo*' has become an honorific for Black women who have fought, in any capacity, on society's literal and proverbial front lines.

Some sixty years after the 'song of the women' became not only an anthem and a manifesto for the women's struggle, but also etched into popular culture, Black women appear to have remained on the front lines, forgotten there after the protests have ended and the crowds have scattered.

[1] Pass laws were a form of an internal passport system designed to segregate the population … in South Africa, and thereby, severely limit the movements of the black African populace, manage urbanization, and allot migrant labor. In 1907 a new law was passed in Bloemfontein requiring domestic servants to carry a Service book where details of their employment were written. These books were to be carried at all times and produced when demanded. Any person found without thebook … suffered imprisonment and worse. (Akpan, 2015)

In the footsteps of their predecessors, the new generation has seen young Black women the likes of Nompendulo Mkhatshwa, Zulaikha Patel and Shaeera Kalla – almost automatically assume their places on the front lines, perpetual casualties of what Maldonado-Torres (2019) calls the 'war on Black people'.

The basis of my research throughout the last two years has been an unpacking of the representation of Black womanhood on stage as it is informed by, and as it informs the representation of Black women onstage and therefore also the treatment of Black women in the world. It's this representation of Black women as rocks, this celebration of hardness, which my thesis is intent on arguing is re-traumatizing and potentially damaging in the long-run.

Having established the issue at hand, my research has also set out to propose language – specifically the act of code-switching - as a potential means of liberation, however brief, from the misconstructions of the oppressive gaze imposed on Black women by modernity. Maldonado-Torres (2016) frames modernity as a 'peculiar construction of knowledge, power and being that divides the world into zones of being and not-being human which makes war endless and perpetual.'

> *Modernity/coloniality is, in fact, the catastrophic transformation of whatever we can consider as human space, time, structure, culture, subjectivity, objectivity, and methodology, into de-humanizing coordinates or foundations that serve to perpetuate the inferiority of some and the superiority of others. (28)*

Maldonado-Torres further explains that the project of Western modernity is inherently colonial, considering that Europe became modern in the process of conquest and colonial expansion. Modernity/coloniality, therefore, represents what he calls a catastrophe, or "down-turn", that sees societies begin to situate themselves according to 'degrees of being human', as opposed to any other arbitrary categorizations. Because this hierarchy of humanness shapes our concepts of thinking and being, this down-turn can be considered metaphysical, creating a world 'to the measure of dehumanization'. (ibid.)

> *This means that the extraordinary behaviour that takes place in war becomes normal and ordinary in colonial contexts and wherever there are colonial subjects. This paradigm can be in effect in actual wars and genocidal practices as well as in democratic societies.* (17)

I'm interested in the idea that democratic societies begin to look like perpetual war zones when all levels of violence against colonised bodies are normalised. These forms of violence, according to Maldonado-Torres, include (but are not limited to) "profiling, imprisonment, rape, low wages, difficult or no access to adequate housing and health care services, never ending condescension, epistemological and pedagogical disciplining" (ibid.). When looking at these, it's clear to see not only why the Movement for Black Lives calls this the "war on Black people", but also that this war is very much underway in our own democratic society.

I wish to return to Maldonado-Torres later in this explication to theoretically frame my personal experience of making my thesis production. For now, though, and

with this understanding of modernity/coloniality and how it sets the stage for a war on Black people, I wish to pull out the two appendages of modernity which I propose reproduce coloniality in performance - language and Drama.

When I speak of ‘Drama’, I’m referring to the mode of performance that is specifically mimetic in nature - that is to say that it mimics real life, as opposed to representing or narrating it, as in diegesis. With the *Poetics,* Aristotle initiated the shift from the diegetic theatre forms that were traditional at the time to the mimetic form that became Drama or ‘dramatic theatre’. Aristotle’s mentor, Plato, however, was firmly opposed to this practice as he believed mimeses to be unsafe.

As Lehman (2016) explains it, Plato felt that, unlike narration (diegesis), representation (mimesis) placed the performer at risk of losing themselves. Perhaps rightly, I’m beginning to think, Plato feared that performers would not ‘keep their distance’ from mimesis but be so affected by the act of ‘speaking through another’ that their own personal identity would be imperilled. (24)

Plato’s argument was that the mimetic representation of another human being necessarily leads the performer to 'match up’ with the object of representation. His most oft-recalled examples included women, people who were considered insane, the ill or those giving birth, as well as people mourning, lamenting, cursing their husbands, and human beings contending with the gods. This ‘mimetic behaviour’ of representation encouraged the kind of identification with others that Plato felt caused the soul of the performer to become ‘detached from the body to which it belongs’ (ibid.).

This idea of bodily detachment recalls a comment from Waldorp (in Weschler, 1998:7), on the act of translation, in which he describes it as “wrenching a soul from its body and luring it into a different one.” I would argue that linguistic transgression in the form of code-switching “allows the Black body to retain its own soul” (Ngcobo, 2019:7). It’s interesting to me that the theme of souls being removed from bodies is recurring. Perhaps its recurrence suggests that the effect of coloniality, whether it perpetuates itself through language, performance or any other form, is necessarily soul-wrenching.

Nevertheless, Aristotle got his way and much of his theory on the dramatic form has influenced European performance paradigms to this day. As his principles took hold throughout Europe, the thing we call ‘Drama’ was born. Dramatic theatre would become ‘modern’ in the second half of the nineteenth century, owing to the influence of the likes of Henrik Ibsen and his German successor, one Bertolt Brecht.

Suffice it to say that while European theatre was evolving from “the crudest mythological pantomime of primitive man ... to the severest problem-play of the stern Scandinavian” (Matthews, 1903 in Stenudd, 2006), Africa had its own storytelling traditions and performative trajectories which were permanently disrupted and irrevocably changed by the beginning of the colonial project on the continent.

Colonialism, to borrow Adigun's (2016) words, is 'a point of departure between traditional Africa and modern Africa'(2). To him, what we call 'traditional' Africa is the Africa before colonialism - dating back the time immemorial and ending immediately after the abolition of the slave trade. Because the abolition of the slave trade in Africa was closely followed by the introduction of Christianity and colonization in the middle of the nineteenth century (Gbilekaa, 2001: 23) if we were to pinpoint a temporal site of violence, I'm inclined to agree with Adigun's assertion that traditional Africa was 'discontinued officially' at the historic 1884-5 Berlin conference. (2016, ibid.)

On the discontinuation of traditional Africa, Tshazibane (2016) is of the view that Xhosa women have been robbed of their place in society by the interference of colonial religion with Xhosa traditions.

> *If the missionaries had not interfered with intonjane[2], the chances are that it would still be practised, as male initiation is, and would bring about a certain equality between genders, giving the Xhosa woman the same cultural honour and social status as her male partner.* (35)

Tshazibane notes that because the missionaries considered the practice of female initiation, among other traditional Xhosa practices, a threat to the moral fibre of society, many Xhosa women were forced to become (and still are) Christians. The colonial project's disruption of African tradition clearly took a number of forms - those with which I'm particularly concerned are English and its disruption of linguistic and pedagogical practice; and the Dramatic paradigm, with its dislodging of the performance practices already valuable to Black African women.

African oral performances have historically been dismissed as quasi-dramatic phenomena (Chinyowa, 2000, in Tshazibane, 5), however, Chinyowa argues that since its functions are central to teaching matters of social, cultural, mental and emotional consequence, African storytelling (and theatre performance) is closely linked to African people's humanistic philosophy. (ibid.)

Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) defines storytelling as 'the telling or retelling of a tale or narrative to an individual or group of listeners through voice and gestures' (in Tuwe, 2006: 2). He distinguishes storytelling distinctly from reading a story aloud or reciting from memory, since the use and generation of mental metaphors become a method of recording and expressing feelings, attitudes, and responses of one's lived experiences and environment (Gbadegesin, 1984: ibid.).

In the oral tradition, most stories are divided into three parts, namely an introduction, a body section and a conclusion (Matateyou 1997, Vambe 2004, in Tuwe, 4) of which, as Aristotle would've put it, "the beginning is what is "not

[2] Intonjane is the Xhosa rite of initiation, equivalent to the male initiation *of ukwaluka. Intonjane* is also the used to refer to a female initiate.

posterior to another thing," (as in: *kwasuka-sukela*) while the middle needs to have had something happen before, and something to happen after it, but after the end "there is nothing else" (Stenudd, 2001) (or: *cosi cosi*, *yaphela*) .

In essence, African storytelling is a powerful pedagogical tool and as the storytellers, Black women exist within the paradigm as the holders and imparters of philosophical knowledge that shapes the values, beliefs, text about beliefs and ideas, daily practices, aesthetic forms, systems of communication, institutions of society and political ideas of the community (Falola 2003, in Tshazibane, 2016:1).

In sharp contrast, what Adigun calls 'African drama' thematically depicts colonialism and the conventions of the mimetic form place Black women inside of the experience of colonialism instead of allowing her to drive the story from a safe distance. The dramatic paradigm is therefore an important lens through which to look at the construction and framing of Black African women characters (as well as the performers who play them and certainly the writers who write them) because it was specifically through the colonial project that African performance became dramatic and the conventions of this form have (had) a remarkable impact on the ontology of Black womanhood in the theatre.

In a democratic, post-colonial space where colonised bodies are perpetually in the zone of not-human (enough), dramatic theatre - necessarily re-inscribes trauma to the colonial body/performer in ways that are unique to bodies not protected by the concept of humanness. This is what it means to exist "in the perpetually minor role."

1.1 **Umlando - A Genealogy of Tropes**

Throughout my research, I've conducted a study of what I - in agreement with Gray (1990), Hauptfleisch (2007) and Lombardozzi (2005) - consider the most significant women characters in the South African literary/dramatic canon from the first extant South African script right through the theatre of the 1970's, 80's and even the influences of South African theatre on the longest-running soapie on local television. The mapping out of this genealogy has served to plot the emergence of specific tropes of Black womanhood over time and to assess the influence of these tropes on contemporary theatre and culture.

I agree with Seane's (2018) suggestion that certain tropes of Black womanhood are guilty of 'perpetuating the erasure of the black woman even in [their] obvious attempt to represent her."(70) This section aims to unpack the question of *which women specifically* are being constructed, deconstructed and analysed within my study. In order to paint the broader picture, it's necessary at this point to steer the discussion through a quick survey of some of the most significant women characters in the South African literary/dramatic canon.

In his study *Women in South African Theatre* (1990), Gray notes that

> *the earliest [South African] script traceable is an extremely lengthy ritual play about a Muslim woman named Galiema. The plot involves the virtuous*

young Galiema freshly enslaved from the Far East, and her ruses to resist the nocturnal demands of her European owner. ..... The play recounts how the land-owner will attempt to seduce Galiema and, when she refuses his hand, consign her to forced ravishment by his bastard son. (75)

While the allegory of Galiema is said to be based on hearsay, since the original text is a closed document, privately owned and not available to researchers, Gray goes on to call *Galiema* the "first recorded South African script, and the eponymous heroine the first in a long line of symbolic female figures of resistance" (ibid.).

In the article *Venus and White Desire* (2008), Osha analyses the central themes in Suzan Lori Park's play *Venus* (1996), namely: the black subject 'in classical coloniality and her conflicting status; the violence and tyranny of possession, fetishisation, commodification, aesthetics, and totalitarian knowledge' (82). Osha looks at how the black subject, Sara 'Saartjie' Baartman, oscillates between humanity and animality since, because her aesthetics do not conform to Western notions of beauty, she's thrust into the realm of animality or non-humanness, to be humanised, briefly and shallowly as and when it serves the erotic desires of whiteness.

It's in line with all of these themes that the first trope, represented by both Saartjie and Galiema can be referred to as the Venus - the exoticised, eroticised, captured Other.

After *Galiema*, a one-man show by Andrew Geddes Bain entitled *Kaatje Kekkelbek* or *Life Among The Hottentots*, first staged in 1838 is what Gray considers to be the first appearance of an indigenous woman character in South African theatre.

Forced labour, starvation wages, attrition .... Kaatje has many complaints against the colonising process, and Bain intersperses the buoyant song narrating her tribulations with railery and invective. Since the part was played by a male for a colonial audience used to profane burlesque, we may assume Bain was satirising the pretensions and vanity of Kaatje, yet the sketch is not at all unsympathetic to the grievances of newly dispossessed people. Indeed, the prattling complainant in the Kaatje mould persisted in English South African popular culture. (76)

Temple Hauptfleisch (2007) in *The Shaping of South African Theatre: An Overview of Major Trends* says of the farcical satire:

the text dealt with the multicultural and socially diverse society of the time, and introduced a conspicuous figure in Kaatje, the "coloured girl from the Cape" who was to become a widely used stereotype in South African theatre, culminating perhaps in the tragic figure of Athol Fugard's Lena. (5)

Lombardozzi's (2005) assertion that critical scholarship has not satisfactorily commented on the portrayal of women in South African theatre by male playwrights is an astute one and there's certainly more to be said about Fugard and his representation of Black women. In the interest of maintaining the chronology of this study, though, we will return to him later.

Kaatje's character, to me, draws on the Venus archetype, only Bain's blackface caricature of the Venus has a specifically minstrelizing effect. In *Inside the Minstrel Mask* (1996), Bean unpacks the minstrel trope that began to emerge in the late 1820s, placing these characters at the intersection of slave culture and earlier blackface stage characters such as the harlequin of the Commedia dell'Arte, the clown of English pantomime and the clown of the American circus, the burlesque tramp, perhaps the "blackman" of English folk drama. (38)

> *This portrait is fairly typical of the representation of black women on the minstrel stage. White men's fear of female power was dramatized with a suspiciously draconian punitiveness in early minstrelsy, usually in the grotesque transmutations of its female figures.* (39)

In 1935, H.I.E Dhlomo would pen the country's first ever English play written by a Black person - *Nongqawuse: The Girl Who Killed to Save.* Dhlomo is said to have written his *Nongqawuse* in response to the 1926 play *Nonqause* by Mary Waters, which he considered to be the "white people's version" of the story. (ESAT, 2015) According to SA History Online (2011)

> *History is not kind to Nongqawuse. She enters history either through colonial records or the oral traditions passed down from generations amongst the Xhosa people. There is, for instance, this description by a police informant: "A girl of about 16 years of age, has a silly* look, and appeared to me as if she was not right in *her mind. She was not besmeared with clay, nor did she seem to me to take any pains with her appearance."*

According to Pilgrim (2002), the other side of the 'Venus' or 'Exotic Other' trope is the 'Pathetic Other'. Pathetic Others, constructed to refute the claim that white men find Black women sexually appealing, include those depictions of African women as physically unattractive, unintelligent, and uncivilized. These images suggest that 'African women in particular and Black women in general possess aberrant physical, social, and cultural traits.'

In *The Dead Will Rise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing of 1856-7*, Peires (2003) shares that uNongqawuse was eventually

> *handed over to Major Gawler and she stayed at his home for a period. One day Mrs Gawler decided to dress her, along with the Mpongo prophetess Nonkosi, and have their portrait taken by a photographer. This is the widely circulated image of Nongqawuse with which most people are familiar.* (355)

It's clear why Dhlomo, though not a woman, felt it necessary to tell Nongqawuse's story from the perspective of a Black person. Haupfleisch emphasises that it was Dhlomo

> *who seriously attempted – along with Ezekiel Mphahlele, and others – to establish some kind of critical debate about South African culture and*

> *more specifically to bridge the gap between African performance and "classical" drama as it was being taught in schools and universities ... and it was Mphahlele who in a sense took up Dhlomo's cause.* (2007: 8)

In attempting to bridge this chasm between mimesis and diegesis, it can be argued that Dhlomo, Mphahlele and many of their successors - Zakes Mda, for instance - sought to eliminate the colonial difference that placed Black women in the minor roles of their own stories. Then again, the portrayal of women by male playwrights is still a matter of contention.

This brings us neatly, then, to the year 1959, which gives us the only Black woman character that Athol Fugard would ever write - *uNongogo* - about a shebeen proprietress, Queeny, who tries to escape her past as a mineworkers' whore (a 'Nongogo', or a woman for "two" and "six") and lead a 'respectable' life; and her encounter with Johnny, the aspiring township tablecloth-salesman trying to forget his humiliation at having been raped in the mineworkers' compound. (Walder, 1984: 34)

Frankly, what's more baffling than the dearth of Black women characters written by Fugard is the fact that a number of publications has been written about women in a number of Fugard's works - just not *Nongogo*. Anywhere that *Nongogo i*s mentioned, it appears alongside *No-Good Friday,* so that they are an inextricable package - the Sophiatown plays, the township plays, *Nongogo and No-Good Friday* - never being studied as important Fugardian works in their own right.

I've seen criticisms of Fugard in those publications I've found that do mention Queeny briefly - In *Gender Dynamics in Athol Fugard's Drama* (2014), Mwihia and Mbugua point out the similarities between *No-Good Friday* and *Nongogo*. "They were both set among Sophiatown blacks and they weave together the realism or naturalistic setting of a township. He observes that the characters face the same issue which is the poverty imposed on the blacks of South Africa and that to be black in South Africa is to be poor" (p. 326). Walder agrees that neither play offers much hope - both make it very clear that being black in South Africa is not a situation in which hope comes easily (34).

What the literature lacks in substantial analyses of Fugard's Queeny, it makes up for in passages and chapters about the playwright's mother. It might be that the simple answer to the burning question, '*Why has Fugard never written Black women?*' is simply that he's been preoccupied with trying to immortalise his mother, whom he called, "the archetypal image for all my women" (2002: 69). And indeed, his writing reflects the decisive and sustaining role that his mother played in his life. "In fact that's got a lot to do with my plays; the woman is always the affirmative element". (ibid: 7)

Something else worth critiquing is Fugard's methodology. Kulenkampff notes that in the collaborative making process of both his *Township Plays,* Fugard opted for "more of a method-acting style, a form that was popular in the 1950s, than a direct collaboration. The black actors in the group served as conduits into black life and township experience – material he used in the production of *No-Good Friday* (1958) and *Nongogo* (1959). (ibid: 48)

It seems that critical writing on *Nongogo* simply hasn't been done. Having directed the work with students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Philisiwe Twijnstra (quoted in Mungroo, 2019) comments that *Nongogo* has "come at just the right time in our country. Women in South Africa are on their bleeding knees. We all know women like Queeny - they are either dead, buried or relentlessly fighting to breathe."

I'd argue that the shift from prostitute to 'Shebeen Queen' in itself is to place something of a corrugated glass ceiling over the head of the Black woman character, so that even her most valiant attempts at upward mobility and, perhaps even purity, keep her in the township and in the service of men. Moreover, Queeny is not the only Shebeen Queen to come out of 1959. After all, Todd Matshikiza, Harry Bloom and Pat Williams gave us *King Kong* that year, and the role that launched a young Miriam Makeba to international stardom was that of Joyce - a Shebeen Queen.

Along with the ubiquitous Jezebel, the 'Shebeen Queen' trope has persisted in mainstream South African drama - the Mfundi Vundla soapie *Generations,* for instance, aired on SABC1 between 1994 and 2014, holding the largest viewership in South African television (7 million viewers every weeknight) for the entirety of its twenty-year run. (Wikipedia, 2020) Central to the soapie's cast for many of those years was Shebeen Queen, Ruby Dikobe, whose role within her community was undoubtedly that of custodian.

With the various permutations of Venus, Jezebel and Shebeen Queen established, another trope emerged in the 70's through the impact of Elsa Joubert's novel, *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* (1970). The novel was translated into 13 languages, adapted for the stage by Joubert and Sandra Kotzé and produced in no less than six versions; adapted as a musical play called *Poppie Nongena* by Kotzé and Hilary Blecher and filmed twice - the most recent of the films being released this year (ESAT, 2020). The influence of this particular text on the South African literary landscape is undeniable and it was through *Poppie Nongena* that working-class, Black women characters began to take centre stage (Gray, 1990).

In fact, to a large degree, the 1970s were a decade that destabilised many of the hierarchies set up by the dramatic paradigm. With the emergence of workshop theatre, the written text was no longer the theatremaker's blueprint - usurped by a collaborative process that relied on the skills of the performer to improvise toward a jointly-shaped narrative. The role of the playwright then became documenting and archiving the text as it was being 'written' by the performers on the floor. Now, in the place of a director who drove the project emerged a space-holder and co-ordinator of the company's joint research endeavour.

This non-dramatic way of working is entrenched in South African theatre practice by the need expressed by Pratt (1991), who argues that telling our own stories, "bearing witness," or "testifying," acts "as an opportunity for correcting misrepresentations and distortions of a culture by an outsider or an opportunity for people to ''describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them.'' (35)

Gray credits Fatima Dike for what he calls ‘the beginnings of a movement of black assertion’ (83) since Dike’s first work, *The Sacrifice of Kreli* (1976), established almost all of the elements of the "black drama" that was to follow. For the first time since the "tribal drama" of Dhlomo in the 1930s, *Kreli* brought onto the stage an entire recreation of black history, intact, with all its ceremonial pageantry and ritual spectacle (ibid.).

Dike employed an allegorical method of storytelling as described by Tshazibane and Adigun above. This method showed, in fact, the root causes of contemporary popular actions of defiance. The metaphysical problem of the disempowerment of Black people is addressed in most every ‘Black drama’ that comes after Dike’s *Kreli* and, unusually for this kind of work at the time, *Kreli* centres a "wise woman”. The character of Khulukazi is described as ‘the peasant harvester symbol of mother Africa, adaptable, continuingly and undyingly humane’ (p. 84). Nomsa Nene would go on to extend this archetype in the 1980s as *Poppie Nongena.*

Still, another important text by women was produced in 1986 - the play was Gcina Mhlope's *Have You Seen Zandile?*

> *Although Zandile is the most oppressed of all South African stage characters - black, female, working-class and a school-child as well - the impact of the play is not based on any demonstration of the disabilities of such a position. On the contrary, Mhlope’s script reveals all the hidden strengths of the female’s position ... in a word, its solidarity. One shining transaction is enacted during the play - the passing of the gift of storytelling across the generations, from old lady to granddaughter.* (85)

In *Harmony of Voice: Women Characters in the Plays of Zakes Mda* (2015), Lombardozzi looks at Mda’s female characters similarly to the way Gray views *Zandile* - that is, triply oppressed – hav[ing] suffered the triple exploitation of being black, female and working class in an apartheid society. Lombardozzi notes that instead of allowing them to succumb to their circumstances, however, Mda’s characters reflect ‘the hidden strengths of what it means to be female and so celebrate their indomitable spirit that allows them to emerge, if not always unscathed, then most often victorious’ (218).

Mapping out this genealogy of significant Black women characters, it’s clear how the dramatic paradigm reproduces coloniality by coming to the fore in a manner that side-lines the valuable and effective storytelling traditions of pre-dramatic Africa, while simultaneously misrepresenting Black women.

It’s not insignificant, for example, that the two ways in which Nongqawuse is known to us are through colonial records and oral storytelling. Through the former, she exists as Pathetic Other. Through the latter, a real, complex human being. Her case proves, to me, that when colonial forms - languages, ontologies and pedagogies are allowed to represent Black womanhood, they cannot do so fully. When they *do* represent them, the dramatic then attempts to capture them with tropes that do not reveal their fullness.

On the other hand, it's equally important to critique the ever 'indomitable spirit' and other characteristics with which Black women characters are often imbued by well-meaning Black men, who, too, write from the marginalized perspective of Blackness, but who - by virtue of not being inside the experience of womanhood themselves and perhaps, like Fugard, are informed by Oedipal idealizations of their mothers – cannot fully represent Black women either.

1.2 **Mbokodofication - Minding the Pain Gap**

In this discussion of representation versus imitation, especially where Black women are concerned, I'm interested in ideas of public and private, specifically since, through linguistic acts like code-switching, we're able create clearer distinctions between how Black women *appear* or *seem* and how they actually *are*.

To this, I'm interested in Fleishman's (2015) article titled *Beyond Capture: The Indifference of Practice as Research.* In it, Fleishman posits that what Alfred Whitehead calls 'public' aspects of knowledge "focus on the ways in which [an] object appears to us and/or the ways in which in behaves in relation to us or other objects." He asks, though, "what about the 'private' or inner experience of that object that escapes the subject because it is not available to us?" (6) He quotes Nagel (1974) as noting that 'there is something that it is like to *be* an organism – something it is like *for* that organism' (in Fleishman, 7).

So, when an organism (let's say, a Black woman) possesses certain qualities or characteristics, abilities or traits, the experience of which we can't reasonably presume to imagine, this complicates the notion of 'what it is like to be' that woman. (438, ibid.)

Being 'restricted to the resources at our disposal', as Fleishman argues – specifically language limitations, in this instance, but possibly all other perceptive faculties – renders us 'unequal to the task' of imagining what it is like to be a Black woman (ibid.). He hurries Coleman (2009) along to his conclusion

1. *that there is a 'what-it-is-likeness' for all things; (b) that this private or inner state exceeds human capacity to imagine or articulate and has an existence independent from it*. (in Fleishman, 8)

Many of the tropes that have emerged through the history of South African drama have been attempts to capture a sense of the 'what-it-is-likeness' of the Black woman. In all of its attempts to ensnare Black womanhood, the canon has produced a pantheon of cardboard cut-outs that are imitations of women, but not real women. These imitations and representations are dangerous in a number of ways, which I will unpack in detail in this section.

Of all the tropes that have emerged of the history of South African drama, I'm particularly concerned with the trope established in the '70s through the 'adaptable, continuingly and undyingly humane' *Poppie Nongena -* this is the trope of the "Strong Black Woman" – the archetype of the noble, Black, often mother-figure, indomitable in spirit and unbowed by the triumvirate of systems that oppress her.

Suddenly, *Wathint' abafazi, wathint' imbokodo* has morphed into something rather sinister. It appears to me that the decades-long repetition of this once empowering phrase has begun to perpetuate the subconscious perception of Black women as fundamentally non-human - as rocks that can and surely must not experience pain.

> *The bodies of the colonized, subjected to total and perpetual war, have different meanings than the bodies of those who inhabit the zone of being-human. As much as femininity is conceived in terms of passivity and embodiment, femininity is generally considered to be an abused but also protected zone that limits the exten[t] and degree of violence towards those who are seen as feminine. Therefore, a black woman is, by definition, never considered to be feminine enough, or is outside of the standard norms of the feminine (see Davis 1983; Spillers 1987), which means that whatever safeguards come with being recognized as female do not extend to black women.* (ibid, 21)

I propose the critical term *mbokodofication*, a neologism comprising '*mbokodo'* and the suffix *-fication*, to denote the production of the 'Strong Black Woman' trope, specifically in the South African context. *Mbokodofication* is the practice of viewing and subsequently treating Black women more as rocks than as human beings who are capable of experiencing pain and trauma. *Mbokodofication* is also the performance of Black Womanhood that emphasises the stereotypical hardness and super-resilience over humanness and vulnerability. Seton (quoted in Levine, 1997) notes that trauma, when triggered, is locked in the body and must be accessed through the body in order to be processed. *Mbokodofication* is therefore also the calcification of somatised trauma in the Black woman's body resulting from the repeated experience of trauma and the prolonged state of (dis)stress, whether real or conjured up and magnified by the gaze of the spectator.

In her essay, *We Have Suffered Enough* (2019) Melisa Pereyra writes that we, women of colour, are praised when we suffer. "Why do women of color gain space in someone's consciousness only when we show them the depth of our suffering?" She goes on to share that since the beginning of her career in the American regional theatre, "... Beloved female characters have, through my body, been verbally, mentally, and sexually abused; mutilated, murdered, and exiled. I can count on one hand the times my characters weren't harmed."

In *Post-Dramatic Stress: Negotiating Vulnerability for Performance,* Seton (2006) coins the titular term 'post-dramatic stress', evoking the notion of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (P.T.S.D.) to signal the broader complexities of acting practices and their impact on actors' lives. On PTSD itself, Litz and Roemer (1996) explain that

> *The effects of exposure to extreme stressors are profound and cut across all areas of functioning – biological (e.g. Friedman at al., 1995), psychological (e.g. Horowitz,1986; Herman, 1992a), and social (e.g. Gist and Lubin, 1989; Kulka et al., 1990). By definition, traumas such as interpersonal violence, sexual assault, life-threat, bodily injury and extreme loss confront the individual or group with demands that overwhelm their coping capacity, and anyone exposed to trauma through direct experience or observation is subject to predictable disruption of functioning.* (3)

In a recent study on *Neural and Sociocultural Mediators of Ethnic Differences in Pain*, Losin, Woo, Medina et al. (2020) dispel the common belief within neuroscience that Black people are hyposensitive to pain compared to white

people. In fact, the Black subjects of their study reported greater pain in response to a controlled pain stimulation than their white counterparts, with MRI scans showing marked differences in Black people's brain responses to pain - when assessed these brain responses correlated with the subjects' personal histories of experiencing discrimination.

According to Villarosa (2020), these inaccurate racial and ethnic biases about the physiological differences between Blacks and Whites (what Lockward, Vázquez, Díaz Nerio, et. al. call 'invented imperial difference') (in Maldonado-Torres: 38) were presented as fact and legitimized in medical journals during the 1820s and 30's, paving the way and providing support for racist ideology and discriminatory public policies.

A survey of 222 white medical students and residents published in The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (2006) showed that half of them endorsed at least one myth about physiological differences between black people and white people, including that black people's nerve endings are less sensitive than white people's.

The lingering myth that Black people don't feel pain has produced race-based disparities in pain care - a phenomenon Losin calls the 'pain gap'. This is as far as I'll wade into unfamiliar scientific territory - only as far as to support my conviction that the existence of a 'pain gap' in neuroscience and physiology proves the same in all other spheres of modern medicine and that mbokodofication is particularly damaging for Black women because it widens the psychological pain gap.

In my introduction, I alluded to the perilous work of oscillating between character, performer and woman-in-the-world. The gaze continues even off-stage - as the Black woman transitions from character to performer, she is observed by the larger professional community. Here, the praise and acclaim that comes with mbokodofication also plays a role.

When the Black woman performer is mbokodofied, it is inevitable that she will eventually experience post-dramatic stress which disrupts her functioning and well-being long after she's supposedly stepped out of whatever role it was that required her to avail her body and mind to mimesis. In addition to this, if she has truly been mbokodofied, instead of receiving the necessary care, she will likely be applauded, awarded and afforded more opportunities as a result of her successful re-enactment of trauma, cementing her as perpetually ready and available to (and even good at) re-enact(ing) her dehumanisation.

This wave of external validation immediately following mbokodofication produces a temporary analgesic effect that might block the performer from truly being aware of her level of traumatisation and the effects of this trope on her self-concept. The performer now not only experiences trauma through the character which is triggered in performance (or rehearsal), but now, it no longer matters what the character is - she might play any other trope of Black womanhood - because something of a feedback loop has been created - the performer herself is now the boulder.

Black women are therefore faced with a unique representational problem, a Sisyphean task, if you will – locked by the dramatic paradigm into the interior world of a trope, she must trudge up the hill with her shoulder pressed against the need, the responsibility, to make her lived experiences visible. To testify and bear witness, to correct misrepresentations and distortions. Down the boulder will roll when, in the repetitive mimetic depictions of her suffering, she will become re-traumatized and more susceptible to the same traumas she's fought so hard to elevate into visibility. Down the boulder will roll when she is applauded for how well she suffers and she begins to identify as the boulder herself.

The point here is not to attempt to eliminate the boulder - the boulder will always be there. The point is to look more holistically at the picture and begin to re-imagine the Black woman's Sisyphean situation – if she's destined by fate (read: coloniality) to become the boulder rolling down the hill, how can she do so without gathering moss? That is, how can she exist within the dramatic paradigm without becoming identified with the dehumanisation she imitates?

1.3 *Ukweqisela* - Shifting the Room Divider

My first seminar paper (Ngcobo, 2019) posed the question, “as an aesthetic gesture and linguistic performance, what can code-switching offer the process of destabilizing the racist and sexist hegemonies that perpetuate themselves within the English language as it (con)figures the Black Woman in society, and consequently, on stage?”

At this point in my research, a significant shift has taken place - the English language is no longer the sole antagonist. What this is to say is that the racist and sexist hegemonies against the configurations of Black womanhood are not being perpetuated necessarily *by* the English language per se, but perhaps are being perpetuated by the dramatic paradigm, *through* the English language. This means that the way out of these tropes imposed by drama in its memetic form is through a type of linguistic transgression that allows the performer to ‘keep her distance’ as Plato suggests, so as not to place herself at risk.

In this year’s webinar reflection on the process of making and performing *Antigone (Not quite/quiet)* (2019), I proposed ‘aesthetic distance as Deus ex Machina when the performer’s trauma is not quite quiet’ (Ngcobo, 2020). As I further explore aesthetic distance, I’m drawn towards the irony that is produced in the act of code-switching and the extent to which Black woman performers can use this irony as a means of transgressing mimesis and thus protect themselves from post-dramatic stress.

A key presupposition on which this section rests is that language can be an aesthetic liberator for Black women, since the act of code-switching, specifically switching into the mother tongue or *ulimi lwebele*[3] something Mtshali (2019) calls ‘speaking from the breast’... indexes a way in which Black people, women, queer bodies - Others - use language or codes in service of their own agendas (Ngcobo, 2019: 7). In this section, I’ll look at code-switching once again, this time with the aim of clarifying what these agendas might be.

> *Code Switching is used as a mechanism for identity negotiation, situational marking, social-group membership, upward mobility, social solidarity, listener accommodation, face management, discursive salience and linguistic economy.* (Albirini, 2011: 537)

To this, Bandia (1996) emphasises the specific acts of Focusing and Distancing - the former being the use of language to isolate the addressee as the sole intended listener and the latter having the force of saying to the listener "you are ... outside (excluded).” (144)

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[3] *Ulimi* (the tongue/language) *lwebele* (of the breast) is the language an infant suckles (and so inherits) from its mother’s breast during nursing. The term is semantically equivalent to the English, ‘mother tongue’. (Ngcobo, 2019: 6)

The Zulu language has an interesting term to describe the instance of speech divergence (Giles et al., 1977) in which the speaker, wishing to exclude or, more literally, 'go over the head of' an individual or group of listeners, switches away from the lingua franca and into a language not understood and therefore accessible by the listener(s). What we call *ukweqisela* is specifically an act of distancing.

> *When I speak about [ukweqisela], I like to use the analogy of language as a room divider. To some, a room divider is simply a piece of furniture used to divide a room. Kanti kwabanye bethu i-room divider iyinto ebaluleke ngezindlela ezingachazeki ngesiNgisi. i-Room divider ihlala umabonakude, oku yiwona osixhumanisa nakho konke okwenzeka ngaphandle. i-Room divider ihlala izithombe zabantu abafundile, bagreda, nabashadile, bandisa imizi. i-Room divider ihlala izitsha ezingathintwa 'umuntu. i-Room divider ihlala amabhiskidi kaKhisimusi. i-Room divider is a cultural artefact. Therefore when I choose to use language as a room divider, I am not only physically dividing the room in order to have a little privacy here or there, I am also using it to become visible and invisible in ways that are otherwise not possible.* (Ngcobo, 2020: 3)

The 'room divider' can be shifted into a number of positions, so that the agenda to which the mother tongue is called to serve is not just the distancing of the performer from the spectator (thus defenestrating colonial gazes), but also the focusing of the performer on one individual or group of spectators, as well as the self-reflexive distancing of the performer from the character (who, as many modern dramatic characters are, will likely have been written in English and whose very appearance onstage therefore inevitably represents a 'colonisation' of the body of the Black woman performer).

The idea of 'aesthetic distance as Deus ex Machina' is an allusion to the almost farcical nature of the device within tragedy - when the protagonist, stuck between fate and a hard place and facing certain doom, is magically rescued - a deity is lowered onto the stage in an elaborate contraption and the otherwise unsolvable predicament is solved... but not really. It's an easy way out of the conundrum that only serves to resolve it on the surface, while emphasising the fact that, in real life, nobody gets off the hook quite so easily.

Similarly, the creation of distance through linguistic gesture certainly allows the performer briefly to let herself out of the costume, so to speak, both to address the spectator, compelling them to participate in a moment of reflexivity and to address the tropes of modern drama as they perpetuate violence against her. Her doing so doesn't eliminate the trope permanently, though. Deus ex Machina might bring the play to a neat end, but it is, essentially, an empty device leveraged *for* its emptiness, in order to produce irony and thus encourage self-reflexivity.

CHAPTER 2:

METHODOLOGY

This section aims to explicate my methodological approach to the work, unpacking the two methodologies which I've employed - Autoethnography and Practice as Research.

2.1 **AUTOETHNOGRAPHY**

'Autoethnography' means different things to different people, so it's important for me to clarify early on what *I* mean by my use of the term. Chang presents autoethnography as "a qualitative research method that utilizes ethnographic methods to bring cultural interpretation to the autobiographical data of researchers with the intent of understanding self and its connection to others." (2008: 53)

> *The benefits of autoethnography lie in three areas: 1) it offers a research method friendly to researchers and readers; 2) it enhances cultural understanding of self and others; and 3) it has a potential to transform self and other to motivate them to work towards cross-cultural coalition building,* (ibid.)

Chang warns, though, that while autoethnography does offer many benefits, it can also become a research method with little social impact if several pitfalls are not carefully avoided. These pitfalls include:

> *1) excessive focus on self in isolation from others; 2) overemphasis on narration rather than analysis and cultural interpretation; 3) exclusive reliance on personal memory and recalling as a data source; 4) negligence of ethical standards regarding others in self-narratives; and 5) inappropriate application of the label autoethnography.* (ibid.54)

There is, without doubt, a level of responsibility involved with the work at hand. Considering that the intent behind my inquiry is, essentially, to decolonize the figurings of Black womanhood that make it unsafe to exist and even to work as a Black woman, Black woman performer and a Black woman in general, it should follow that the methodology I've chosen is designed to meet this need. As a Black woman engaged in healing work (and what Black woman isn't?), it's important to select methodologies and pedagogies that centre the researcher within a world and a practice that historically excludes or marginalizes her at best and entirely erases her at worst.

If the intention is to assert new possibilities and realities for the seeing, understanding and thus staging and treating Black women in the world, in the industry and on stage, the methodology should be equal to the task.

So, what, then, is the difference between autoethnography as Chang has helped us define it, and Black Feminist Autoethnography? What makes Autoethnography Black and Feminist?

I believe what elevates your regular, garden-variety autoethnography to the nuanced and ultra-woke heights of Black Feminist Autoethnography is intent. It is the lending of this research methodology specifically to the *understanding* of Black women and womanhood and not the anthropological description of her.

Though we've successfully established the appropriateness of Autoethnography, I'm becoming concerned with the use of BFA as too much of a borrowing from African American discourse and thus too foreign and narrow to suit our purposes here - an ill-fitting dress borrowed from a half-sister who inherited her shape from the father you don't share. It might be necessary, then, to let the hem out and further nuance this discussion to something more Afrocentric.

The question is not, 'why is it important to write towards an African Feminist Autoethnography?' Developing an African Feminist Autoethnography is important for the same reasons that Black Feminist Autoethnography is important. As a remedy to literary whiteness. For the same reasons of self-reflexivity, of self-(re)presentation and of identity negotiation. The question is, 'what are the features, characteristics or properties that set African Feminist Autoethnography apart from BFA?'

Well, my first guess would be its basis specifically in an African storytelling tradition. In Allegory and idiom. In call-and-response. In *ingoma*[4]. So, any form of autoethnographic work carried out through *ulimi lwebele* (or whose output is expressed thus) might realistically be called AFA.

> *The act of switching into ulimi lwebele,…'speaking from the breast', is an aesthetic way of entering into the conversation on recalcitrance and refusal. It becomes embedded in the performance of Black Feminist Autoethnography.* (Ngcobo, 2019:7)

Also integral to the diegetic paradigm are *izibongo*[5] and *izithakazelo*, the use and recitation of which I'd propose as another feature of AFA. In the recitation of one's praise or clan names, one engages in the act of narrating the stories of one's ancestors in a way that not only foregrounds her in the present moment but also frames her in context with the past, bringing her historical background into focus. Functionally, to engage in storytelling of this kind, extolling the ancestry and history of a person and their immediate community

> *is to mediate and transmit knowledge and information across generations, conveying information to the younger generations about the culture, worldviews, morals and expectations, norms and values (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1982, Asante 1987, Kouyate 1989, Alidou 2002, Chinyowa 2004 in Tuwe, 2016: 2)*

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[4] Tradtitional Zulu dance. The word "ingoma" literally translates as "anthem'', but nowadays tends to refer tothe many and varied dance styles that exist within Zulu culture, particularly in the competitive arena.

[5] The term *izibongo* is derived from the verb -bonga which means mainly 'to praise,' and also 'to thank,' 'to worship' (Grant 1937: 85; Rycroft & Ngcobo 1988: 12), as well as 'to give clan name or kinship term' (Vilakazi1938: 106). The terms *izibongo* and *Izithakazelo* are often used interchangeably.

AFA is an afro-centric feminist autoethnography that takes into account that while diasporic Blackness is, on many levels, a universal experience, the experience of Biko-Blackness[6] in post-colonial Africa is something else altogether.

Methodologies rooted in the African storytelling tradition lend themselves naturally to the authentic representation of Black women. In speaking about *language* and *code-switching*, we're also speaking about *the ways* in which meaning is conveyed just as much as we are about the spoken, verbal language being used.

> *… the practice of ukubonga is one I intend to explore, not just as a way of 'shifting the room divider', but also as a pedagogical methodology. Again, I'm interested in switching codes here, in order to present ukubonga not as a verbal practice, but perhaps as an embodied practice that archives history in the body. The exploration of this makes room for thinking about the aesthetics of Black feminine corporeality, embodiment and adornment onstage* (Ngcobo, 2020b).

Like another room divider, the method of storytelling itself is encoded with trinkets - cultural artefacts like a doily, *isithombe segrad ka Siya* or The Pink Porcelin Dog. The reason that any and all of these things make AFA is that *ulimi lwebele, ukubonga, ukweqisela* and any other aspects of African culture, make self-(re)presentation and thus the seeing and staging of Black women more possible.

> *I came to the realisation that I could possibly 'ab-use' (Spivak, 2012:3) incommensurability and make it deliberate in order to resist the sort of translatability that requires a diminished self-representation in order to be understood from the perspective of the dominant discourse.* (Seane, 2018: 12)

I wish, in the latter parts of this paper, to revisit Warona Seane's *Autoethnographic Dramaturgy Through A Deliberate Incommensurability* (2018), which the author calls, 'an attempt to create performance methodology around deliberate incommensurability and the myth of the missing black woman.' (45) As one of my key theorists, her praxis is an important part of the foundation on which I build my own.

2.2 **PRACTICE AS RESEARCH**

> *PaR involves a research project in which practice is a key method of inquiry and where, in respect of the arts, a practice (creative writing, dance, musical score/ performance, theatre/performance, visual exhibition, film or other cultural practice) is submitted as substantial evidence of a research inquiry* (Nelson, 2013: 8-9).

Along with the critical framework of AFA, my work is scaffolded along the structure of Practice as Research (PaR), my thinking around which is informed by Robin Nelson's *Practice as Research in the Arts* (2013). First, I want to tackle the questions, 'why PaR?' and 'how can PaR be focused on African women?'

An important reason to make use of this particular methodology is that, as Haseman points out, we stand at a pivotal moment in the history and development of research. Practice-led researchers are formulating a third species of research, one that stands in alignment with, but separate to, the established quantitative and qualitative research traditions. (2013: 22)

A key theme which underpins my research is access - access to knowledge, access to methodology, access to nuance, to instruction, to resources. There is a resource privilege in being able to access a language and thus access the world it speaks into being. If, as a researcher - as a maker, as an activist - the intellectual and artistic resources that I bring into being through my practice, through my research are not accessible to those who do not occupy the same privileged spaces from which I theorize, then it cannot be said that I am engaged in de-colonial work. The way in which PaR decolonizes knowledge on the African continent is that it gives access to the resources created through it, to African people. African people who have historically and deliberately been denied access.

Being a Black, feminist theatre-maker, researcher and activist, I am engaged in an enquiry about language and how marginalized identities can use it as a tool for liberation. It would be contradictory to the purpose of my work to carry out that enquiry using methodology that reinforces that from which we seek liberation. Fundamentally, the hierarchies set up by Western epistemologies are violent on the African continent and to make work that privileges lived experience, embodied knowledge, ritual and oral tradition is to challenge the cannon.

In the persistent tension that builds up in the spaces between us, my use of *ulimi lwebele* and refusal to translate and therefore to render this body, this narrative accessible to certain members of my audience is integral to my study on modes and means of linguistic liberation. What does it mean when a Black woman chooses to exclude the benefactors of the main forms of oppression against her, from a conversation about her? I believe it means self-determination.

How, then, does the Black woman employ irony as a means of resisting the character's, the text's - even the dramatic paradigm's colonisation of her body? How can she *speak from the breast* in such a way as to allow herself enough distance from the character as to be able to expose the trope instead of becoming it?

The beginning of the Master's provided for my first acquaintance with a practice-led research paradigm, that is, "research that is carried out through or by means of performance; using methodologies and specific methods familiar to performance practitioners; and where the output is at least in part, if not entirely, presented through performance." (Fleishman, 2019)

A month-long studio process in which I was tasked with 'embodying the research through performance' yielded a short solo work ('*Isu Lokwakha Umlingiswa Wembangalusizi Ongowesifazane'; or* '*The Recipe for Creating the Woman Tragic Character'*) that not only articulated my then quite rudimentary research question, but which I'm rather pleased to realize has formed a solid foundation on which my thesis production can also stand.

As I've been engaged in what is, essentially, a Practice as Research degree, my artistic practice as a performer, voice artist and theatre maker has been my primary means of obtaining, discovering and creating knowledge as I've endeavoured to answer questions around the constructions and representations of Black womanhood in theatre. My five-minute-long pre-minor project was no different as my body became 'the site of construction, as well as the tool.' (Ngcobo, 2019)

I later presented a minor project which also functioned, possibly even more literally, as the publishing of the research I had carried out on the constructions of womanhood – here, employing my vocal practice to create a sonic text that drew directly from the theoretical sources which informed my subsequent seminar paper.

From there, my research took the sharp turn that has seen the development of my rudimentary question into the enquiry that now exists. It was in the making of the medium project, *Antigone (not Quite/Quiet)* that I began to engage in an autoethnographic study of the links between trauma, trope and translation. It was in the performance – both onstage during the run of the production and reflexively in my webinar presentation – that I published my findings on autoethnography and aesthetic distance.

A solo-making workshop hosted by the Institute for Creative Arts in which I participated in the latter part of last year also presented me the opportunity to continue to develop a dramaturgical process that used my practice as the means for knowledge production as well as publication. This dramaturgical process– one which involves equal amounts of physical movement in the space, writing, composition and performance - is one on which I still rely today.

CHAPTER 3:

CASE STUDIES

Particularly in the context of PaR examination or audit, it is helpful for the assessor to be given in writing a 'clue' ('clew') as to the research inquiry. In the modern form of the word, a 'clue' in writing is useful in PaR since the research inquiry is not identical to the practice, though it is evidenced by it. The old form of the word, 'clew', literally denotes a thread, and students have found it to be a productive metaphor for holding on to the line of the research inquiry as it weaves through the overall process. … 'clew' is subtly distinct from 'clue' in specifically drawing attention to the thread of the researcher's doing- thinking articulated in complementary documentation and writings (Nelson, 2013*:*10)

In the interest of maintaining the conventions of both PaR and AFA as methodologies, it's necessary at this point to lead my discussion through a quick reflexive survey of projects through which I have had the opportunity to try out my hypotheses. This is the goal of this section of my explication.

I want to present these case studies not in a manner that simply describes them, but to theoretically ground and substantiate them by specifically pulling apart the aspects of them that constitute the research with which I'm concerned. In so doing, I provide both a 'clue' into my inquiry and maintain the 'clew' of my thought process as a practitioner-researcher.

Isu Lokwakha Umlingiswa Wembamngalusizi Ongowesifazane / The Recipe for Creating the Woman Tragic Character

I began the first year of the master's with my research question being something along the lines of "How does society turn women into/view/(con)figure women as tragic characters, and to what extent is language complicit in this?" A month-long studio process of embodying the research through performance presented a means of taking the research from theoretical to corporeal and each session served as a step through the task- based exploration of object theatre, embodiment, design, architecture, temporality and space.

The culmination of this process was a larger task which required the creation of a five-minute performance piece that articulated the research question. The product of this was my first shot at the performative exploration of the research enquiry.
My approach of the task was to employ what Mills (1999) calls 'sonic text as action'. I created a sonic text which would form the base of the performance, and which I will analyse for its significance not only as a text but also as an action within the larger scheme of enquiry.

The text was a five-minute-long voice track titled, '*Isu Lokwakha Umlingiswa Wembangalusizi Ongowesifazane'; or* '*The Recipe for Creating the Woman Tragic Character'* (Ngcobo, 2019b). The track was as much the performance as was the physical movement which accompanied it onstage. Setting up the construction of women characters as a metaphor for society's treatment of women, I recorded *The Recipe* in the style of a mid-century homemaker's instructional tape and set it to theme music from the life-simulation video game *The Sims* (Russo, 2007). *The*

Recipe was recorded entirely in isiZulu, with the full understanding that, being in an academic institution in the Western Cape, only a certain percentage of my audience would be able to understand the text. In her thesis, *Theatre Voice as Metaphor* (1999), Liz Mills notes that the choice to place an audience in a position of non- comprehension signals the use of language as a sonic image. It was in my beginningto play with pragmalinguistic focusing, as Bandia (1996) describes, as well as employing *ulimi lwebele* as an act of recalcitrance.

In *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Enquiry* (2017), Barrett & Bold write extensively on the use of improvisation as a methodological vehicle of investigation. For them, it

> *...provides interesting illustration and extension of Bourdieu's ideas concerning the relationship between institutional structures, intuition, knowledge and research ....The significance of improvisation lies in its capacity for effecting an ongoing dialogue between the objective and the phenomenal, and mirroring the relationship between theory and practice.* (Barrett & Bold, 2017: 11)

What liberated the moment of performance from a set structure to intuitive response and improvisation was the sonic image and its role in leading the physical image. The physical performance was led by the verbal performance: much like in the real world, words and language are generative – they create the physical world as much as they point to it. Through this, I intended to speak to the question of how women and women characters are figured through language. I therefore set up the act of responding to and following the instructions of a recipe as a metaphor for the ongoing act of assimilation of the queer, Black, female body into a hetero-patriarchal, white-supremacist world which constantly feeds her messages of Otherness. My body was the site of construction, as well as the tool. The subject and the object, or the signifier and the signified.

As previously mentioned, the pre-recorded voice track was set to theme music from *The Sims*, a life simulation video game described by its creator as an "interactive doll's house" (Seabrook, 2006). In the game, players can create their own characters, build homes and environments in which to place them; and then, based on an algorithm modelled on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, they tend to the desires and requirements of their Sims. The song, titled *Now Entering* (Russo, 2007) which plays during through the 'Create-A-Sim' portion of the game, was chosen not only as an aesthetic reference to the crafting of a character, but also to further distance the world of the character from the real world and speak to notions of reality and the ideal.

In terms of the content of the track, the instructions laid out in *The Recipe* are representative of society's imposed norms and expectations – ideas, which, through language, are used to create people. These ideas, modelled on traditional Zulu ideas of womanhood, dictate how women/women characters are expected to be dressed, how they move or take up space, how they speak, as well as how they behave and respond to trauma. The refusal of a voice for the character is a manifestation of the silencing effects of these realities on the Black woman.

Much like in the case of the video game ‘Sims’, being created or figured in front of an audience and being expected to perform womanhood, the Character is robbed of a sense of privacy or selfhood. In the initial moment, in which the Character is expected to name herself, she invents a name based on what she sees in front of her – other people. The name, ‘Nobantu’, literally means, ‘mother of (the) people’. In naming herself thus, the character concedes that she does not belong to herself, but rather to those who observe and consume her. She is immediately aware of the gaze of others and of the fact that her existence is validated by the presence of a spectator. I make use of this device as a comment on the generative potential of Zulu nomenclature.

The heightening of the performance through this sonic text (and the performance which corresponded to it) created an aesthetic distance which allowed me to unpack the complexities of performing Black womanhood in detail, whilst also creating a compelling narrative.

Tragic Flaw

This performance piece was the next step along the practical exploration of my research – my minor project. This work was an attempt at an overlaying of tragedy onto Black African womanhood - the prominent image being that of ill-fitting clothing, and a metaphor for the English language and thus Western tradition on the Black body. In it, I performed the ritual of dressing – putting on and taking off clothing, examining one’s appearance and ultimately projecting onto oneself received and perceived standards of beauty, propriety and respectability.

Again, in the minor project, I worked with a sonic image. A voice track which began with the closing line and music from my first work denoted the continuation of the narrative or line of enquiry begun in the previous project. This time, I leaned in to leveraging the sonic image, endowing it with even more critical significance than before, mobilizing it as a way of ‘talking back’. On the subject of talking back, bell hooks’ explanation is quoted in Griffin (2012) thus:

> *Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of ‘‘talking back,’’ that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject— the liberated voice. (in Griffin, 2012:143)*

This ‘movement from object to subject’, this act and gesture of liberation is the underpinning of the sonic image. In order to move the Black woman character from the perpetually minor role, it is imperative that the work in which she appears ‘talks back’.

In the minor project, The Character/I begin(s) by performing reading – I/she perform(s) research. This time, instead of a self-written text, the soundscape comprises quotations taken from the literature of Western scholars of Tragedy which represent colonial epistemology.

These inform the process of the black body reading from what could be called a foreign body of knowledge which purports to define the lens through which she is seen and consumed. In addition to the content of the sonic image, I adopt a quality of voice that assumes a particular role. The distinct voice of the Scholar is presented speaking in a British colonial accent - a Received Pronunciation which further creates distance between the scholarship or episteme and the Black body.

> *As I mentioned earlier in the paper, I'm intrigued by the idea of mimesis and translation being two reproductions of coloniality that are said to 'detach' or 'wrench' a soul from the body to which it belongs. It makes sense that they should be similarly viewed this way, as I could argue that translation is a form of, or at least an attempt at linguistic mimesis.* (Ngcobo, 2020c)

In fact, in further thinking about this, it's become clear to me that tropes are produced in the attempts of the dominant culture or language to translate Black women; to render Black womanhood legible. Tropes can therefore be said to contribute directly to some kind of a representational violence. In my paper/performance/lecture presented at this year's Artistic Research Africa conference hosted by Wits University, I mentioned that:

> *Much of my work centers language and how people, particularly Black Women exist within and without language. How language can be used as a liberator, a space creator - a validator - by marginal identities.*
> *The reason there will not be many direct translations in this lecture or generally in my work is that my work is not concerned with translation. In choosing specifically to explore [ukweqisela] instead of translation, my work poses questions about particular linguistic behaviours which carry with them ideas of ethnic and cultural visibility, legibility and intelligibility – all of which, in Post-colonial South Africa, are still hinged on the presupposition of a 'white-' or 'colonial gaze'.* (Ngcobo, 2020c)

Antigone (Not Quite/Quiet)

"December-Something 2019. I had a panic attack at the post office today. Didn't get my ID certified." (Ngcobo, 2019: journal entry)

In keeping with Chang's warning that autoethnography runs the risk of relying too heavily on memory and recall as a data source, I'm relieved that much of what I have in my archive relating to *Antigone* is journal material.

> *"Dec 2 2019*
>
> *There's something of a misconception about portraying pain and healing. How do you know whether the acting out of your trauma is, in fact, healing you or whether the pain is simply calcifying? After a performance or a run or a season, you no longer feel the pain of a trauma because numbing happens… but does that mean you've dealt with it?*
>
> *So when the work is personal and painful, is it really healthy to put the BW performer on the line? It's martyrdom. We're celebrating martyrdom and self-destruction and calling it art. We're committing self-harm and then measuring our strength based on how much of it we can stand before we break. And our breaking doesn't play out on stage. There are no neat, beautiful transitions, there's no music, no one to bear witness and applaud it. We break on our own, in silence and many times we ourselves don't even know it's happening because we're used to existing in a certain condition as BW. Mbokodoism and Mbokodo culture says, "you strike the woman you strike a rock." It has, in my opinion, inadvertently perpetuated for a long time the idea that Black Womxn should emulate boulders - that we should be tough and solid, unmoved and unmovable. This is a pressure I don't often see placed on the shoulders of White Women. White women are allowed to be delicate and soft and feminine. In a world that seeks to systemically annihilate Black people on a daily basis, we simply don't have the luxury of softness.*
>
> *So the work is about rupturing a way of thinking and working undermines good health practice to make way for healthier ones. The solution is not to stop telling our stories, but rather to stop cutting ourselves open for our stories. Let's continue with the telling of our stories, but let's put self-care first. Let's really begin to prioritize ourselves over the work. I hear the widespread gasping and the clutching of pearls when I mention prioritizing yourself over the work. Let me shock you some more. The work is not the most important thing. The work is secondary to you as a whole person. If our portrayals of Black Womxn characters AND Black Womxn actors is that of martyrs, we place ourselves in the centre of the very tragic tropes we so vehemently resist. Our work can still be powerful and relevant and valid and effective - without it damaging us. For how long will we be the beasts of burden?*
> (Ngcobo: 2019)

On the 4th of September, in the latter stages of our rehearsal process for *Antigone Not Quite Quiet* news broke and the country learned the grizzly circumstances of the

death of missing UCT student Uyinene Mrwetyana. We rehearsed, as planned on that day, but nothing was the same. In a journal entry that day, I wrote about how

> *The poem written by Mandisa Vundla, which I had rehearsed many times over by that point, confronted me in a way it had never confronted me before. Suddenly, trauma that I thought I had 'dealt with', that I thought I had quieted, returned with a vengeance to remind me that it would never be quite quiet. Just three years ago, I escaped abduction and certain death by throwing myself out of a moving car. I've always spoken very matter-of-factly about this experience, even joking that unlike your favourite action hero I do my own stunts. On this day, not even the humour was enuf. I was triggered. The trauma that had been locked within my body, as Seton says, was unlocked. I delivered that final line, "Dreaming while black womxn is a disappearing act", and as I lay on the floor I realized that Deus Ex Machina doesn't exist in reality. No one saves us in real life. But while we're in the theatre, while we're re-imagining Tragedy, we might as well re-imagine the stage as a world in which the performer doesn't meet the same tragic fate as the character.* (Ngcobo, 2019)

This moment represented a drastic shift for me, in terms of the focus of my research. It was at this point of personal experience that I became singularly interested in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and the Emotional Hygiene of the Performer.

<u>The Monomyth of NoBaNtu and the Ppl</u>

After the completion of the medium project (*Antigone (Not quite/quiet*) the opportunity came up to continue to make work, without the pressure of presenting it for assessment. I set about continuing to practically develop this character and this work I'd begun to think about only theoretically up until that point. I spent days in the studio, merely entering with questions and a certain amount of curiosity.

I began to develop another solo work, titled *The Monomyth of NoBaNtu and the Ppl* as a sequel to *Isu*/*The Recipe*. *The Recipe* itself was a key point in my research because with it, I'd set up the live construction of a woman character as a metaphor for society's treatment of women and performed the de-construction of language as a way of dismantling the culture, politics and economics that entrench certain dominant perspectives that figure Black women. A character, NoBaNtu, was created, dressed and conditioned onstage according to existing societal norms as well as the conventions and tropes of Tragedy as a genre.

Further pushing the conventions and tropes of Tragedy, this sequel, *The Monomyth*, returns to the genesis of the woman tragic character, NoBaNtu, and plays out her journey as she navigates the tragedy of being stuck in the liminal space between language(s).

Various notes captured throughout the process reflect an adoption of some elements of aesthetic distance already. Dated 22 November:

"I reject the pressure on myself to play Imbokodo. I am not a boulder. I am a person. I need rest. I need sleep, I need food. I need myself and a mind and heart at peace.

I refuse to play into strong black woman tropes by sacrificing my well-being for this work. If what I'm looking at is aesthetic distance for the safety of the actor in performance, then I must practice safety for the maker in the process. I am not a machine. I must slow down and tend to myself. Rest and self-care. These are the orders of the day." (Ngcobo, 2019)

Artistic Research Africa

The Wits School of Arts early this year hosted a conference as part of its Mellon-funded Artistic Research Africa project. I heard myself agreeing to submit a paper and present a lecture/demonstration before I realized I said it. The opportunity to continue exploring what I thought at the time was an 'enquiry into language and how marginalized identities can use it as a tool for liberation' was too good to pass up.

I presented my paper and performed my lecture, critically unpacking my process of creating the as-yet-unfinished *Monomyth* and NoBaNtu the character to an audience of mainly academics and scholars also engaged in their own versions and iterations of 'Artistic Research'.

Here, I leveraged my practice as a performer to demonstrate, in real time, what the construction of a woman character looked like on stage and why every aesthetic choice was a autoethnographic artefact. I also unpacked the cultural artefact that was the Room Divider when I demonstrated the social distancing that became possible with code-switching, so that it was more clear how language was used as a tool for liberation and the creation of 'public privacy' that it might ever have been simply written to read.

Sanah

The next project which I began was a one-person play I titled *Sanah* after my great-grandmother who was the super-hero protagonist. It was at this point that the COVID-19 pandemic reached South African shores and a national lockdown was imposed. The prospects of creating a one-person play that would be seen by a live audience suddenly dwindled to none and the limitations that the lockdown placed on movement and resources presented challenges that further pushed my exploration of my practice.

I decided to translate my one-person play into a comic-style digital event, stitching together still images of myself in costume and character, performing the role for my phone's camera. The limitations of the COVID moment have inspired an unconventional approach to creating the thesis work which have pushed me toward

digital explorations of the physical, psychological and social constructions of Black womanhood.

Retracing the trajectory of my work over the last two years places me squarely at the present moment. I can clearly make out the clew of my thought process as it has developed over time, as well as plot the development of my practice toward this final project – my thesis production.

CHAPTER 4:

A GIRL NAMED MARIKANA – A PROSPECTIVE/REFLEXIVE

This section began as a prospective look at the process of making my thesis production. With moving into the performance venue to begin rehearsal and making work on the floor, however, the prospective writing came to an abrupt halt. I return to it weeks later, with the work now having been made and in its post-production phase. This chapter is therefore both a prospective look at a process planned, and also a reflexive look, placing side-by-side what was planned and what eventually materialized.

4.1 Prospective

In the same vein as the minor project and solo work I've conceptualized over the course of the Master's, I proposed a thesis production that carried through my enquiry in the form of a play titled *A Girl Named Marikana,* which I claimed 'set up the world of a community of women adapting to life post-Massacre under conditions of extreme disempowerment so that they begin to appear less as real women and more as products of their circumstances (or tropified tragic figures).' The proposed play also explored the dangerous work of a performer who must move between these characters, representing and, by proxy, experiencing their tragic circumstances.

I wrote extensively in my second seminar paper about the importance of understanding the ontological problem of the disempowerment of Black women in the world, as this aids in understanding the construction of Black women characters in theatre and therefore also understanding the perilous work of Black women performers whose job is to oscillate between them and I felt that this work specifically mirrored my research in that it was stacked on three levels.

> *At its base level, the work is about various Black women characters. It's a common African practice for children to be named for the circumstances of, or surrounding, their birth. On the level of the titular character, I wish to explore the effects on a Black girl of being named after the Marikana Massacre – the primary catalyst of the disempowerment she and her mother experience. The relationship between mother and daughter is the first layer of Mbokodofication – a widowed woman seeks to perform her resilience by using her child as a political statement in her own fight for memorial justice, effectively erasing the girl's childhood and forcing on Marikana a premature coming of age.*
>
> *On the upper level, the work is also about the Black woman performer who portrays Marikana, Marikana's Mother, and the other women characters who exist in this world. She becomes locked into what I described in my seminar paper as a Sisyphean task when she finds herself needing to step out of these characters and each time suffering worsening symptoms of post-*

dramatic stress. The performer, however, is not able to address her trauma because each time she steps out of a character, she is applauded and encouraged to continue. This is the second layer of Mbokodofication – the Black woman performer is now seen as perpetually able, available and good at performing her dehumanization.

Finally, at the uppermost level, the play is about Black women in the world. The 'pain gap' that keeps Black women's pain unacknowledged and thus undertreated is essentially what results from the construction of Black women as 'strong' and 'boulder/rock-like'. The manifestation of this third layer of Mbokodofication is the chorus of one and many. As feminist poet Nayyirah Waheed states in her famed micropoem, "all the women in me are tired", the chorus represents the many women who exist, at any one time, inside of one individual woman. The sister, the wife, the friend, the student, the patient, the daughter, the mother – and so on. (Ngcobo, 2020)

My thesis production is not only the culmination of my research, but also a response to the challenge of making theatre during the COVID-19 pandemic. For this reason, I decided the work wouldn't and couldn't be a conventional work of theatre. I elected to create a solo work that would feature multiple performances of characters who'd appear simultaneously either onstage or on screen, through the combination of video, live performance, projection and recorded vocal performance.

Narratively, I imagined the play's protagonist would be a performer-character, or 'Vessel' who existed in a state of virtual reality.

She appears onstage with the intention of entering the world of the play, selecting a character or characters to perform/inhabit in a similar way that a gamer might select an avatar or character with which to play. … The virtual world with which the performer interacts onstage then unfolds as a projection elsewhere in the space.

From an array of possible characters (including such iconic tropes as Poppie, Zandile, Galiema, Queeny and Saartjie), The Performer selects Marikana and effectively begins to enter the world of the play. I intend to make the effects of this gamification on the performer apparent as a performative publication of the data I plan to collect through a survey of Black South African women performers who have experienced Post-Dramatic stress as a result of portraying trauma. (ibd.:2)

These initial plans I had going into this work months ago developed into something of a gesture towards a replicable process.

4.2. Reflexive

The making process itself was four weeks long. I suppose the first three could be called rehearsal weeks - although I can't say a whole lot of rehearsal actually took place since I didn't really know what this work would be until around the middle of the

second week. Realistically, these were weeks of coming onto campus, sitting in the theatre alone and, on occasion, generating content. The fourth and final would be production week.

While, theoretically, I'd made peace with the fact that making theatre under the conditions of a global pandemic would require adapting, making the mental shift from the conventional play I'd envisioned since early in the year took me a long time. I couldn't reconcile myself with having to de-construct and change some of the scenes I'd already developed to that point and spent weeks agonising over what I felt was a major regression.

What freed me from this agony, in the end, was a decisive move. I decided, firstly, that I would no longer be making *Marikana.* I cut the Marikana character out of the work entirely and re-structured the thesis production so that it featured only one new character – The Performer/Vessel - and five established tropes drawn from the South African literary canon explored in my *Umlando/genealogy* chapter above. This allowed me to focus on the central character and to lean on what text already exists as far as the historical tropes are concerned.

As something of a proof of concept, I began to create a preliminary draft of the play to test the viability of its technical elements and set design. What I needed the draft to prove was that it was possible to perform and bring simultaneously into the space all of the various characters who have emerged as tropes over the course of South Africa's theatre history. Those who I felt have contributed significantly to the *mbokodofication* of Black women.

Knowing which tropes I'd be bringing in was the first step. I decided I'd be working with the Schoolgirl (specifically, Zandile from Gcina Mhlophe's *Have You Seen Zandile?*); the Jezebel/Shebeen Queen (Queeny from Athol Fugard's *Nongogo*); the Exotic Other (Sarah Baartman); the Pathetic Other (Nongqawuse) and finally, the *Mbokodo* (Poppie from Elsa Joubert's *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena*).

I then set about sourcing costume, set and arranging to pre-film short video clips of each of the tropic characters to be projected into the performance space that the protagonist would inhabit. I invited my supervisors into the space to see this early draft of the work and to give me feedback on the concept itself. A key critique I received was that the characters appeared voiceless, and that this might be inconsistent with the reality of their nature. Nongqawuse, from what has been written about her, had a lot to say – it's been said she had a prophetic voice, in fact. Saartjie, too, by all accounts, was not a meek servant. Neither was Queeny and nor was Zandile.

I had to go back to the drawing board and find ways to re-present these women. What this necessitated was my locating each character within the context of her original text and then creating overlaps that bring these texts into conversation with one another. So, over the days that followed, I scrambled to find the texts which I felt represented these characters so that I could draw from them the voices of these women.

For example, to carve out the prophetic voice of Nongqawuse, I needed to weave together multiple points of existing literature on her. In *The Heart of Redness*, Zakes Mda describes the moment of Nongqawuse's phrophecy thus:

> *Soon the whole valley was covered with mist. The air was filled with the bellowing of cattle, the neighing of horses, and the bleating of sheep and goats. "Cast your eyes in the direction of the sea," Nongqawuse commanded.* (2000: 181)

In the aesthetics of the Nongqawuse scene, I created a soundscape and brought in the visual effects through a fog machine to place the character in this environment. A stage direction in H.I.E Dhlomo's *The Girl Who Killed to Save* states that

> *Nongqause, feigning to be seized with a hysteromania-like trance, laughs, cries, spins round and falls down on her knees and hands- and acts what took place at the river, with additions proposed by Mhlakaza. (Dhlomo, 1935:8)*

Again, I incorporated this direction into my performance of the character. Further, in the text itself, I created my own version in my mother tongue of Nongqawuse's prophecy as it originally appeared in Bradford and Qotole's *Ingxoxo enkulu ngoNongqawuse* (2008). Reading the original isiXhosa orthography alongside Dhlomo's English interpretation and deliberately selecting isiXhosa words such as '*xhela'* for slaughter, as opposed to the Zulu '*hlaba'* in my performance, I attempted to produce the 'Xhosarized Zulu' that Yani (2018) claims Dhlomo employs in his 'occasional lexical interceptions … which re-enforce and are descriptive of particular cultural habits of the [Xhosa] people.' (81) This was my way of *speaking from the breast* as a Zulu-speaker, without engaging in that soul-wrenching act of translation.

In another example of this intertextual work, I brought together the texts of Elizabeth Alexander with Suzan Lori Parks and Lebogang Mashile for an image of Venus that was based on each of these women's works about Sarah Baartman. Alexander's poem *Venus Hottentot* (2004) forms the basis of my performance of Saartjie. I perform Alexander's fabulation of Saartjie's self-narration, my revolutions set to the stage directions in the opening overture of Parks' *Venus*:

> *The Venus facing stage right. She revolves, counter-clockwise. 270 degrees. She faces upstage. …The Venus revolves 90 degrees. She faces right. The Venus revolves 180 degrees. She faces stage left.* (Parks, 1997)

In her monologue, Saartjie describes the ordeal of life as Exotic Other. She describes London's circuses as

> *florid and filthy,*
>
> *swarming with cabbage-smelling*
>
> *citizens who stare and query,*
>
> *"Is it muscle? bone? or fat?"*
>
> (Alexander, 2004)

I introduce this reference in the work through the Zandile character, whose monologue appears first. The young girl speaks wistfully with an imaginary friend about future aspirations – Zandile will become a tall teacher when she grows up and Bongi will be *a White Lady!* Zandile imagines the illustrious lives they'll live, together, as a tall teacher and a white lady – how they'll dress up, wear lipstick and, most excitingly, speak English. As Zandile begins to imagine all the things they'll say to one another, Gcina Mhlophe's voice abates and Alexander's comes out of Zandile's mouth - that peering question: "*Is it muscle? Bone? Or fat?"*

Unlike the previously silent character I'd presented Saartjie as in the preliminary draft, this woman speaks back. She says towards the end of her monologue:

> *Since my own genitals are public*
>
> *I have made other parts private.*
>
> *In my silence I possess*
>
> *mouth, larynx, brain, in a single*
>
> *gesture.*
> (Alexander, 2004)

This became the catalyst for a gesture of obfuscation. It was my cue to erect a room divider. At this point in the poem, I switch into my mother tongue to speak *from the breast* once again, creating a public privacy when the rest of Saartjie's monologue is suddenly obscured from prying Western ears. As Saartjie does this, the closing song from Lebogang Mashile's *Venus Hottentot vs Modernity* (2018), sung by opera singer Ann Masina, begins to play:

> *Uma kungena thina kuyozamazama amabala*
>
> *Uma kufika thina ububi buyothi galo yephuka (x2)*
>
> *Sizobashaya ngengoma, ingoma kaMveli*
>
> *Ingoma, Ingoma yezulu*
>
> *ingoma kaMveli*
>
> *Ingoma, Ingoma kaMveli*
>
> *Wemfazi omnywama, wamabele amade*
>
> *Owancelis' i'ngane ngaphesheya komfula bo*
>
> *UyiMbokodo, uyiMbokodo, uyiMbokodo!*
>
> (Mashile, 2017)

The above song is an ode - to Saartjie in particular and to Black women in general. In '*we mfaz' omnyama, wamabel'amade owancelis' i'ngane ngapesheya komfula'*, which roughly translates to, 'Oh, ample-breasted Black woman who has breast-fed children across the rivers/seas', Masina and Mashile make use of *izibongo* or praise names associated with the Zulu Mthimunye clan to comment on the parasitic drawing of the West from Black and African culture, while also acknowledging the endless self-sacrifice of Black women. The closing refrain, "*uyiMbokodo*!" exclaims, "you are a rock!" completing the *mbokodofication* of Saartjie and women like her.

I applied this intertextual approach to my performances of the remaining characters, bringing aesthetic motifs through the various scenes – Queeny appears, smoking, as the mist from Nongqawuse's prophecy begins to dissipate and the song that Poppie sings as she seemingly prepares for some sort of battle becomes the rousing choral hymn that eventually closes the work. When I return to discuss deliberate incommensurability later in this explication, I will unpack how *Igama Lamakhosikazi Malibongwe* functioned as a manifesto adopted for the making of this work.

The process of identifying the tropes, conducting further research to find the appropriate texts from which to draw their voices and preparing all technical elements such as set and costume left me with little time to rehearse these characters for performance ahead of the beginning of production.

The play itself was beginning to take more the form of a 'digital event' in my mind and I decided that I would make it over two performance days. On the first, a Friday, I came in to perform and film the individual trope scenes which would then be prepared for projection the following day. The Saturday was then a filming of the overall narrative as it unfolded with the protagonist now reacting to and interacting with the tropes as they were projected into her world. These would all be cut and edited together to create a digital production that straddles the conventions of film and theatre.

As a theatre-maker with a film background, I was excited to explore the extent to which the mediums could be married to produce this digital happening. I was creating a solo work about a protagonist who becomes increasingly tormented by the adverse psychological effects of entering the bodies, minds – the texts - of various tropes and I wanted to break the conventions of the theatrical and dramatic paradigms by making use of live and pre-recorded performance, voice-over, multiple camera angles and rhythmic editing to produce irony as a way of aesthetic distancing to protect me, the performer, from psychological strain in the portrayal of the protagonist's evident breakdown.

4.3 A Glitch in the Matrix

> *I have always struggled with the sense of belonging - with a sense of, “is this my place in the world?” and I'm thinking about Nelson Maldonado-Torres' ideas around Otherness and the violence of coloniality, the feeling of not quite belonging, you know, not quite being human and the impostor syndrome that comes with being Other … A lot about what it is to be a Black woman is also about putting oneself last. Self-sacrifice. What it is to be a Black woman is about catering to the needs of others at the expense - to the detriment - of oneself … The understanding that there is no time or space for you, even in your own life, in your own mind, in your own work, in your own eyes - there is no need for you to take up space because space is already being taken up by those who set up the epistemological frame through which you are seen.*
>
> (Ngcobo, 2020)

Now that I’ve begun to lay out my *process* of creating the work, I’m eager to augment that with an autoethnographic reflection on my *experience* of doing so. I’ll steer my discussion, in this section, toward the specific unpacking of my personal experience and process of making my thesis production, not only because explicating the process is the point of this paper, but also because my experience of making the work provides key insight into the ‘ontological problem of disempowerment’ Maldonado-Torres writes about, while also making the case for autoethnography as a methodology.

During my four-week process, I found myself experiencing what felt like living in a simulation of my research. As I was writing and making work that pushes against the violence of the white gaze, I was also faced with the terror of having to work under it. I’ve transcribed the following from a video reflection I recorded at the end of my three-week rehearsal process, as I prepared to enter into the first week of production proper:

> *There's just something about being looked at by white men that is triggering. That is terrifying. To me. … I was thinking about my rehearsal - my open rehearsal I held in this space weeks ago and how comfortable, at ease and natural I felt being observed and being recorded by a Black womxn; being observed and being recorded by someone who looks like me, someone who perhaps has similar life experiences as me; who knows what it means to be …. So, I hold that experience - I hold the experience of infinitely rehearsing and performing identity in the presence of a Black womxn in opposition, perhaps or in contrast to, the experience of being observed by a white man.*

.

> *… Part of my process being in the theatre over the past couple of weeks I’ve been grappling with, dealing with, the presence of a white man in my space. A white man who - you know - isn't deliberately or intentionally problematic, but who was problematic simply by virtue of being a white man, which is not*

> *something that he can necessarily help, it is not something that **I** can help. But it's something that definitely influenced my process.* (Ngcobo, 2020)

Possibly also due to the fact that I'd been living in virtual isolation for the last eight months, the idea of going into the studio to make work was terrifying.

> *The results of that, I would learn when I showed these preliminary shoots, was a set of characters who were… insipid…. And it kind of stood out to me that the characters I had shot and performed through the lens of a white man were so inhibited by this gaze that they read as insipid to the gaze of another white man whose job it was to assess me.* (ibid.)

A week after this reflection took place, I began the final shooting of the production itself. The preliminary shoot had been operated by the stage manager I describe above. Leading up to the actual shoot, though, I'd gone back and forth a number of times, trying to decide who best to collaborate with on the recording of my work. I knew early on that I wanted to work with a Black womxn. I wanted to be more comfortable and at ease in production that I'd been in rehearsal. I wanted to be able to communicate in our own language – even if we were speaking to each other in English.

The snag I hit, though, was that the Black womxn videographers I did engage either lacked the experience and technical skills to be able to execute my vision or simply weren't reliably available. I was referred to another videographer – a white woman who was known for her technical skill in projection mapping and her experience filming theatre. For the sake of getting the work done with what I thought would be 'as little headache as possible', I decided on her.

The videographer arrived on the first day to begin shooting the trope scenes and immediately, the discomfort returned. Now being the only Black woman working with a white man and a white woman, I began to feel Other in my own workspace. Just as I had mentioned in my reflection a week prior, I felt I could no longer take up space because space was being taken up by those who set up the epistemological frame through which I was seen – or, more literally, space was being taken up by those who operated the camera.

The process itself was gruelling. This white woman who self-described as 'bossy' and constantly reminded me that it was my job to keep her in check when she overstepped her bounds, was critical of much of my artistic vision, resisting my direction at every turn. We clashed often - me, trying to hold on to creative control of my vision and her, trying to impose her preferences onto it.

I wanted to create a digital event, leaning into filmic conventions and she wanted to shoot a play. We were at loggerheads for most of the first day until our stage manager -speaking often on my behalf - was able to bring us to a compromise. We would shoot a play, only moving the camera into two other positions in order to capture close-ups and medium shots.

The following morning and the final and most critical shoot day, I arrived to have the videographer announce to me that a 'we' which didn't include me had decided that

the camera would be locked off in a single position and that the plan that we (the 'we' that *did* include me) had agreed upon for creating a digital work would simply no longer be happening. There would be no close-ups, no other camera positions or angles. The work would be shot 'as a play' and that was that.

I felt like I had lost the fight against what was essentially the colonization of my space, my creative process and my work itself. I use the word 'colonization' not to sensationalize here, but rather to point to the figurative reproduction of coloniality within my working process and environment, as well as to describe, in the dictionary sense, the literal 'settling among and establishing control over' that I experienced.

The videographer continued to overstep - at some point actually reprimanding me when the impulse overtook me and I spoke in a part of the performance where my character didn't normally speak. The loss of my voice was a jarring experience - suddenly, the very act of heeding my performative impulses was being policed.

I was defeated, having had a full day prior of rehearsing and performing Black womanhood in full view of, and sometimes even under the direction of, the white gaze. I was exhausted and I wanted it over and done with, so I relented. My thesis production – a work about Black womanhood – would now be something completely different from what I wanted – it would be executed according to the desires and conveniences of a white woman and thus my performance, my existence onstage, would be framed according to the lens of the white gaze. This, to me, was the ultimate failure.

Once the filming was done and we moved into the post-production phase, we went back and forth - again at loggerheads – when I would send notes for the editing of the footage and the videographer would respond with a set of notes on the notes I'd sent, explaining that she would not execute certain requests I'd made because they 'didn't make sense as a play' or letting me know that she preferred a particular scene cut her way and not the way I'd asked. I found myself fighting, once again, to retain my authorial voice when it became clear that the outcome of my research endeavour would depend on the capacity of the videographer to 'make sense' of my choices according to her own frame of understanding, without the context of my research (which she wouldn't read as it was 'too long').

Once the final edit was done, I surrendered to the inevitable fact that this iteration of the work would not be as I intended it and, strangely, I was liberated by the realization that there was no requirement for this to be in any way a definitive, final or complete work. It could simply be a rehearsal.

My first action towards reclaiming control of my process was to rename the most recent edit of the product. The videographer had originally misnamed the work, assuming, despite my correction, that it would be titled according to the seminar paper I'd shared. The act of re-naming it alone made it feel like my own for the first time. I gave the work back its appropriate name and alluded to the fact that this was not by any means a definitive, final product. It was simply, '*Malibongwe draft 6*.'

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

A DELIBERATE INCOMMENSURABILITY TOWARDS A POST-MBOKODOIST MANIFESTO

The impulse for deliberate incommensurability comes from the subaltern- the underrepresented black woman theatre-maker - primarily. The subaltern has either had to translate herself, endure bad translations by some Other (or the One) on her behalf or offer contexts to her experiences in the aim of assisting some Other to 'enter her text' and experience what is being offered as a translation ... What happens when the subaltern wilfully resists translation and contextualisation? (Seane, 2018:16)

I mentioned in my Autoethnography section that I'd return to Warona Seane's deliberate incommensurability as a possible answer to questions that have emerged around the process of making my thesis production.

Much of the theory into which I lean speaks repeatedly of self-representation. How can a Black woman produce a self-representational digital work when the camera is operated by someone who is not a Black woman and the editing is carried out by someone who is not a Black woman?

This means that self-representation can only exist in the resultant product as a gesture toward self, but the product can never be self-representational. Under these circumstances, deliberate incommensurability is my last gesture toward self-representation - the erection of a room-divider here to protect myself from the intimidating white gaze and the colonisation of my work.

> *The manifesto, borne out of frustration at the lack of representation of the black woman, was a personal call to action and healing, a reparation of the imbalances in a creative and poetic manner.* (ibid.: 69)

Seane calls the manifesto a dramaturgical devise for deliberate incommensurability and Puchner breaks down the basic attributes of a manifesto thus:

> *Its morphology includes such features as numbered theses; denunciations of the past; an aggressive attitude towards the audience; a collective authorship; exaggerated, shrill declarations; varied, often bold, letters; and a mass distribution in newspapers, on billboards and flyers. (2002: 451)*

Early on in my own rehearsal period, I read the manifesto that Seane created for her dramaturgical process and for days it sat on the backburner of my mind. As I waited for the time when my own manifesto would emerge from wherever it is that ideas emerge, it became clear to me that I already had one.

It seems that at some point in the process of making theatre, there will always be a piece of music that jumps out from wherever it is that pieces of music jump out and announces itself as what I used to think was a personal soundtrack or 'theme song' to the work, but which I now understand to be the manifesto that drives the process.

I'll propose, as I look now to conclude my explication, that my thesis production, *Malibongwe* is a post-Mbokodoist manifesto. The struggle song for which the work is named and which apears in the climax of the work, can translate to anything from the literal 'praise the name of (the) women' to the figurative, 'may the contribution of women be acknowledged' or even 'the legacy of women must be upheld'.

Of the struggle songs that emerged during the 1950s in general and the 1956 Women's March in particular, two songs about women have been so etched into the South African protest songbook and social consciousness that they have become slogans used to this day. These songs are *wathint' abafazi* and *Malibongwe*.

The fact that these songs and their resulting slogans are contemporaneous makes *Malibongwe* the ideal post-Mbokodoist manifesto. Knowing that African culture doesn't make a lot of room for members of the younger generation 'talking back' to their elders, I daren't be disrespectful enough to propose a contemporary protest song as something of an antidote to *mbokodofication*. I must let the adults speak amongst themselves. The song says:

> *Igama lamakhosikzai malibongwe* (may the name of (the) women be praised) (x2)
> *Malibongwe, malibongwe!* (x2) (praise it, praise it!)
> (In Sesotho)
> *Lebitso la mafumahadi ha le bokwe* (x2) (may the name of (the) women be praised)
> *Di ya cheswa, di ya cheswa! (*x2) (let them burn, let them burn!)

'Let them burn', mind you, is a reference to the pass books burnt by women in 1913.

> *Struggle songs can also be used by 'smaller groups of protestors within a larger demonstration … to subvert the intention of protest organisers [and to assert] their autonomy'. And protest songs can convey meanings that are hidden from the public gaze or can be used to articulate that which the authorities do not want to hear. Struggle songs were therefore often used by the people as a method of self-persuasion, and to 'rouse their fellow oppressed peoples to grow even more indignant against the injustices that they were being subjected to'. … The performance of struggle songs can therefore be a means of empowerment and 'a means by which one inhabits or re-inhabits a tainted social space'.* (Le Roux-Kemp, 2014: 251)
>
> If the post-colonial, democratic society can be seen as a tainted social space where coloniality is constantly being reproduced and Black women are not only constantly having to perform hardness so as not to be crushed by the machines of coloniality, perhaps the use of aesthetic distance, particularly through language can provide a means through which Black women protect themselves, in process and performance, from the potentially hazardous effects of post-dramatic stress. The song, 'Malibongwe' is a struggle anthem. My thesis production, *Malibongwe* is my offering towards a post-*mbokodoist* future.

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