Everything I am not: Discovering who I am.

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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.

Signature Signed by candidate Date: 29 August 2022

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In loving memory of Manuel Miguez Daporta

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Abstract

My research explores the decolonisation of the self by excavating what emerges when the black African woman works to transcend traumatic memory to renew and heal. I suggest that traumatic memory be likened to a scar or a wound on the body. I, a contemporary black South African woman, seek to heal from the wound created by dominant structures of oppression such as slavery, colonialism, patriarchy, and apartheid. I am prompted by the work of black African feminist, Namanzi Choongo Mweene Chinyama (2017), as to how traumatic memory enters our consciousness to distort our understanding of self. I advocate for a process of decolonising which endeavours to break away from structures that inhibited black African women's liberation, denying them their cultural ideologies. Decolonising the self asks us to repossess, take back and re-imagine ourselves by invoking connections to ourselves, our bodies, our ancestors, the land, and others to cultivate inherent knowledge. I use my lived experience to demonstrate how the cultural apparatus of 19th-century racism is still actively created in South African society and globally today. Aspects of this apparatus are the negative stereotypical constructions and myths used to devalue and create ideas of inadequacy in black women to maintain dominance over them. I employ a black African feminist perspective as a framework which encourages placing black women's experiences at the centre of the inquiry. Using a mixed autoethnographic and Practice as Research (PaR) methodology, my research re-imagines representations of black African female experience in South Africa. Thus, it seeks to probe deeper into how implying certain subversions of authoritative hegemonic frames by disturbing accepted social categories and given constructs, creates alternative spaces for the assertion of black African women. I attempt to deconstruct, disturb, and reject normative categorisations to re-construct them, re-claiming, re-imagining, representing, re-discovering, re-shaping and re-membering in the present as a vital part of reclaiming the power of self-definition and healing.

Keywords: Black African Women, Trauma, Healing, Decolonisation, Practice as Research, Autoethnography

Terminology

Decolonisation:	A multi-pronged process of liberation from political, economic, and cultural colonisation. Removing the anchors of colonialism from the physical, ecological, and mental processes of a nation and its people.[1]
Colonisation:	The process or action of settling among and establishing control over the indigenous.[2]
Colonialism:	A domination policy or system of partial or total political control in the form of social, economic, and cultural authority. A form of domination - the control by individuals or groups over the territory and/or behavior of other individuals or groups.[3]
Coloniality	Coloniality is one of the specific and constitutive elements of the global model of capitalist power. It is based on the imposition of a racial/ethnic classification of the global population as the cornerstone of that model of power, and it operates on every level, in every arena and dimension (both material and subjective) of everyday social existence and does so on a societal scale.[4]
Coloniality of Power:	The most general form of domination in the world today once colonialism as an explicit political order was destroyed. [5]
Decoloniality:	A specific type of decolonisation that advocates for disrupting legacies of racial, gender and geopolitical inequalities and domination. delinking from the colonial matrix of power.[6]

[1] Tamale,2020: xiv. The definition resonates strongly with my understanding of decolonisation because she describes it both as *multi-pronged* and as a *process*.
[2] Odawi Porter, 2005, expands this definition by stating how it is a systematic "process by which a people exploit and/or annex the lands and resources of another without their consent and unilaterally expand political power over them" (108)
[3] Horvath, 1972:46.
[4] Quijano, 2007: 342.
[5] Anibal Quijano coined the expression 'coloniality of power'.
[6] Mignolo, 2011:455.

Introduction

> We have experienced multiple forms of trauma that often sit in our bodies, on our skin, and find insidious ways of seeping into our consciousness and contorting how we may think of ourselves. These traumas often occur in our schools, in our homes, in churches. Some of our most intimate spaces are the most dangerous to women and I think one amongst the many resistance tools we have is finding and connecting with our own abilities to heal each other. (Chinyama, 111: 2017)[7]

> My skin is my own burden to carry as I do all the way through my life. This bad skin. *Andifuni ukuxweba kodwa ngaphakathi ndixwebile. Ndidiniwe. Ndinxaniwe.*[8] It is broken. The way I see myself is not the way I carry myself. Piece by piece I hold on, I carry on, I maintain the façade of being okay. (Gubangxa, 2021)

I am a black African Xhosa woman living in post-Apartheid, post-colonial South Africa. An important signifier which has shaped much of my identity is my black skin. I am uncomfortable in my skin and for many years of my life have thought of myself as having had bad skin. The negative connotations I associate with my skin are a result of an ongoing internal grappling with seeing myself beyond the limitations of racial identification. I identify as black, Xhosa and African but my upbringing saw me adopt English as my predominate language because of the circumstances and the environment that I was raised in.[9]

Growing up in this environment has shaped much of who I am. I am shaped by the languages I speak, the cultures I have been exposed to, and the experiences I have had. But in turn, I have been alienated and 'othered' from isiXhosa culture and the spoken language, the very cultural group

[7] Namanzi Choongo Mweene Chinyama is an African feminist who describes how internalised traumas can shape negative perceptions of ourselves. These perceptions distort how we think and understand who we are. Chinyama suggests locating and connecting with our ability to heal as one resistance strategy. I understand Chinyama's idea of healing not as an absolute end or a solution, but rather a means of moving forward, and stepping into an act of imagining rather than as an achievement.
Chinyama explains how she negotiates navigating her position as a sangoma in training, ukuthwasa, alongside identifying as a queer African feminist in her life more broadly. She continues to say how she thought that pursuing the practice of a sangoma, and the ceremonial aspects that come with the training, went against her feminist beliefs. Chinyama attributes her feminist beliefs to be "[..] that of autonomy, freedom of choice and agency to do with in [her] life, especially [her] body" (2017:116). She describes her ukuthwasa journey as turmoil because she is grappling with her ability and inability to make her choices and determine how she manoeuvres in the world (2017:116). The reasons for Chinyama's turmoil are because as a practicing sangoma, there are restrictions she must conform to in what she wears and restrictions on her movements with curfews, therefore, sacrificing her bodily autonomy. The negotiation of these two aspects of Chinyama's life have contributed to how she has come to understand and think of herself. Chinyama dispels notions of fragmentation and separating components of her life in favour of encompassing a full self which finds balance where both "obedient thwasa and raging feminist" (2017:117) co-exist within each other. She comes to realise that the very act of healing and learning to heal could be considered an act of feminism. Chinyama draws attention to domestic spaces such as schools, homes, and churches, to locate where women are vulnerable to trauma. This accentuates the struggles of violence acted upon black women by locating the problem in daily lived experiences.

[8] Translation: I do not want to be 'ashy' but on the inside I am dry. I am tired. I am thirsty.

[9] My parents enrolled all their children into predominately white private schools as an attempt to rectify opportunities not available to them by the laws of Apartheid South Africa and hoped that this would offer the best economic opportunities for their children's futures.

which I identify with. I have questioned my own identity. I do not wish to identify myself differently nor do I have a choice in my pigmentation, but the reality I am experiencing is discomfort, displacement, and a feeling of unease. As I navigate through the world, I am acutely aware of notions of belonging and not belonging, the complexities my body holds and how these complexities have come to form my understandings of myself.

Chinyama's opening quotaion resonates with my lived experience, offering a possible explanation for the negative self-connotations, discomfort in my black skin, and issues of belonging that I experience. The traumas she refers to related to me through the continued questioning of my inability to speak my mother tongue, isiXhosa, fluently, and the emotional implications thereof. I also relate to the traumas through my distance from my culture, its people and cultural practices, and my close affiliation to the English language and predominantly Western way of life. Chinyama not only offers a way of understanding these experiences but also suggests a way of moving through these insidious feelings by finding and connecting with oneself and one's abilities to heal.

How does one begin to connect with oneself and one's abilities to heal? How does this process of healing manifest to undo the insidious contorted understanding of self? My research proposes a decolonisation of self as a method for answering these questions.

Chinyama's turmoil of struggling with the inability and ability to make choices as she navigates through the world, resonates with me as I am reminded of how I am made to feel not African enough. But, as I navigate through the world as a black African woman, I am faced with a damaging reality. The reality that I am experiencing is discomfort, dis-placement, and a feeling of unease. I have noticed how inherited slave consciousness haunts my very being. Thus, my research seeks to probe deeper into how implying certain subversions of authoritative hegemonic frames by disturbing accepted social categories and given constructs, creates new alternative spaces for the assertion of black African womanhood. I discuss how the deconstruction, disturbance, and rejection of normative categorisations are reconstructing, re-claiming, re-imagining, representing, re-discovering, re-shaping and re-membering present a vital part of reclaiming the power of self-definition to enable black African women to express their realities. Hence, the disturbance, destruction and disruption of the identifiers used to represent black African women's experiences, create tension in the hegemonic world to enable a transcendence of traumatic stereotypes while reconstructing black African women's subjectivity.

My research on the representation of black African women centres around the rupturing of existing stereotypes and myths. I intend to highlight stereotypes, shed light on them, and bring focus to the damaging reality of such forms of representation. The negative stereotypes used to characterize black African women have transcended time and race/class boundaries. In doing so, I

invite new ways of experiencing, representing, and understanding experiences. Using archetypes and stereotypes of how black African women are defined, I hope to take apart the current paradigms trapping and limiting the understanding of our lived experiences and imagining new alternative ways of inverting these labels and constrictions. By imagining new and different possibilities of thinking, being, and presenting black African women. I engage in methods of healing by breaking away from structures that inhibited her liberation. The notion of healing and transcendence I refer to is about creating a liminal space which moves from a stagnant identification of a black woman's experience to one that sits in a state of becoming. Becoming speaks to an ongoing, fluid, changing, and transformative experience which opens an understanding of self rather than limiting identity structures informed by the past.

An important identifier I use to illustrate my experience as a black African woman is my skin. I suggest that memory be likened to a scar or a wound on the body. I then propose that the traumatic wounds that I seek to heal from are the effects of slavery, colonialism, spirituality, patriarchy, and apartheid, which are present in my formulation of identity and body[10]. Against this background, I understand trauma as a scar on the body because of colonial wounds. I want to propose that the act or process of decolonising is a form of psychological and physical healing. A process in which I, attempt to break away from structures that presently inhibit my freedom and ability to understand myself.

The title of my paper recalls how I have come to identify myself through the interactions of others and how the generation of alternative methods of thinking can contribute to ideas of transformation in South Africa. *Everything I am not* refers to the stereotypical representations of blackness[11] that I am arguing against, that I fail to conform to, but which have nonetheless shaped a lot of who I am.

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[10] The word *trauma* derives from the Greek word for 'wound'. The term initially refers to an injury inflicted on a body. Later, through the development of medical and psychiatric literature, the term trauma comes to be understood not only as a wound inflicted on the body but also on the mind (Kurtz, 2018:1). Early psychological and psychoanalytical theories on trauma were developed by Sigmund Freud. The Freudian trauma theory model presented trauma as a representational disruptive experience that fragmented the psyche. In the 20th century, Trauma Studies emerged as a discipline that expanded on the Freudian theory. Cathy Caruth was a leading pioneer whose focus explored understanding and speaking about trauma. Caruth's work still forms part of Trauma Studies which has expanded into a vast interdisciplinary approach to the concept of trauma. However, in recent years, Caruth's theories have been criticized extensively by scholars such as Dominick LaCapra. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2002), LaCapra defines trauma as "a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence" but he criticizes the mode of knowledge generation on the subject by explaining that "the study of traumatic events poses especially difficult problems in representation and writing" (LaCapra 2002:41).

[11] I want to highlight that blackness is understood in the context of this research as a social construct. Anti-racist researcher George Sefa Dei articulates blackness as "a multidimensional concept that refers to the conception of what black subjectivity and identification signify and symbolise in society" (2018:119). I refer to blackness as the experience of being black.

My positionality is significant to my approach because I do not wish to totalize my experience to inform the experience of all black African women. Rather, I use my position as a black African woman to express a perspective of a subjugated voice, to add to the histography of black African women. I am a black African woman existing in post-apartheid, post-colonial South Africa in the twenty first century. Through my work as a performing artist in South Africa, I realised the potential power of art and performance in creating, transforming, and disrupting representations of identity. As explained in *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, "the word 'post-colonial' has come to stand for both the material effects of colonisation and the huge diversity of every day and sometimes hidden responses to it throughout the world" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin 2006: 2). I am interested in utilising my performance as a *Practice as Research* (PaR) tool for knowledge generation around the diverse lived realities of black African women's experiences in South Africa today. I do this to investigate how the notions of diversity, hybridity, intersectionality, and difference can be engaged in performance to act as a transformative tool that moves towards post-colonisation. According to Pumla Dineo Gqola:

> There are many feminist strands, which is to say different kinds of feminism, there are also many core principles. The commitment to actively oppose and end patriarchy is one of the core principles. The recognition that patriarchy works like other systems of oppression, like racism and capitalism, to value some people and brutalise others is another area of agreement. (2017:56)

However, for Gqola, although there is a plethora of strands of the feminist perspective, at the centre of the movement is a core belief system aimed at change. Chinyama states that locating and connecting with our abilities to heal is a resistant strategy. I employ a black African feminist perspective as a decolonial tool that (re)centres Africa and African feminist scholarship as a vehicle of resistance against Western hegemonic epistemologies. Mignolo's concept of the coloniality of power traces the geographic, political, and onto-epistemological extensions of Western domination through the relative domains of economic, authority, gender/sexuality, and knowledge. By outlining how and why Western power relations achieved and maintained dominance over colonised communities, I attempt to deepen my understanding of how existing problematic representations of black African women come to endure.

My thesis is structured in a way that allows me to frame African women's lived experiences through an African feminist lens where African women are central to the narrative to illustrate how African feminism is a successful tool for decolonisation. I further criticize the lack of African women's experiences in the African imaginary and assert that the consequences of this can be damaging in relation to the ideas of personhood and healing explored in the paper.

The importance rises from the overwhelming accessibility of resources of black women of African descent in Euro-American contexts but limited representations of the lived experiences of black women here in Africa. I argue that placing my lived experiences of trauma as a black woman at the centre of my theoretical investigation assists my conception of healing by imagining new possibilities. I draw on their scholarship to identify current problems of representation within a South African socio-historical context. This context depicts the inherent problem discussed by Pindi, which shows the domination of the Euro-American representation of black African women.

Positionality offers multiple avenues for consideration in my conceptualisation of myself as I introduce my biography as research. One such exploration was my one-person show, *Xwebile*, where I am the subject of my research. The concept of healing is essential to the performance of *Xwebile*. *Xwebile* is an honest response to my trauma, what it feels like being in my skin, and echoes what Chinyama says about trauma as it seeps into my consciousness and contorts how I think of myself. The process of sharing and capturing this trauma the way I did, was a form of healing by accepting and acknowledging the circumstances I found myself in. At the time, I did not realise how much of what I went through and expressed resonated with others. It is not simply sharing the work, which forms a significant part of the healing process, but also holding, creating, and making space for healing to occur. I want to suggest that change and transformation can occur in creating and formulating space. The created space is for women who look like me to be remembered, considered, and fought for. I will return to an analysis of this specific work later in the dissertation.

In *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics and Praxis* (2018), Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh describe "[h]ow the colonial matrix of power was constituted, managed, and transformed from its historical foundation in the sixteenth century to the present" (2018:45), and go on to say that, "[…] the intention [of decoloniality] is also, and more crucially, to push considerations of how decoloniality undoes, disobeys, and delinks from this matrix, constructing paths and praxis towards an otherwise of thinking, sensing, believing, doing, and living." (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018:45)

I aim to establish how these concepts of decoloniality can contribute to an understanding of myself. Theoretically, I engage with novelist and post-colonial theorist, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's, approach to decolonisation and decolonial thinking. In his collection of essays, *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), Ngũgĩ provides me with a literary lens for analysing my autoethnographic writing and highlights prominent ideas about methods of decolonisation and decoloniality. He proposes that, "[…] language was the most important vehicle through which that power fascinated and held the soul prisoner" (Ngũgĩ 1986:9). I place Ngũgĩ's analysis of decolonial thinking in conversation with my autoethnographic writing to clearly illustrate how I have come to see myself to be in the process of decolonising. Ngũgĩ's assessment of language and its power relations, aligns strongly with my

perceptions of myself and my links to the world. He suggests that the act of acknowledging these issues is a starting point to begin the process of decolonising.

I use autoethnography as one part of my methodology, and have included some of my reflexive writing in the dissertation, which formed a large part of understanding my subject matter, how I engage with the material to developing new ways of understanding. This is achieved by placing myself, a black woman, at the centre of knowledge generation to include African women's experiences in theoretical analysis. Heewon Chang asserts that autoethnography, "transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation" (Chang, 2008:43). Using the autoethnographic method, I illustrate how my reflexive writing assists my inquiry both in terms of analysis and in terms of the evaluation of self as a decolonising individual. Therefore, my reflexive writing appears in italics throughout the paper to navigate my process of knowledge generation.

I use Practice as Research as a second part of my methodology, applying the creative artistic act to generate knowledge by responding to a research question. I examine my employment of PaR in discussion with Mark Fleishman's writings on performance as a method of articulation. He proposes the value of performance as a different way of knowing and how this method of Practice as Research can be integrated as a decolonial strategy (Fleishman 2009 & 2012).

I have chosen two black South African women artists to examine how their performance practices attempt to address issues of belonging, identity, and citizenship. I examine how both artists develop their practice as a tool to express themselves, their history, and their experiences. In doing so, I explore how their methods of expression have influenced and inspired ways of thinking and creating that have informed my research. I demonstrate how the work of these artists can be put in conversation with my performance of *Xwebile* to illustrate ideas that further explore black African women's experience. I highlight concepts unique to their practice, conveying how their work addresses the desires, expression, and representation of black African women's experience. Finally, I explore how I envision drawing from mechanisms used by Siwani and Sibande to produce my final thesis production entiled, *The Park*.

Although I am unsure of how this research production will manifest in performance, I have included how I intend to use my research in the formation of a production. *The Park* is an investigation into how I capture my experience as a black African woman through performance. My focus is not merely on conveying my experience, but I attempt to dismantle, disrupt, and deconstruct oppressive and damaging stereotypical representations of black African women. Thus, it seeks to probe deeper into how, by disturbing accepted social categories and constructs, certain subversions of authoritative hegemonies create new alternative spaces for the bodily assertion of the black African woman. The disturbance, destruction and disruption of the identifiers used to

represent and express black women's experiences create tensions in the hegemonic world that enables her transcendence of traumatic stereotypes while reconstructing her subjectivity. I challenge the construction of these representations as a site where her lived experience is purposefully placed against historic and stereotypical misinterpretations that result in her being rendered invisible and unheard.

I am actively inverting the ideas of representation to evoke assertion and visibility to reconceptualise ideas and possibilities of representation. However, it is imperative that the aim of achieving transformation and transcendence does not constitute re-traumatising the subject and creating new paradigms against which African women will have to fight to work against in the future. I hope to unlock different possibilities of thinking, being, and presenting the black African woman without further suppressing and reducing her experience. By engaging in new imaginative ways of thinking, the trauma inflicted on the body can be translated beyond performance-making as a form of healing, negotiating, and navigating realities and possibilities for black African women.

Literature Review

I assert that my wound is everything I have lost as an African woman. I do not speak the African language of isiXhosa, and the formation of words feels foreign on my tongue. It is not a choice. Those who can speak the language have rejected me as an imposter. The individuals who accept me observe me butcher the language as I stumble deeper in shame. I do not engage in traditional isiXhosa practices because those spaces are now foreign, unsafe, and too far. I can identify my clan-names to which I belong and list my ancestors. I wonder if they know me.[12]

This chapter explores what has been lost by the silencing, oppression and attempts at erasure inflicted on black African women. A quality of decolonial theory is the propelling force of energy to take back and claim what was taken from African people. I describe the nature of my dis-ease as drenched in the frustration and deep loss that I have come to realise I only have allowed myself to know in secret. This suggests a self-sabotaging form of oppression where I react negatively with violent acts of subjugation inflicted on myself. I am unable to pin-point the trauma seeping into my consciousness, distorting my understanding of myself, but I do know that I have lost the ability to communicate eloquently in my mother-tongue. This deep sense of loss can be linked to my feelings of dis-ease, discomfort, and displacement. I mentioned earlier how I am drawing from a black African feminist perspective to frame my healing process. I turn to feminist outlooks for ways of working through the dis-ease I am experiencing, to transcend current negative forms of representation in imagining new ways of knowing and becoming. Black South African feminist, Sisonke Msimang, explains feminism as:

> [Being] fundamentally concerned with challenging the notion of importance. Feminists examine the lives of those who have been overlooked and pushed aside and ignored - most often, women - and so feminists are often wary of claims of importance as a very principle. (Msimang, 2021:22)

Msimang's highlighting of the plight of women as *overlooked* and *pushed aside* articulates a correlation between my experience of loss and displacement and a black African feminist perspective. However, I need to distinguish how fundamental conceptions of black African feminism differ from Western feminist notions, and how the disparity contributes to unpacking my experience. Sylvia Tamale discusses the foundations of African feminism as predating colonialism because African women have been fighting oppression side-by-side with men over their subjugation. Women would have to find alternative methods to fight against patriarchal and political domination (Tamale 2020: 42). Tamale suggests that the status of African women only regressed because of

[12] This is an extract of my writing from: "Interlude: Trauma Seeping into My Consciousness" in the following chapter.

colonialism, and that Western feminist's fight against patriarchy did not take into account the multiple intersecting oppressions against black African women. Tamale states that this is:

> Not only because race is a deeply constitutive element of gender, but also for the reason that the African continent occupies a separate cultural, social, economic and geopolitical landscape from the West. Moreover, the enduring legacies of slavery, colonialism and imperialism continue to slip through, intersect with patriarchal domination and come out on the other end as subjugation with different strands from those found in Western paradigms. (Tamale, 2020: 40-41)

Tamale's description above details how Western feminist notions do not always take into consideration the layered oppressions that face black African women. This illustrates the significance of positionality in capturing the lived experience of black women, because positionality takes into account thinking through the contestations of intersectionality and the oppressive hierarchies established by hegemonic Western ideologies. In the wake of the move from apartheid to a democratic society, South Africa has celebrated the richness of a multicultural society diverse in ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. I suggest that the insistence that one identifies with, and belongs to, a particular social group is partly the issue with my experience of displacement and lack of belonging. There are many distinct representational groups striving to locate themselves in the diverse fabric of South Africa and I submit that this is because of a segregated past which diluted any complexity in favour of a simplistic categorisation of white and non-white. I believe that the idea of needing to belong to a particular identifying social construction has once again led to a fixation on difference. The black African feminist framework draws on intersectionality to engage with oppressions against black women as opposed to highlighting difference. However, difference is significant nontheless.

Furthermore, Tamale describes the challenges faced when using an African feminist framework. As stated before, the impetus for the shift away from Western feminist conceptions was because of the Western hegemonic tendency to subscribe ways of knowing. To insert themselves within the theoretical discourse, African woman have had to carefully craft conceptualisations which captured the intricate difference of African experience and to include political, cultural, and traditional realities accurately. Tamale assesses the problem to be that our ways of knowing and knowledge generation are intrinsically rooted in the same ideological structures African women are fighting against.

> As Africans, our colonial education systems largely delimited our thinking to Western theorizations of ourselves and our environments. Right from the nursery rhymes through to the philosophical and literary classics, to the mediums of formal instruction, we are oriented to apply alien concepts. "Modern" colonial education deliberately avoided honing the creativity and problem-solving skills of the colonials. Worse still, it reinforced racist and sexist stereotypes about the superiority of Western nations and patriarchal conventions of male

> dominance. Neocolonial powers ensured that the status quo remained intact well after the attainment of flag-independence. It is time to change that, to remove the scales from our eyes and focus on pathways that re-centre Africa and its people. (Tamale, 2020:41)

This poses problems because any attempt at capturing accurately the lived experience of black African women, would need to be curated in hegemonic narratives, conditioned by the power relationships that exist in mainstream theoretical discourse. The necessary interventions are problematic in nature because all ideas of knowing were embedded in hegemonic ideologies which favoured Western conceptions of knowledge as the totality of knowing. This is also an issue I face when engaging in my process. How do I place my experience of being a black African woman at the centre of my research, to reclaim my sense of belonging and heal from wounds, without re-establishing myself in the same system that wishes to dislocate and subjugate my existence? As Pindi narrates, of her own experience:

> The first time I attended the class, I was excited to see a room predominantly full of Black people (and particularly Black women). I felt at home. Yet, something strange happened. As we (students) started to introduce ourselves, one after the other, I came to realize that I was the only Black woman originally from Africa in this room of Black people. I suddenly felt out of place. I felt like a stranger. As the semester progressed, I wanted to comprehend and make sense of why I felt that way. This is how I came to realize that although my body and those of my African American peers are marked as Black, and that we share a common legacy of oppression as Black people, our lived experiences positioned us differently. (Pindi, 2021: 327)

This is an account of how critical feminist scholar, Gloria Nzimba Pindi, came to recognise some of the challenges faced by black African feminists. Pindi can attest to their being a sense of familiarity and comfort with her African-American classmates, however as the passage suggests, this feeling soon dwindles to a sensation of being 'the other'. Pindi's account depicts the importance of engaging with intersectionality when discussing the oppressive hierarchies of black African women. Pindi positions herself as the only black person in the classroom to be 'originally from Africa' and this recognition results in a feeling of alienation. The lived experience of cultures, traditions and modes of representation differs immensely. To promote African knowledge, Pindi asserts African feminism as a critical decolonial praxis. This decolonial praxis is a way to contest the imperialistic portrayal of African women, African sexuality; research processes; the homogenization of blackness; and ways of knowing.

> Defining African Feminist Knowledge in terms of subject matter, the perspectives of geographical location of knowledge-makers are also tricky. Is feminist knowledge African if the subject matter is African, if the writer themselves define as African, if the writer is located in Africa? Despite the absence of our marginality, African Feminist Knowledge could be seen to offer a standpoint that speaks back even if in undifferentiated ways to dominant views underpinned by intersecting racial, gendered, and imperial discourses. The value of taking

> African Feminist Knowledge-making into account in thinking about decolonising, would be that it counters or addresses the gaps in the circulation and reception of 'knowledges that matter'. (Lewis, 2018)

Desiree Lewis (2018) emphasises that African Feminist Psychology can be seen as a disciple that counters and addresses gaps in knowledge in a way that matters. Given that one of Pindi's critiques exposed the lack of black African women's scholarship, I found it equally imperative to also locate my research within a South African context. In their edited collection, *Surfacing: on being Black and feminist in South Africa,* Lewis and Gabeba Baderoon aim to deepen the rich methods of seeing and understanding ourselves and our world within the lived expereinces of South African women.

The collection does not aim to represent a specific group of black women but rather displays an eclectic array of experiences shown through academic texts, essays, letters, poems. The editors claim that South African feminists have always been vocal and played a large role in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. As a result, the experiences and stories portrayed are of prominent figures such as Saartjie Baartman, Winnie Mandela and Miriam Tlali. Even then, the decision of what stories to include and in what forms, was based on a specific agenda: to question what kind of knowledge is deemed to be valuable and significant. Lewis and Baderoon state:

> Many contributors acknowledge how entangled our experiences and subject positions are, inviting readers to speculate about discovered subjectivities that result not from reclaiming identities, but from envisioning new ways of being human. This is an invitation to understand that, beyond our need to be recognised, heard and seen in worlds that marginalise us on the basis of officially ascribed identities, we often strive to picture freedoms beyond these predetermined identities. (Lewis and Baderoon, 2021:11)

I assert that Lewis and Baderoon allude to an active imagining which enables transcendence beyond rigid and fixed identities.

> The task of representing Blackwomen in postcolonial ways is challenging since it demands from us that we create and refashion forms of representation which continue to break new ground. (Gqola, 2001:15)

I am particularly invested in Gqola's interest in how creative genres and popular culture are sites that can generate knowledge and have nurtured ideas that are disruptive to patriarchal power. She attributes this way of thinking to the 'African Feminist Imaginations' project launched by The South African Research Chairs Initiative at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, South Africa. The project invites a magnitude of creatives and expressionists to participate and is involved in "[…]adding to the growing lexicon of how art and art-making (in all its myriad manifestations- fine art, digital art, film and filmmaking, live performance, poetry, writing, dancing, music, applied

theatre practices, museums and curation) contribute to increasingly complex notions of identity, belonging and citizenship" (Loots & Mbele, 2020:4).

Gqola suggests that a way to insert black African women into scholarship is by utilising elusive creative agencies which deconstruct patriarchal, hegemonic ways of understanding. Gqola describes African feminist literary imagination as it "denotes and resides in the evocation, the suggestive, the world of the experimental" (Gqola, 2017: 107). I infer from Gqola's description that imagining is fluid and filled with possibilities which do not limit the understanding of the experience of black African women. The idea expressed by Gqola alludes to an opening up of, rather than a closing in on, prospects and narratives. Yewande Omotoso describes how imagination can be used as a tool of unmaking when she states:

> Along with the complexity of the struggles we face, these days call for unmaking, and I find nothing more well equipped for unmaking than the creative endeavour itself. The employment of imagination, using the act of making to unmake the ways of sensing and thinking that are often at the root of so much of what doesn't work in our lives and societies. (Omotoso, 2021:158)

An interesting perspective, Gqola points to in respect of literary imagination, is the relationship between bodies protesting as people versus protesting presented through writing. Gqola suggests that "[r]ioting women are bodies on the street" and are considered dangerous, whereas "writing women […] are middle-class educated women theorising" (Gqola, 2017:108). The latter description is understood to be passive and non-threatening in Gqola's opinion. Her critique proposes that writing be equally threatening. I understand the observation relevant to my project because what Gqola describes as limited in writing, I suggest can be achieved through the medium of performance, therefore making PaR a valuable method for knowledge generation.

Interlude: Trauma Seeping into My Consciousness

I have never entirely understood those that express statements like, "I don't see colour," followed by the dreaded, "It does not matter," which truthfully makes my blood boil and has become a trigger for ending friendships. I accept the mature method of addressing the issue would be to discuss, mediate, inform, and educate, but I'm just tired. I am exhausted. But the annoyance it continuously presented in disrupting my life was more significant after some deep diving into my past and memories; I wanted to know why it had come to affect me so.

Five-year-old me:
I remember running around the house after school with a towel, jersey or one of my brother's hoodies believing it was my hair. I would flick, toss it, brush a sleeve gently over my ear, and tie it into different hairdos as I had seen so many around me do. It was the agony of being separated from 'my hair' which I remember vividly. My brothers tormented me by running past and swiping it off my head or the conversations that always ended in tears with my mother every morning before pre-primary school and when I had to leave the car. I remember tears, real, painful tears. My 'hair' had become a part of me, and without it, I felt ugly and dumb. I didn't like myself without my hair. I was five years old.

"Why don't you get Sive braids," a mum uttered. "She would look really beautiful, and she would have the hair she always wanted."

I didn't understand my mother's reaction to that comment at that moment, but I would only come to realise its significance much later in my life.

My mother responded to Julia's mother by explaining that I must know that my hair will never be blonde, long, and silky. And that I will never have sea blue eyes, but I will always be beautiful.

Eight-year-old me:
I was hated, targeted, and bullied because I was different. I did not speak isiXhosa. I understood it but never spoke the language. I did not live in a township. The Toyota Venture, known as iTransport, did not drop me off very early in the morning and pick me up with twenty-three other black kids squeezed into a thirteen-seater vehicle. I did not make my own lunch. I did not know what polony was, let alone eat it. I wouldn't say I liked it. I did not eat chicken.
I did not enjoy being ridiculed every Friday afternoon in compulsory First Language Xhosa lessons for all black children while everyone else in the grade watched classic Disney movies.
I did not have black friends.

Fourteen-year-old me:
I am one of the very few people of colour in my school. Based on experience and traumas, I still do not have black friends. They do not like me; they do not understand me. I am a different black, the acceptable black. The easy to consume black. Three months into grade eight, my first year of high school at an all-girls school, the principal invited me to speak at a panel for prospective parents and girls wanting to know more about the school. I had only been there for three months. I would represent the grade eight in this panel. I was the only person of colour on the stage and in the auditorium. Placed on stage, a sea full of people staring back at me, I relayed my experience. This opened several opportunities where my 'expertise' was being begged for. I did photoshoots; I did interviews and things I didn't even know I was interested in. It was not my experience that was of interest; I was a neatly packaged, clean, accessible version of what I represented. All I was, was a representation—a token. I was the token black girl.

Nineteen-year-old me and beyond:
I have black friends now. I speak the language. I love chicken.

I have come to understand the complexities of race and representation through my own experiences. It has always been through my experiences. My parents, coming from very little, tried their very best to give me all they were denied because of past laws that governed people's lives due to race relations in apartheid South Africa. My parents believed in offering me every opportunity possible and tried so desperately to equip me with

ideals that they believed provided me with a better future. However, how much was lost to 'not be that kind of black girl'.

South Africa has some terrifying statistics regarding violence and abuse against women, and unfortunately, those stats point to black African women of colour. According to the stats, I'm black. Sexually assaulted as a minor, raped as a young adult, attempted rape a few years later, years of being in a toxic physical abusive relationship and a single-parent household. Born a statistic. I'm Black.

Constantly being told, You're beautiful for a black girl.
My body was questioned, examined, dissected.

Fetishized by "I've never been with a black girl."

I'm just another fetish, experiment, and first-time experience.

I am constantly reminded about how I am different, and each time something deep inside happens to me. I scar, I bleed, I weep, and I repeat.

A Practice of Decolonising

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's approach to decolonisation and decolonial thinking provides a literary lens for analysing my autoethnographic writing. My autoethnographic writing establishes my positionality as a contemporary black, predominantly English-speaking, South African woman. I am interested in his body of work which calls for action against the effects of colonialism in post-colonial Africa. In his collection of essays, *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o argues that issues of contemporary Africa have colonial origins because of imperialism's stifling of all cultural expression beyond the Western 'norm'. He shows how enforcing European languages on indigenous African people played a significant role in erasing national culture, history, and identity. He articulates this by exploring the power dynamics and roles in the relation between language and culture, colonisation, and decolonisation. He describes Africa's predicament as follows:

> The present predicaments of Africa are often not a matter of personal choice: they arise from a historical situation. Their solutions are not so much a matter of personal decision as that of a fundamental social transformation of the structures of our societies, starting with a real break with imperialism and its internal ruling allies. Imperialism and its comprador alliances in Africa can never develop the continent. (1986: xii)

In the above quotation, Ngũgĩ suggests that Africa's predicaments result from historical situations and are not personal. Similarly, the root of my research lies within the socio-historic constructs of oppressive racial representations which originated in slavery to maintain power over colonised African people. Subsequently, the conception of coloniality as a dominant power system that exists in the present, has come to inform my lived experience and formation of self as a black African woman. Ngũgĩ argues for a social transformation to liberate Africa as a continent. He describes how the operation of language is a powerful tool that retains the concept of coloniality because "language was the most important vehicle through which that power fascinated and held the soul prisoner" (1986:9). I describe my anguish in the loss of my mother tongue, isiXhosa, and how because of my inability to communicate with others in our common tongue, I am placed in an 'othered' position. Ngũgĩ's conception of the role of language in instilling power can be seen in my own experiences of displacement due to my inability to speak isiXhosa and the perceptions I have of myself, denying my image and wanting to conform to a Eurocentric one. I wondered in the previous section if my ancestors could still recognise me because I have lost my ability to communicate in a vernacular African language. My ancestors are located deeply in the spiritual realm of my African cosmology, and I fail to believe that a colonial language is one that would be acceptable to them. This illustrates that the "structural inequalities of [colonialism] existed in many other domains, including the use of language for the purpose of exclusions and protection of privilege" (Heugh,

2002:11). I have lost a signifying association with being African. The image of imprisonment mimics a severing of an umbilical cord suggesting a separating of two different worlds or realms.

> Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. (Ngũgĩ, 1986:16)

The colonial language is responsible for the loss of cultural practices and traditions in Indigenous communities and confirms the capacity of language to influence and shape cultures.

Pindi describes the accentuation of her positionality to be a marker of resistance to colonization because it evidences the uniqueness of her subjectivity. She asserts her Congolese accent as a "an asset not a flaw" and is in protest against damaging descriptions of her accent as "thick", "strong" and "aggressive" (Pindi, 2020: 449). I propose that she is celebrating and embracing her African identification. My experience exists in juxtaposition to Pindi's. I am frequently met with positive, affirming statements about my accent when people express, "you speak so well" or adjectives such as "eloquent", "nicely", or "articulate". This is an example of favouring Western over African values. To sound 'European' is celebrated over sounding 'African'. My inability to communicate in my mother tongue has alienated me from people who share the same African culture and African language, and this isolation has deemed me foreign and 'othered'. Any attempts to integrate are greeted with immediate acknowledgement of difference and obscurity. I have become the 'other' within my own cultural circles.

Ngũgĩ points to the role language has in preserving culture. He argues that the traditional form of teaching values, traditions and informing codes of life in African cultures was performed orally through storytelling. Traditional African knowledge, cosmologies, and epistemologies were preserved and passed down from one generation to another through the conventional storytelling paradigms of African cultures. These teachings included rituals, celebrations, moral codes, and community histories, which helped to preserve the culture, and which informed a way of life. I do not participate in rituals and celebrations but have read about them in books throughout my educational life. I learned about my cultural lineage at university and how I come from a long line of traditional healers from both my maternal and paternal ancestry. One of my great grandmothers used to disappear into the water for days and reappear with important news. The information about my history anchored me in understanding my strong connection to water and the ocean. It gave me a concrete sense of self in relation to my personal history. The knowledge and understanding of myself enabled me to transcend the limits of my racial identification. Knowledge is transmitted and recorded by collectively sharing these stories in communal settings. As Ngũgĩ notes, "language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history" (1986:15). In this instance,

language is used to conserve African traditions and culture, but by the same token, Ngũgĩ suggests how the opposite is possible. He describes how language is used to influence and contort negative images of ourselves:

> But obviously it was worse when the colonial child was exposed to images of his world as mirrored in the written languages of his coloniser. Where his own native languages were associated in his impressionable mind with low status, humiliation, corporal punishment, slow-footed intelligence and ability or downright stupidity, non-intelligibility and barbarism, this was reinforced by the world he met in the works of such geniuses of racism. (1986:18)

Ngũgĩ suggests that through the insistence of the colonial tongue, African traditions and cultures have been significantly affected in favour of employing Western ideologies and practices. At the risk of complete erasure, "the alienation became reinforced in the teaching of history, geography, music, where bourgeois Europe was always the centre of the universe. This disassociation, divorce, or alienation from the immediate environment becomes clearer when you look at colonial language as a carrier of culture" (1986:17). He attributes this to favouring the foreign language over native African languages and becoming more and more distant from indigenous African methods of understanding, so that African conceptions of knowledge are seen as obscure and European conceptions of knowledge are considered to be 'truth'.

Ngũgĩ does not suggest that this process is instantaneous. Instead, he draws attention to unfolding methods, revealing the need for decolonial thinking. He uses a metaphor of violence when he says that "the bullet was the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation" (1986:9). Ngũgĩ explains how language alters knowledge generation by adopting the colonial language presented in the form of text. Zimbabwean essayist and novelist, Panashe Chigumadzi, articulates the importance of language to culture by saying that "[b]eyond transmitting functional information, our languages carry our experiences, our values, our world views. If you cannot understand our language, you cannot hear us" (Chigumadzi 2021: 234). Dominant Western scholarship has valued text as the primary medium of knowledge generation. The insistence on language as text as the only way of knowing has devalued and undermined alternative methods which are found in African culture. The adoption and favouring of colonial languages alienate the individual from their culture. The individual learns to assimilate to the colonial culture through distance from their culture. Therefore, the individual finds themselves moving further away from their own culture and continues to integrate colonial culture so that their original cultural practices and understanding become more foreign and obscure.

I have witnessed the distancing of my Xhosa culture in my own experience. My parents favoured private, predominately white schools to 'improve' my chances at a better life because of what they were denied during apartheid. However, what was understood to be a great opportunity

for my future, by conforming to Western ideologies instead, layered my understanding of self with ideas of shame and guilt. Irene Visser details the understanding of shame and guilt in this context as a site of trauma while exploring Patricia Grace's work with respect to Māori culture and colonial languages. Visser describes Grace's work as:

> [P]art of the internalization of the hegemonic ideology of white supremacy, taught in schools and imposed on parents as the best education for their children. This generation's later realization of the insidious nature of this complicity deepens their trauma of loss and impoverishment and increases their feelings of shame and guilt. (Visser 2015:16)

The above illustrates again, how Chinyama describes trauma as insidiously infiltrating our consciousness and distorting self-identification. What also becomes evident for me is the idea of trauma being passed down. I suggest this because it is not necessarily my parents who are experiencing this shame but me.

Through Ngũgĩ's account of the influence language has in dominating African cultures, I have discovered what I have lost. The realization of this loss carefully defines the particularity of my traumatic wound, therefore, shifting my focus to articulate my traumatic wound within the context of my lived experience. I offer the loss of language, isiXhosa, to be a traumatic wound I intend to heal because of how this loss has major ramifications for my feelings of displacement. Now, I look back to the past to attempt to understand the present, in hope for the future. I explore the history of negative stereotypical images that have informed the damaging representations of black African women that exist presently.

Social Historical Context

> Africa has to reclaim the black body with all its blackness as the starting point in our plunge into and negotiations with the world. We have to rediscover and reclaim the sense of the sacred in the black body. (Ngũgĩ, 2012:41)

Ngũgĩ 's suggestion of the need to reclaim the black body, implies the black body has been displaced or lost. The notion of displacement underlines ideas around black women's subjectivity. I have not been exclusively defined by my race, but I have had to deal with the consequences of impositions of racial hierarchies throughout my life, imposed on me simply because I am a black African woman. The delegitimization of black and African bodies, is connected to and perpetuates black and African erasure from imaginative thinking. Black African-American feminist critic, Barbara Christian, asserts that "the enslaved African woman became the basis for the definition of our society's Other" (1985, 160). This chapter explores how and why the black body needs to be reclaimed and contextualises my ideas about decolonising myself as a black African woman. I discuss African-American depictions of negative stereotypical images of black women and examples that are found in a South African context.

Audre Lorde suggests that black females are scarred, stating that: "We are Black women born into a society of entrenched loathing and contempt for whatever is Black and female. We are strong and enduring. We are also deeply scarred" (Lorde, 1984:151). I propose that Lorde envisions this scar as black women taking on the double burden of being both black and a woman. The black body continues to be a site of marginalisation, objectification, and fetishization. bell hooks articulates how representations of black women in contemporary popular culture rarely subvert or critique images of black female sexuality, which were part of the cultural apparatus of 19th-century racism that still shapes perceptions today. In her book, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), she explores the position of the black female body as one that is:

> […] there to entertain … with the naked image of Otherness. They are not to look at her as a whole human being. They are to notice only certain parts. Objectified in a manner similar to that of black female slaves who stood on auction blocks while owners and overseers described their important, saleable parts, […]. They were reduced to mere spectacle. [….] Their body parts were offered as evidence to support racist notions that black people were more akin to animals than other humans. (hooks, 1992:62)

Saartjie Baartman is certainly an image that comes to mind. Saartjie Baartman, *the Hottentot Venus*, was brought to Europe in 1810 from what is now South Africa, as an attraction to behold because of her unique and unusual body shape and size (Hobson, 2018:20). "She was the icon for primitive

sexuality and ugliness" (Ruiz & Isabell 2017:137). Saartjie Baartman was the fascination of the white European gaze as it did not meet with the standards of Western civilization and her difference was evaluated by European standards. She was a symbol of deviant sexuality. She had what was called steatopygia which resulted in extremely protuberant buttocks due to a build-up of fat. She was then caged, gawked at, poked, and prodded as a freak-show attraction in London and Paris. She was placed on display for the amusement and enjoyment of others. When she died an autopsy was done and she was scientifically examined to explore further the extremity of her otherness. Her sexuality was exploited for the benefit of paying, wealthy white men and women of the time. Saartjie Baartman has become a contested icon of South Africa because of the central point which is used to begin to analyse her. In *What is Slavery to Me?: Postcolonial/Slave Memory In Post-Apartheid South Africa* (2018), Gqola identifies

> The emergence of a very specific idiom which arises in literature of the African feminist world, and which, … offers radical departures from conventional representations of [Saartjie] as only embodied (object), pathologized (deviant), evidence (knowable) and/or singular ('freak', myth). (Gqola 2018: 70)

Baartman's image, narrative, representation, and histography have been critically explored, and this critical writing has been attributed to her sexuality, her agency in her choice to leave for Europe and her narrative. All accounts of Baartman are sourced from limited recorded information about her. Gqola suggests: "A tale that begin with [Saartjie Baartman] cannot be one with narrative certainty" (Gqola 2018: 79). The limited information about Baartman creates an opportunity for a kind of mythical writing which imagines life for her.

Negative depictions of black women maintain the power relations between white and black people. I propose that by perpetuating myths and negative stereotypical images of blacks, whites maintained the separation of the races while reflecting the dominant group's interest in maintaining black subordination to further entrench these ideas. Gqola explains:

> The damaging power of being named is one which has been felt and experienced by people of colour everywhere […]. Let us briefly consider the names which cut my tongue as I say them: kaffir, hotnot, boesman, coolie, plural, non-white, ethnic, native, coloured and more broadly third world, commonwealth, empire, colonies. Similarly, we are well aware of the derogatory names accorded to Black women: cherrie, chick, hoe, magosha, babe, s'febe, s'kebereshe, to name a few. In contrast to this is the affirming power of label' which originate from the subjects they describe. These names are often accompanied by controversy, often expressed as alienation by those outside the self-defining group. (1997:5)

These destructive names have come to shape the ideology of both black and white people. An example of how these ideologies influenced the way white people viewed race, is an advertisement in *The Graphic*, an illustrated weekly newspaper published in the United Kingdom in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The advertisement by *Pears* (figure 1.), the British soap brand, illustrates

two images of babies bathing each other with the caption 'for improving and preserving the complexion'. In the first image, a white baby on the outside of a bathtub is seen with a bar of soap, while the black baby is seated inside the tub of water. The second image reveals that the black baby has a black face and a white body after washing and using Pears' soap. The child looks at himself in the mirror with glee at the results produced by using Pears' soap. The advert reinforces the stereotype of black skin as dirty and undesirable, while white skin is viewed as clean, desirable, and therefore more highly valued.

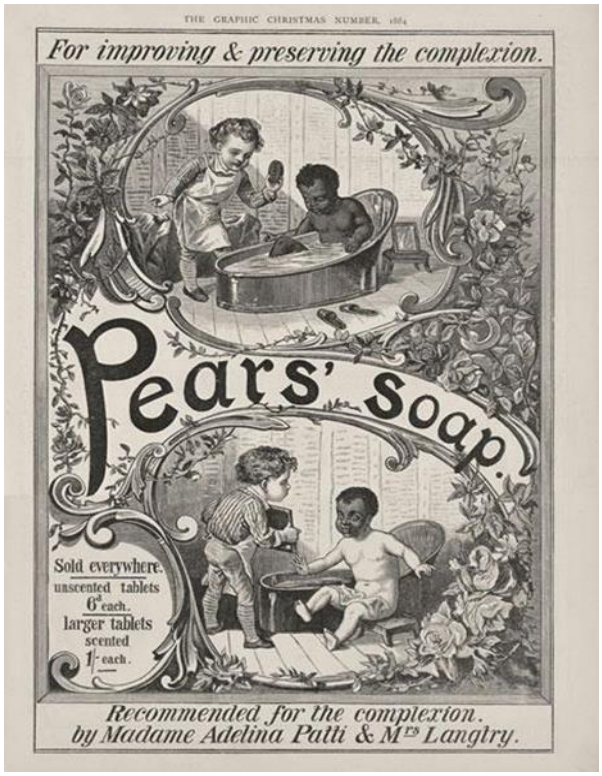

Figure 1: Pears' Soap ad in *The Graphic*, Christmas Number, 1884

Images like the one above were used to commodify black bodies and justify slavery and colonialism. In a more recent South African advertisement made in 2017 (Figure 2), Unilever's *Dove* was forced to apologise after showing an advert displaying a young black woman taking off a brown skin-toned t-shirt and morphing into a white woman to prove that *Dove* body wash was for every woman.

Figure 2: Dove, 2017. *Dove Drops an Ad Accused of Racism*. October 2017

The advertisement received immense backlash from social media sites for its glorification of the white female body. Maggie Astor, who writes for *The New York Times*, stated that "the transition from the black woman to the white woman — compiled into a static collage by a social media user— evoked a long-running racist trope in soap advertising: a 'dirty' black person cleansed into whiteness" (Astor, 2017). Meanwhile, the spokeswoman for *Dove* attempted to apologise by saying that "[it] was intended to convey that Dove Body Wash is for every woman and be a celebration of diversity, but we got it wrong and, as a result, offended many people" (In Astor, 2017).

The white woman's body has always been seen as holy, pure, and civilised: "She was depicted as a goddess rather than a sinner; she was virtuous, pure, innocent, not sexual and worldly" (hooks, 1987 31). White women were adorned with positive and to an extent, God-like, characteristics. Images of the black body in comparison, as illustrated in *The Graphic's* 1884 Pears advert (Figure 1), are associated with animals, and something dirty, savage, impure, the embodiment of evil. As hooks says,

> Black women and men faced a society that was eager to impose upon the displaced African the identity of "sexual savage". As white colonisers adopted a self-righteous sexual morality for themselves, they even more eagerly labelled black people sexual heathens … black women were naturally seen as the embodiment of female evil and sexual lust. (hooks 1987:33)

The controlling images are designed to make sexist, racist, classist and other societal differentiations appear to be a normal part of everyday living. According to Patricia Hill Collins (2000), there have been three main dehumanizing stereotypes of black women: *The Mammy, The Jezebel, and The*

Sapphire. Since the inception of these images, there have been more stereotypical images added to the list, like *The Matriarch, The Welfare Mother, The Tragic Mulatto, The Sassy Black Friend,* and *The Angry Black Woman*. Although the controlling images discussed are predominantly referenced from an African-American perspective, the root of the images is to instil a negative connotation of being African. This I believe has shown to be equally relevant here in Africa. These images were borne by the imagination of the political white-supremacist regime to oppress and manipulate black communities. The Mammy is the overtly subservient servant to a white household (Collins, 2000:72). Jezebel is hyper-sexualized, cunning and her only power is in her body and the hold she has over men (2000:81). Sapphire is an overbearing, sharp-tongued, aggressive woman who emasculates her husband (Yarbrough & Bennett 2000:243). I would like to mention The Mammy to discuss the objectification of the black female body depicted through this image, as the image of The Mammy assists in illustrating the negative images of motherhood and servitude within the South African context.

> Mammy. She is a character as powerfully imprinted as the English nanny, a psychological, social, commercial, and racist stereotype who looms large in the American commedia dell'arte of legend and literature—Southern earth mother, source of nutrition, wisdom, comfort, and discipline, cook, adviser, mediator. In such personifications as theater's Ma Rainey and television's Beulah, in literature and film, she remains in myth and memory the most positive and yet most dangerous of all racist stereotypes. (Patton, 1993:5)

The Mammy is seen as the dutiful, obedient, and faithful servant to the white household. Known to care for the young of the white male master and his family. The mammy is said to put the white family before her own and is accepting of her subordination. Solidifying her place in the social order as a servant. The image of the mammy symbolizes the dominant group's perception of the ideal black woman and her relationship to elite white male power. As expressed by Patricia Hill Collins, the mammy image, "[c]reated to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service, … represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women's behaviour" (Collins, 2000 :72). Her appearance is that of exaggeration and extreme features. She is bubbly, playful, happy, devoted and in appearance she is ugly, dark in complexion, unfeminine, asexual, large, with African features (McElya, 2007: 8-9). This stereotype was used to justify slavery by suggesting that slaves consented to and enjoyed their enslavement.

The Mammy is always aware of the constraints given to her as a black woman. This stereotypical controlling image of The Mammy ties to ideas of servitude, exploitation, and subordination. She can put aside her own desires and needs for the needs of the white family. Since these images come out of American popular culture, I would like to suggest a South African

equivalent to the image of The Mammy. The Domestic Worker or nanny displays similar characteristics to the role of The Mammy. The similarities are depicted through the low-income salary job, the close relationship the domestic worker has to the family she works for, and the nature of the work that is expected to be done in the form of cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the children. Brenda Grant explains the position of the domestic worker and her expansive responsibilities as follows:

> Domestic work is socially useful and necessary. It imposes great responsibility and draws on a range of socially useful skills. It involves cleaning, feeding and caring for millions of people. Domestic workers are used and abused as cleaners, cooks, household managers, secretaries, sex-workers, security guards, confidantes, psycho-analysts, nurses, social workers, tutors, gardeners, chauffeurs, dress-makers, interior decorators, etc. Domestic workers are entrusted with the most important human and financial possessions of many of their employers - their children and their houses and household possessions. (Grant, 1997:64)

The earliest account of a black South African domestic worker is traced back to the 1650s with the arrival of Jan Van Riebeeck at the Cape. Van Riebeeck and his wife Maria employed a young Khoi girl named Krotoa, to care for their children. Living with the family, Krotoa learned to speak Dutch and Van Riebeeck took advantage of this opportunity to use Krotoa as an interpreter between the Khoi and Dutch (Jansen, 2019:1).

In South Africa the domestic worker has impacted the lives of those (predominantly white) who benefit from her employment as a caring and motherly cleaner. At the same time, the absence of a mother in her own home, when she has gone to seek employment as a domestic worker, impacts on the lives of her own children.

The negative stereotype of subservient black women is depicted in the 1990s comic strip, *Madam and Eve.* Established in the early years of the South African democracy, historian Harry Dugmore and graphic artist Rico Schacherl, two pioneers of South African satire, collaborated with American Stephen Francis to make *Madam and Eve*. The comic was set up to be a satirical look at the relationships between the employer and employee which existed within a South African home. Eve Sisulu, the domestic worker in the comic, was depicted as The Sassy Black Woman who commented on the conditions of being a domestic worker and the political situation in South African. Although set up as a commentary device, the comic fails to provide a challenge to the status quo but instead it maintains stereotypes of black womanhood. Gail Smith speaks of how the comic created by three white males, does nothing more than reinforce stereotypes:

> Eve's character is doomed to betray her initial promise as a potentially radical or transgressive portrayal of black South African femininity. As the maid stereotype, Eve is presented as evidence of 'change' in South Africa. Yet at the same time the Maid-Madam power dynamic ensures that she cannot become too threatening. (Smith, 1996:34)

Smith continues by adding that,

> Madam and Eve relies on black stereotypes that do not challenge white supremacy. It legitimates white stereotypification of black experience. Eve is presented as a 'sassy black woman' when the reality of being black and woman means that 'sass' comes at a price, and for domestic workers that price could very well be your job. (Smith, 1996:34)

Another trope to explore is that of Motherhood, often found in expressions such as *Mother-nature* and *Mother Africa*. Gqola refutes the Motherhood trope when referencing Africa as,

> A way of making women characters stand in for what was done to the continent: raped, pillaged, trampled on, impoverished, bled dry, robbed, all the while the character itself may not speak back. But women are the continent. (Gqola, 2017:111)

The negative, subjugating and suppressing images discussed above, affect how my black skin is viewed today. These forms of identification have denied black people their subjectivity and supported the political economy of domination. This is an example of the concept of the colonial matrix of power that purposefully instilled a deep sense of inferiority and inadequacy in black people so that they could be exploited. Domination always attempts to objectify the subordinate group. "As subjects, people have the right to define their reality, establish their own identities, name their history," asserts bell hooks (1989:42). This right is compromised by systems of oppression as others define one's reality.

This is the legacy of what continues today and has been made easier because it has been internalised. Again, the internalisation echoes these associations with the identification of racial differences that have lived long throughout the centuries and are still being perpetuated as the mainstream media likens beauty and femininity to the European aesthetic. I experience conforming to the European aesthetic daily in my refusal to wear my hair naturally. The absolute disdain I have for my prodding buttocks because my hips to waist ratio, to me, is 'not normal'. I believe, I love my black *African-ness*. I accept who I am, and I value all those who have come before me in the world. However, I don't know how I will convince myself that I am beautiful with my natural hair, that I do not have to hide my figure under copious amounts of material and that no exercise or dietary plan will make any noticeable difference.

Throughout history, black women have been depicted in reductive ways that deny the different experiences and emotions that are part of their lives. In my research, I investigate current representations of black women, as these depictions give life to how I understand myself as a black African and more so as a creative person. I feel ultimately responsible for portraying this image with truth and sincerity as Patricia Hill Collins asserts that self-definition and self-evaluation form part of a collective black women's consciousness (Collins, 2000:117). Such practices allow black women to

negotiate contradictions between their perceptions of themselves and misrepresentations of their identity within negative and positive stereotypes and controlling images, contributing to black women' journey to independent definitions of their identities.

I now turn to outlining my methodology, in more detail followed by an explication of my solo performnce, *Xwebile*.

Methodology

Autoethnography draws on personal experiences to examine and critique cultural experiences, and my reflective writing was an instrumental tool in critiquing my work. My reflective writing assisted in analysing the explorations of my research around decolonising the self. My ability to share my story pushes back against the tyranny of singularity. I apply an autoethnographic approach by considering my personal experiences of violence, trauma, and oppression to generate knowledge and understanding. As research and writing method, autoethnography places the self at the centre of cultural and social analysis. The autoethnographic methodology is where my past experiences become the memory or scar that I attempt to recover from and transcend to move forward.

The autoethnographic method appeals to me because it focuses on a tangible reality that I can relate to, my very own reality. Furthermore, it situates the research within a praxis that allows self-reflexivity. Aisha Durham expresses autoethnography in an article as, "[...]a mind-mining excavation of memory. We recover memories to reconstruct the situated self about other bodies-real-or imagined-within a particular context or historical moment to understand culture" (Durham, 2014: 19-20). The idea of mind-mining excavation parallels how I was extracting information from my very own work.

Autoethnography has been defined as "a genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bouchner, 2000: 739). The notion of consciousness articulates what I wish to portray through my work. It is not just to express these experiences I have found troubling but to bring to the surface the reality of how such matters continue to traumatise, victimise, and isolate me. Bringing these issues to mind unlocks the potential for transformation and change. It can potentially shift ways of thinking and the ability to unpack the complexities and contradictions that black African embodiment entails. Autoethnography also illuminates ideology significant to the black African feminist because "central to both Black feminism and womanism is valuing the everyday experiences of Black women" (Gqola, 2001:17).

I was drawn to Practice as Research as a methodology because it invites a different mode of knowledge generation which I find to be very similar to the strategies employed by Black African feminists in their efforts to decolonise. PaR also engages with lived experiences and embodied knowledge. My practice in this case is performance and my body serves as a site of knowledge.

> 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, 2013:9)

PaR, as explained by Nelson, is a well-suited methodology within the framework of black African feminism because of the multiplicity that Nelson suggests that lies at the heart of its methods of research inquiry. As mentioned earlier, the issue presented by Tamale was that with centring black feminist scholarship, black African women would need to find new conceptualizations and schools of thought. These would serve to articulate their lived experiences by countering the hegemonic mainstream narratives. The range of expressions available through PaR allows for expansion of knowledge generation to challenge dominant ideologies.

In *Knowing Performance: Performance as Knowledge Paradigm for Africa* (2009), Mark Fleishman argues why performance is a suitable methodology for knowledge generation in the African context. Fleishman argues for performance as a way of knowing by challenging three major knowledge orthodoxies. It is not how Fleishman debunks critique of employing performance as knowledge generation that interests me, but rather how he views the role of performance in relation to knowledge.

Chinyama articulates her journey of being a sangoma as a site of countless discoveries. She explains that "as with many life-changing experiences, you commit to an idea or practice before you know what it might entail, for the experience of it is the only way to really know" (2017:114). Fleishman articulates a similar understanding when speaking about performance as "open[ing] up the world of meaning" (2009:112). He goes on further to say, "it is a process of discovery that allows us to penetrate the surface of the world" (2009:123). He describes a performance research production as an "inventive state of becoming" (2009:34). My understanding of his articulation is that there is not a completeness, stuck-ness or a resolute ending with the performance but that it is constantly evolving and changing through each uttering of its existence. The research is not determined by a result in the form of the performance production but in the experimental nature of the performance. He proposes that the experimental nature of the performance articulates complexities of thought and feeling that stable texts cannot. Fleishman's idea of the capability of a performance resonates with Gqola's differentiation between rioting women and writing women. Gqola stated that writing women were less threatening than bodies in the street rioting. In my opinion, the PaR methodology grants the feeling of intensity and aggression Gqola points to.

> If performance as research is anything, it is the desire to make conscious, to become aware from within the midst of the endless process of becoming and then to attempt to translate this for others through a variety of modalities. (Fleishman, 2012:35)

Fleishman expresses PaR as a desire to make conscious. I believe that autoethnography and the black African feminist perspective are attempts to do exactly that - to bring to consciousness. The

methodologies I have employed in my research have enabled me as a researcher and performance practitioner to bring my lived experience as a black South African woman into research. My one-person show, *Xwebile,* was a steppingstone to my final research production. Through the PaR methodology, I experimented with my body and from the video work was able to deepen my understanding of what it means to be a black African woman.

The Scab: *Xwebile*

> I remember being told how important it was to moisturise.
> It started with someone else moisturising me and then me learning to do it myself.
> A ritual of sorts.
> Sitting naked and applying the smooth lotion on my body. My body, learning the ins and outs of who I am.
> I loved the way it felt as it squished and squirmed through my fingers and my fingertips.
> I loved how it made me feel as I placed this thin layer of newly formed skin on my body.
> Now, this has become a ritual where I find myself every day taking the time to replenish and feed my skin.
> A me-time moment, a moment where I become one with myself again.
> The only skin I have. The one that identifies me. Defines me. Shows me off and holds me in. (Gubangxa, 2021)

My second seminar paper explored the representation of the black female body visually and how it came to bear meaning in performance as a way of understanding the lived experiences of black women. This was inspired by the book, *The Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (2011) by Nicole Fleetwood, as she navigated various visual and performance practices which troubled the visuality of blackness and how these manifestations contributed to harmful and stifling images attributed to people of colour today:

> *Troubling Vision* is more concerned with race as iteration through theories of performativity; the book considers how the markings and iterations of blackness manifested through deliberate performance of visibility that begs us to consider the constructed nature of visuality. The book then not only concerns itself with the black body in the visual field but more broadly with how blackness gets attached to bodies, goods, ideas, and aesthetic practices in the visual sphere. (Fleetwood, 2011: 20)

I developed my research by critically analysing my one-person ethnographic performance, *Xwebile*, to navigate and understand its development. Through reflection and analysis, I could begin to engage with this material consciously. I examined how blackness is attached to my body, how and what meanings are created when I am seen as a black African woman. I explored my body visually to understand what inscribed meaning is presented through the work. This was achieved by using strategies such as hypervisibility of the skin, which urges the viewer to confront certain fixed racial and cultural assumptions around the meaning of the skin. To further understand the racial and cultural beliefs about skin and, more specifically, the multiple meanings associated with black skin, I looked at other visual representations of black skin, by other artists, to articulate the origins of these assumptions.

I used elements of my biography to create a performance that explored my creative obsession using an identified personal power object - an object of value to me. *Xwebile* developed into an ethnographic performance of self, womanhood, and my experience of what it meant to be a

black woman. *Xwebile* in isiXhosa means to be broken, but everyday use of the word means to have 'ashy,' dry and patchy skin. It was never my intention to focus on the skin. However, through playing and developing the work, I discovered how important a role skin plays in expressing who I am, my connection to the world, and how society views me. The piece was performed, recorded, and exists as a video work.

South African performing artist, Buhlebezwe Siwani, uses a range of creative outlets in her expression including photography, sculpture, drawing, film, and performance. Her modes of expression take on many forms in the navigation of her own personal and cultural identity. What drew me to the work of Siwani is her process of creation, which seemed very similar to my undertaking when creating *Xwebile*. Siwani's interest in the subject matter of black African women's journeys, and how her experiences influence her way of thinking, are informative.

> When I began my work – and it hasn't changed – it was under the umbrella of spirituality. What African spirituality really means and how it speaks to colonisation, history, socio-economic conditions, tradition, the black female body. And how all of that takes effect in the present world where we have manifested ourselves as human beings. I just started thinking about the things we construct and the things that have been constructed for us and the ways in which the black female body is [understood] through *ubungoma*[13]. (in Bouteba, 2020)

The thematic area of her work is rooted in the exploration of the black African woman within the South African context, and she interrogates patriarchy and ideas of home. Siwani attributes her way of thinking to "[...]how [she] live[s] as a black woman and how the world engages with [her] in spaces and how the world engages with other black women in the spaces that we occupy" (Siwani, 2018). Siwani's description of her thematic process shares strong parallels with Chinyama's experience of feminism. Yes, both women have a shared experience of practicing *ukuthwasa*, but their ideas of home, spaces of intimacy and their navigations of awareness as black African women in the world, generate powerful points of connection. I believe that in these moments of familiarity and comfort, space is made where I can see myself and feel heard and seen by others.

Xwebile begins, and in the voice over, I am saying, "I was born with bad skin." I was born with eczema, and from a very young age, this impacted the way people, including my mother, saw me. I was also a very dark-skinned baby and was told by family members that I was ugly just like my father because of this dark skin. This significantly impacted how I saw myself and my self-worth. This triggered an obsession with what it meant for me to be a black woman and the way black women are viewed in the world as a way of understanding myself. Something that has stayed with me from an early age is how I was constantly being moisturised, firstly to try and combat eczema, then as a daily moisturising ritual. It developed into a creative obsession through the work *Xwebile*. The

[13] isiXhosa word meaning a calling or a gift from the ancestors.

performance attempts to interrogate the codes of blackness seen in dominant public discourse regarding the black female body. I cannot help but mention Saartjie Baartman when discussing the gaze. Her body was placed on display for others to look at. Gqola attributes the legacy of Baartman not only to the contribution she may have served to scientific knowledge, but also to the interrogation of feminists writing against "the *felt* effects of the gaze which fixes them/us as the oversexed, deviant object[s]" (Gqola 2018:69, emphasis in original). I propose then that the body be seen as a site of knowledge because it is constantly in view, and being interpreted, with meanings being extracted from it.

> […] body is the bedrock on which the social order is founded; the body is always in view and on view. As such, it invites a gaze, a gaze of difference, a gaze of differentiation — the most historically constant being the gendered gaze. There is a sense in which phrases such as "the social body" or "the body politic" are not just metaphors but can be read literally. (Oyěwùmí, 1997:2)

Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí expresses how the body is constantly viewed and that meaning is extracted from the body. The performance tries to negotiate what is visualised when this body, the only one I have, is seen. What does it say to the world before I even have a chance to introduce myself? A person lives behind the skin, which has more to offer than what these markers represent. This construction of being black has always resulted from my skin colour and the indicators this skin presents to the world that I live in. Therefore, it was essential to interrogate this with the many obsessions about who I am.

One of my personal daily rituals as a part of bathing is moisturising. I have been raised to know and believe its importance and have instilled it into my daily routine, which is how moisturiser became a central object in the project. On the 29th of April 2021, the performance took place in a room in the Rosedale Building on Hiddingh Campus in Cape Town. The performance begins with a body wearing only a black G-string, my body—the simplest of forms and ways of being. The viewer's gaze is drawn to the only thing in the room, this almost naked body. My body is still as the camera moves along to explore various parts of the body and the skin. Yet, in this performance, my black body does not become the object but the subject of investigation. Having the camera's gaze create extreme close ups of my my body and skin allowed for a kind of vulnerability and honesty in the performance. I was so exposed to the viewer looking and viewing my body. Parts of my body were viewed this intimately to invite the viewer to really look, scrutinise, and not just see a black body. The images are so close that the pores of my skin, the tiny hairs, and my skin's scaliness, the scarring, the stretch marks, and the flaking of the skin are all seen through this gaze. The camera controls what is seen, momentarily, moving over my skin to different body parts. Therefore, I was able to control the direction of the audience's gaze and the duration of the scrutiny, which would not have been possible had the viewer been in the room with their naked eye. Brining the skin to life in this way was important to draw

attention to it as a living, breathing organism inscribed with so much meaning. Sarah Ahmed and Jackie Stacey suggest in, *Thinking through the Skin* (2001), that the skin employs more of a role than just the form keeper of our bodies and assert that "the skin does not simply contain the body, nor is skin simply there, already formed, in its place; rather, the skin is both already inscribed, or marked, and is always yet to be inscribed" (Ahmed & Stacey, 2001: 14). This articulates that the skin comes with prescriptions and possesses the ability to create new meanings.

My focus was to remain still while the camera moved across my body, engaging with the gaze upon the black body and how it continues to be exploited, scrutinised and abused. However, this is intensified by the magnification of the close viewing of the marks on the skin, showing its history and lived experiences. The tight angle on the skin distorts the image where you cannot tell which part of the body is being looked at. The intimacy of the performance is palpable as the gaze moves across my body, exposing various surface areas of the skin.

What does it mean to have this black skin, and what are the experiences of being in it? The skin becomes a marked surface as it is racially categorised as black and gendered as female. Many black bodies, especially naked ones, are exposed, looked at, and exploited. However, seeing my body very closely invites the viewer to an alternative way of viewing and seeing. I articulate this as an alternative view because it does not place a face or a persona on the image. Instead, one is faced with complex notions of a body but, more specifically, a black body while also emphasising that it is a moving, breathing, living body that has a whole set of experiences and a history that informs the way it is perceived. This body could be anyone, and as a viewer, one is called to draw on their own experiences and knowledge of the black body to create meaning. Then, I begin to moisturise the body with aqueous cream.

> To feed this vessel is important to me as it is the only one I have.
> The scars I carry remind me of many times I was not myself and in the darkest places of my existence, the funniest moments and the most painful.
> I carry it with me every day.
> It slowly minimises the appearance of my scars, but they are forever there, with me.
> Like the memories I carry of them. (Gubangxa, 2021)

I begin to smear the moisturiser over my body. I decided to use aqueous cream because of its ability to combat dry skin. I use the word combat to draw attention to the ideas of overcoming and fighting against. Black skin has been pathologized and has resulted in internalised notions of black skin being problematic. Black skin becomes something that must be fixed. These ideas are rooted in the social-historical context explained earlier, where power structures attempted to instil feelings of inadequacy to enforce domination. First, I applied the moisturiser liberally before applying an excess amount all over my body and hair until I was completely covered with the white sticky, gloopy

substance. I have already discussed the ways Siwani's work resonates with my own. I would also like to draw attention to Siwani's creative interest in the black female body.

Siwani, as a contemporary South African artist, is interested in rebuilding a reliable sense of self and identity. This is suggested in her insistence on claiming control of her own body and positioning herself in public spaces on her own terms. By placing herself and her body at the centre of her art practice, she can highlight the cultural and structural erasure of her own black female body in white male-dominated spaces, like the visual art world. Siwani uses her body to claim her agency and create her narratives. Siwani's body acts as a medium and a site of protest and power. She elaborates on how she uses her body as a tool to understand herself and create new narratives about black women by stating:

> [t]here is a long history of fetishizing and exoticizing the black female body. When you finally offer it up and return the gaze will it be consumed in the same sneaky way that white people normally consume it? I constantly ask myself that question before I make work. How am I challenging the gaze? Who am I making this work for? Have I offended myself? Have I been honest? This is the set of questions I use to go to war. (Siwani, 2016)

By embodying silent narratives, the artist seeks to challenge roles assigned by our society and change Western notions of history. Speaking about trauma and unresolved feelings of injustice is essential to the healing process of both the collective and of individuals.

Any Given Sunday: Qunusa, Buhle!
Khayelitsha, Cape Town, 2016.

Another South African visual artist, Mary Sibande, explores methods of healing unresolved feelings of enacted injustices by paying homage to the women in her family who were maids and domestic workers. Through her work, Sibande celebrates the women in her life as they were limited through their experiences as black women during the time of apartheid. Sibande positions her work by understanding the complexities and layered history of black women's experience by saying: "[…] what is true - urgently - paramount to me, is the body. In particular, the black female body, and the

presence, extension, and proliferation of it, despite the complicated and violent histories it inescapably carries" (Sibande & Davey, 2019). She also expresses the desire not to limit the experience of black women and confine them to fixed constructions of representation: "I realise that in order to avoid the perpetuation and normalisation of […] power roles, the body need[s] to dissolve - to sprout, swell, and thrive - and ultimately be liberated" (Sibande & Davey, 2019). She creates large scale, hyper-realistic characters cast from her own face and body as sculptures and uses the characters to comment on issues experienced by black, working-class women.

The first figure Sibande created is clothed in blue and has the name, Sophie. An important distinction of Sophie is that she is always made in Sibande's likeness, including closely matching her skin complexion. In discussion with Shraddha Nair, curator, and author of *STIRworld*, Sibande describes the character of Sophie and defines her relationship to the figure of Sophie and what she represents, as follows:

> The character of Sophie is my alter ego, and she plays out the fantasies of the maternal women in my family. I tasked myself with creating this mythical figure that I imagined from stories that my forebearers used to share with me. Their stories were a result of the political system of apartheid that determined a particularly impoverished station in life, lives of servitude. Sophie comes as a culmination of their collective escapism; the escapism used in the work to tell stories through sculpture, dress and installation. I cast my face and my body to capture gestures that adorn costumes that are partly maid uniforms, in terms of the blue-coloured fabric that signifies servitude. The form of these garments reference colonial fashionable gowns. Sophie is not a static figure; her story is continuous; she emerges out of apartheid in the blue uniforms and enters other phases of purple and currently red. (Sibande & Nair, 2020)

Sophie was born out of an assignment that tasked the artist with investigating her personal history and biography. Sophie debuted at Sibande's first solo exhibition in 2009 at the MOMO Gallery in Johannesburg, South Africa. The solo show was titled, *Long Live the Dead Queen* (2008). Sophie appeared in what seemed to look like a classic domestic maid's uniform but bore a striking resemblance to the attire of the Victorian bourgeoisie. Sophie is cast from Sibande's image, unlike Siwani, who physically uses her own body. While Sibande uses the figure of Sophie to navigate lived experiences of black African women, she physically and figuratively distances herself from the subject matter through the character. Sibande is then able to create meaning using garments, gestures, and Sophie's environment to comment on servitude and power in relation to black South African women. This is suggested by contrasting the domestic workers' uniform with elaborate and sizeable Victorian attire:

> When you look at images of Victorian dresses, you realize that women found it hard to wear such big, heavy and tightened-up dresses and that their movements were limited as a consequence. I constructed Sophie's clothing with that 'limited movement' concept in mind. Sophie goes to work in her ordinary dress. If she were wearing such big and heavy Victorian dress, she wouldn't be able to do anything. Her dress is a protest against being a maid and

> at the same time it is the facade that allows her fantasies to come to life. (Sibande & Balboa-Pöysti, 2011)

Sophie's eyes are always closed, indicating her escape from her lived experience to exist in the imagined present, which Sibande creates through her artwork. Sibande employs the idea of imagination as a powerful tool to conjure new possibilities and alternatives to the current or lived experiences of the lives of her foremothers. In her *Long Live the Dead Queen* (2008) exhibition, Sibande presents Sophie in her elaborate concoction of a blue dress with a red cape. The red cape is significant because it evokes the garment worn by Queen Victoria at her coronation in 1838. Therefore, Sibande's art suggests that Sophie is imagining herself in a position of royalty and superseding the notion of servitude. Sibande elaborates on the importance of colour in her work saying, "I have found colour to be an effective, affecting agent of anchoring the wayposts of my practice. The biggest determining factor of the social structure of contemporary South Africa is colour, often used as a mechanism of division by the corrupt chieftains clinging to their ranks" (Sibande & Balboa-Pöysti, 2011). *The Purple Shall Govern* (2008) is an exhibition of her work, in which Sibande uses the colour purple, which symbolises nobility, luxury, and power and references an anti-apartheid protest in 1989 in Cape Town. The police laced the water cannons used to disperse the protestors with purple dye, marking the individuals at the protest. The police could then identify those individuals present at the protest and later arrest them. This brings me to the use of a significant object as a starting point in the creative process. The colours formed an instrumental component of layered meaning in Sibande's work and both *Xwebile* and Siwani's work, incorporate objects that stem from childhood memories, and both speak strongly to the pathologizing of black skin.

A Reverse Retrogress, Scene I (2013)
Mary Sibande

The act of moisturising is one of the critical moments mentioned overtly in *Xwebile*. You physically see me moisturising myself by applying more and more moisturiser throughout the performance. The moisturiser becomes more than what is implied in the performance. Firstly, it is suggested as a form of nourishment to the skin. The skin needs to be nourished to prevent dryness, flaking and cracking. However, it is significant to note the personal importance of moisturising, as it has become a 'ritual' in my life, as I have mentioned above. Considering that there is a level of high esteem granted to this act, I wonder why then it is so essential to prevent dryness? This brings me to the point of 'ashiness'. This colloquial term is used for dry, cracked and flaking (black) skin. To be ashy has become more than just a dermatological phenomenon but a cultural and political one. To be 'ashy' is seen as having a lack of pride. To have and preset moisturised, well-kept, and well taken-care-of skin expresses dignity and pride. The Black Consciousness Movement as advocated by Steve Biko was a philosophy which promoted unity for Blackness, and the aesthetic which developed as a result was rooted in African pride. The movement worked against the racist apartheid ideology in South Africa to instil positive reinforcement and increase agency amongst its supporters:

> In their earliest form, Black Consciousness aesthetics embraced the rhetoric of the ideology by challenging the very notion of difference (first racial, later ethnic) at the heart of apartheid and, indeed, at the core of colonial and imperial interests elsewhere in the world. Proponents celebrated Africa's past, emphasizing the essential humanness of all people. Heroes were honored, both well known and unnamed, who showed fearlessness in the face of a formidable enemy that denied them fundamental human rights. By unifying as black, and glorifying Africa's past, BC adherents experienced a shift in awareness from *less-able*, as cast by apartheid's makers, to *self-able*. Action depended on one thing: a belief in oneself as agent of change. In word and image, music and fashion, this aesthetic of conviction made headway among the BC-minded at this time, as all were seen as politically pertinent. As Biko once put it, "A country in Africa, in which the majority of the people are African, must inevitably exhibit African values and be African in style". (Hill, 2015:4)

Black Consciousness and the Black is Beautiful Movement, highlighted the importance of pride in everything relating to blackness. This celebration of blackness included fashion, physical appearance, and hair. "A woman who put time and money into her appearance was dignified, and her dignity spoke well of her race. Grooming was a weapon in the battle to defeat racist depictions of blacks" (Craig, 2002: 36).

The moisturiser is applied as a protector, and I want to suggest that the skin is being protected by being moisturised. I am also being protected from the scrutiny of society, from the pain and harm inflicted by the societal view. I propose the need for protection because of the continuous violence directed at women in South Africa. My experience alone as a woman in this country has seen me become victim to violence impacted by men in 2014 and 2017. The moisturiser acts as a soothing agent to the harsh reality of lived experiences by black women in South Africa. This further

echoes the notion that black women are generally not safe in South Africa. It seems absurd to think that we would seek this protection from cream, however, we are not afforded the protection of white privilege. The ritualistic tradition of lathering one's skin is passed down, and so are stories of trauma from one generation to the next. The moisturiser as protection also speaks to the skin's safety from the outside world, "the skin", as the outer covering of the body that both "protects us from others and exposes us to them" (Cataldi, 1993: 145). The skin is the barrier between us and the world, protecting and guarding the self by keeping the intimate relationship with ourselves private. The skin exposes us to so much and is our main point of contact with the rest of the world. The moisturiser then acts as armour for protecting what the world cannot see.

The act of moisturising oneself is usually private, but it becomes public in the performance. The pace at which the performance unfolds is also deliberately slow to allow the viewer to engage with the visuality of the performance. The mundane act of moisturising is intensified when I use an excessive amount of moisturiser all over the body, covering the skin to transform it, coat it, hide it, and create a new skin to exist in, even if it is just for a moment. I am gazed upon beyond the markings of my skin. I become something else.

> Thicker and thicker, I lay it on as I disappear only for a moment before returning again, and again and again…
> I hold on.
> Words are just words, but I take them as they seep in.
> The stickiness that cannot be separated.
> Do you see me? (Gubangxa, 2021)

A recurring object present in Siwani's early work is *Preem* soap. *Preem* is a green multipurpose, inexpensive household soap, found in low-income South African households and used by black South African families to clean everything including household items such as dishes, clothes, the stove, the floor, and the body. The object symbolises, and has a deep-rooted connection to Siwani's home. It is not only the sensory affiliation brought on by the soap's abrasive smell, but it also triggers a memory of a young Siwani standing and being washed at her grandmother's house. As she recalls:

> The whole thing came from a memory that I have of being washed by my aunt at my grandmother's house. And I was washed in the kitchen that day, like many days, but the difference is that there was just a lot of people. And that day, my aunt said *qunusa*! Which means bend over, you know, because she wants to wash your cooch. And I was just, first, I'm about ten years old, I can wash myself, but you've chosen to take me from the streets playing with the boys, and you've decided that it's time for me to wash and to look like a girl now.
>
> I kept on thinking about that, it became this idea of purity and how we cleanse in order to be spiritually sound and just desirable. I just wanted to grapple with the idea.

> At that point in time, when I was just beginning the material, I had my memory understanding of it and then I wanted to understand the material now. Because this green soap used to be brought home and it would be cut up in pieces. And it would be used for washing dishes, washing clothing, washing you. It would be cleaning the house. There were all sorts of purposes for this long bar of soap.
>
> Yeah, and this was the other thing; as soon as I started working with it, my hands started stripping themselves, like the skin the flesh started stripping itself.
> (Siwani & Matakala, 2017)

Siwani uses the object of *Preem* soap as a departure point for her exploration. This creation method echoes so much of the preliminary stages of producing *Xwebile*. Siwani develops her process by thinking through the object to understand herself and her relationship to the object, and I want to highlight the engagement with the object and how this manifested from a memory, a scar, her experience, and her personal history. In the interview, she describes the process in which she allows the object, the *Preem* soap, to live as itself before she develops it even further by moulding it. Yet, she always keeps in mind the object's relationship to herself as she experiments with moulding it into other objects.

Siwani describes *Preem* soap as multipurpose household cleaner, and this soap was used to clean her body. The contrast of the harsh detergent and her supple skin resonates with ideas I mentioned earlier, of combatting and fighting against the belief that the black skin needs fixing and cleaning, suggesting that the skin is problematic in nature. Siwani's memory of being washed in her home also sparks memories of *The Graphic* Pears' advertisement (Figure 1). Siwani working with her hand and the soap stripping away her skin seems such a violent act associated with the removal and cleansing of the skin. The insistence on cleaning, scrubbing, and combatting suggests impurity, dirtiness, and ugliness. As Siwani explains:

> Before anything, I often think of my body as a costume, not as naked or nude, so when I make work, I refuse to render my costume vulnerable or offer it up to people. It is mine and I own it in all my pieces. Furthermore, I have explicitly cited that this body that I inhabit is not mine, it belongs to my ancestors, and it is a vessel. I know this sounds a bit contradictory, so let me elaborate, this body is not mine alone. I often refer to myself as we in a collective manner because I do not walk alone. This body is inhabited by my grandmothers and grandfathers, who have chosen me to be a spiritual healer. I have chosen to use their body to make art. (Siwani, 2016)

Siwani can continue to place herself at the heart of her investigation while still expanding and encapsulating the detail of her experience of being a black woman. I would like to employ such thinking when creating a performance, where I think through and transcend to find deeper meaning and connection to the self. Her journey of becoming a *sangoma* has also influenced her way of thinking, working, and creating work. By not separating these two identities, Siwani believes that her

spiritual journey as an African healer has added another dimension to her art practice which she explores through her work. As she explains:

> It's very much a part of my journey and my art-making journey. I think that part of my ancestral calling is to make work about this so that people can see another side. We're constantly dealing with the politics of identity, but not thinking through the politics of the spirit that [must] do a lot with identity: identity is linked very much to the spirit, when the spirit is gone, what identity do you have left? All my work has to do with the journey of finding oneself through indigenous practices, looking at history, looking at culture, through who I am: a black female body. (Siwani & Abrams, 2021)

The performance of *Xwebile* ends with me writing words all over my body with my fingers, such as black, whore, slut, drunk, ugly, and fat which are seen through the moisturiser. The work is accompanied by a voice-over of conversations I have had with myself about myself and this obsession with moisturising. Are they the words that I associate with myself? Are they words related to black women and their bodies? Or are they the words of the societal view being expressed? This writing becomes the final act of the performance before I gaze directly into the camera. This is the first point of direct engagement between the viewer and me. The uncertainty provides gaps in the inscription, meaning and association with the body. The final words of the voice-over refer to the words found on the body before posing the question: "Do you see me?" This direct question serves as an acknowledgement of the act of being looked at.

The voice is my own. It is relentless and does not let the viewer rest or make them feel at ease as they view this ritualistic act of moisturising. The act of moisturising is simplistic and mundane, yet the text that co-exists with this act encapsulates the complexity of such an act. The text suggests the insidious trauma made visible that is then internalized as the moisturiser is absorbed into the skin. It gives the viewer a peek at the struggles of being looked at and judged, and brings to light the internal conflict of what is happening beneath the skin. It is a private moment as it feels as if the audience is being invited to engage with the conversation but at the same time are kept at a healthy distance from what is happening.

The work speaks to how I feel as a black woman living in this country. My skin is sensitive, it scars very quickly and reacts to everything. Every time I get a small scratch, bump, or bruise, it scars. If I put certain lotions on my skin, it scars. If I am not feeling well or reacting to something, my skin is the first indicator. The work encompasses the struggles I must take on, every day as I absorb so much information about myself and who I am from interacting and engaging with others, with family, and with society. I take on these words, judgements, negative stereotypes, and racially constructed myths, and they seep into my consciousness, shaping my understanding of who I am. I am left asking, what happens when one is constantly absorbing baggage that is not their own?

Siwani's work incorporates African traditions and African spirituality because both aspects form a large part of her identity. Sibande's approach is more explicit in her imaginings of the future. She uses history and the past to address issues in the present and imagines new futures through the construction of her character, Sophie. As hooks argues: "Art constitutes one of the rare locations where acts of transcendence can take place and have a wide-ranging transformative impact" (hooks, 1995:8). How, then, will I approach my work in the final thesis production to illustrate and transcend my wounds, wounds which prove to be complex even for me to articulate?

Let it Breathe: *The Park*

The discoveries I have made throughout the process of writing, researching, analysing, and creating this paper have led me to the conceptualization of my final performance project, *The Park*. *The Park* gathers my methodology and black African feminist perspective to attempt to present my research in performance. I will begin to explain what I can deduce from my research so far and then follow with how I wish to portray my research through performance.

The black African feminist perspective has illustrated the challenges of finding alternative forms of knowledge and new ways of knowing to capture and express black African women's experience as valuable scholarship. This perspective has encouraged me to place my experience as a black woman at the centre of the inquiry. Utilising the PaR methodology has allowed for the inclusion of various modes of creative interpretation which were employed to engage the range of experiences of black African women. Further, following Fleishman, I am now encouraged to extract meaning from the discovery and development of the research rather than fixating on a result. It is through discovery and experimentation that learning is occurring. *Xwebile* enabled me to explore and deepen my understanding of self through a performative medium. My analysis provided me with an understanding of different ways I can use my body in my research, and as Fleishman and Chinyama mentioned earlier, I was able to recognize more about myself and body through the process.

The inquiry of my paper has aimed to focus on decolonising the self and mainly focusing on my own experiences that are embedded in my body. The making and performing of my research production is an attempted towards decolonise the self. My research thus far has served to place and make sense of the negative construction of thought I have attributed to myself.

The medium project *Xwebile* was an attempt to explore my inquiry through my performance practice. The practice of performing the negative perceptions of self, is a platform for the expression and processing of difficult experiences. The process of performance and making allows for a method of understanding the experiences of being in my body and skin in a new way. The work explored my interpretation of blackness and the meanings I have come to understand about my body when viewed by others. I examined how blackness is attached to my body, and how and what meanings are created when I am seen as a black African woman. I explored my body visually to understand what inscribed meaning is presented through the work. The piece assisted in highlighting the importance of the gaze and being looked at and offered a way to move the body from the notion of an object to the subject of investigation. Therefore, suggesting a means through which to claim back my body and my identity.

However, on reflection, I noted that the text I wrote centred on my thoughts of how my body is viewed and as such, exists in isolation in that it only speak to one perspective of the problem of representation, and therefore does not provide the complex tension that exists within my thinking. The voiceover in the work does not directly link to the body in view but rather is left to suggest that the words spoken are related to my black body in view. I wish to speak directly to the problematic notions of representation and not reinforce these representations through silencing. Through the work, I ask how I might begin to challenge traditional notions of representation without silencing and tokenising black bodies.

The idea of exploring the fragmented self and bringing these versions of self to life through performance was developed through the performance-making of *The Park*. Through my research, I found that the limitations of the representations of blackness and Africaness being reduced to a singular form of representation ignore the multifaceted nature of an individual which further erases and minimizes their existence and perceptions of self. The different versions of myself that cease to exist in harmony formed the crux of the complexities relating to identification. I have chosen to personify and characterize the categorized representations that make up who I am as various characters are all extensions of myself. This is an attempt to allow all these different versions of myself to exist with each other. The characters are experienced outside of myself, bringing form to the manner in which I experience them- separated and fragmented. I am able to bring to life each of these characters through conversation and encounters to give voice to what is being experienced. The fragmented self reflects the negotiating we are constantly confronted with in society, when the need to be identified supersedes the notion of simply being or existing. The task I present is not one that seeks an answer but rather an investigation into how difficult it has become to just accept or be accepted. I believe that it is relevant to recognize intersecting categories of identification, but it should not be an obsession that hinders and dictates how I should live.

The strategy I would like to adopt and explore in my research production is similar to the one utilized by Mary Sibande where she challenges constructed representations of black women through Sophie and imagines a different future for the avatar. Sophie transcends the constricting representation of a domestic worker by adorning clothing associated with royalty. I would like to employ this idea to attempt to dismantle and disrupt damaging representations of black African women. This, in turn, allows me to imagine and create new ways of seeing and understanding myself as a black woman towards the idea of becoming. The act of imagining is fluid and presents no limitations and the way I would like to be represented in the world is similarly fluid because my ideas of myself shift over time. The fragmented self represented through the different women, hopes to physicalise these women as being part of my body and yet outside of my world. This I hope to

achieve to illustrate the tension that exists between the Western imagination and the Xhosa world which I am situated.

The setting of *The Park* is in my mind. A space where I have been trying to make sense of my intersecting categories of identification for years. I have set the production in a park. A park is a space that is public and you are in view of others. There is also a code of how one is expected to conduct themselves in this space. It is also the one space where I could have the various personas of myself existing, showing how they exist in a common place and space. This is also a place where I have learned to get lost in my own thoughts and musings, in a playground of questions and answers. It is not as rooted and connected to a home space and place, but it can be be returned to again and again. The weather, and the people in the park are always changing and the place appears the same but it is not and there are constant shifts with how it is seen and how people interact there.

In the production, the fragmented self is explored through different physical bodies so that the act of contemplating representation which has only existed in my mind, interacts with other forms of expression to open myself up to new ways of thinking and being. These are the chracters in *The Park* and what aspects of myself they represent:

Thandeka is closely linked to my experience as a contemporary black South African woman.

Sarah is an expression of my assimilation to Western ideologies and culture.

Primrose is created from damaging stereotypical representational images of black African women. This is suggested in her motherly and caring position of servitude.

Neo a young child, innocent of the pressures and persecutions of society. She dreams and lives unscathed by the need to be categorised.

Saartjie Baartman a suggestion of a black African woman connected to a different realm of existence. Her inclusion speaks to the past looking in on the present.

The women are all connected in different ways through relationships of employment, family, friendship, and ancestral past. I have attempted to incorporate imagined realities in each woman's life and not subjected her to the position of victim. The park is the location in which we see the characters interact and play out their lived experiences. The play explores the rage, fear and doubt that accompanies living in a racialised society and penetrates the lives of the five women. Wounds are opened and a series of questions begin to unravel their park experience as we ask if the women are living in a societal system that is designed to fail them. The play explores the well-meaning lies we tell ourselves about freedom, equality and justice, and the tension comes to a head when the truth about how each woman feels about the other is revealed.

To summarize, I quote Fleishman following Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari when he asserts that:

> becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor destination . . . [it] is neither one nor two nor the relation of the two; it is the in-between, the border or 'line of flight' that runs perpendicular to both. (Fleishman, 2012:34)

with this I would like to bring my research paper to a pause as opposed to an ending. To conclude would be to suggest that the issues and questions I began the research with are in some way resolved. Instead, I suggest an opening of inquiry to engage in a process of becoming.

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