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**Plot 99**

**Towards a Feminine Semiotic: Spiritual and Sexual Emergence(y) in  
Women's Puppetry and Visual Performance**

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Plot 99. Photograph by Anthony Strack van Schyndel

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## **Dedication**

*For Ma*

*Whose sacred form has taken us into the heart of the underworld  
But always offered a red thread, to guide our way through the labyrinth, to lead  
us back to the surface again*

University of Cape Town



Fig. 1. A portrait of Nonthetha Nkwenkwe painted by Lizo Pemba

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My two supervisors, Jay Pather and Jane Bennett, have each provided guidance into the intersections of gender, postcolonial and contemporary performance theory in my research. My supervisor Jay Pather has provided me with three years of artistic and academic support that has been invaluable to the process. It was during my second year of research that I proposed to Jay that the best way for me to understand the applications of postcolonial site-specific production, was to assistant direct on his production *Qaphela Caesar* at the Cape Town City Hall in September 2010. It was in close exchange with his extraordinary meeting points of site, video, installation, lighting, costume and dance that I gained immense artistic insight into the meanings, mechanisms and potential of site-specific visual performance. It confirmed my own artistic inspiration to create a site-specific puppetry production that dealt with the complex theoretical terrain of women's experience. I was also given the opportunity to design and create installations within the performance and to work closely with the production and artistic team in order to understand the full mental, physical, artistic and logistical requirements of such an ambitious undertaking.

I extend my gratitude to Heather Jacklin, Philip Rademeyer and Roxanne Marneweck who have given their expert eyes and minds to the sub editing of the final thesis, my proposal and my creative archives.

During my research period for **Plot 99**, I received great artistic support and opportunities to develop my professional puppetry work alongside my academic research into the practice. I designed and constructed the puppetry and multimedia installations for five productions using visual performance. These

included my latest production *In Medea Res* (2009-2010); *The Mysteries* by Isango Portobello (2009-2010); *Aesop's Fables* by Isango Portobello (2010); *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (2010) and *The Spier Festival of White Lights* with The Siwela Sonke Dance Company (2010). In each process of creating puppetry for my own productions as well as for others through my company, The Paper Body Collective, I was given opportunity for growth, reflection and research. I also acknowledge the support of funders and organizations during this time. This also gave me an opportunity to develop a strong creative team on the road to creating Plot 99.

The puppetry creation team that worked on **Plot 99** included painter and sculptor Marsi Van De Heuvel, puppeteer Lulama Mame and my assistant Bridgette Mqkaza.

My husband, photographer Anthony Strack Van Schyndel, must be acknowledged for his ever-present support in documenting every step of my process. His photographic essays create a poetic dialogue with my field research in the Fort Beaufort and Valkenberg asylums as well as the Eastern Cape. His videography and photography of the five nights of the live *Plot 99* production captures so much of the complex semiotics of the experience and for this I am forever grateful.

I would like to acknowledge the support of the Provincial Government of the Western Cape for helping us to stage the production at the historical site of Hospital Ward F of the Valkenberg Asylum in Pinelands, Cape Town. There were many people from The Oude Molen Eco Village who assisted us daily. Our thanks to the family that brought us wood for our fires, the sangomas who provided impepo when we ran out, the many hands that were always available to assist us with many things, Gary and the horse cart team for their generosity, the chiefs and leaders of the Xhosa clan gathering who invited us to attend their land reclamation ceremony and festivities, all of the businesses who gave their in kind support, the community who gathered every day to participate in Dr Pascharama's preaching. Your diverse community represents a little microcosm of what it means to live in South Africa today. Thank you for reclaiming the

spaces of the asylum. I would like to thank the Department of Public Works managers gave permission for **Plot 99** to take up a two month residency and to be staged in the abandoned hospital. The building required a significant amount of technical attention, safety inspections and procedures, cleaning, clearing, rigging and preparation in order for us to work in it. It was through the tireless work of my production team, headed by James Macgregor, as well as The Little Theatre technical team under the supervision of Luke Ellenbogen, that made it possible for us to stage the production in the asylum. Mandiselli Maseti must also be acknowledged for his full time residency on the premises, so that there could be a 24-hour security presence on the site.

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The original generated videoscape created for the live event was shot on location at the Steenbras River mouth in Gordon's Bay Cape Town. Here I worked closely with long-time video collaborator Jacqueline Van Meygaarden. Acknowledgement must also be given to the Mqgaza family, Thandiwe Bridgette Mqgaza, Mama Buyiswa Mqgaza, Nomagugu Gogo Mqgaza, who are the lead performers in the video.

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the lead roles of the piece. Martin Kintu, Rouxnet Brown and Andrea van Meygaarden have performed with my company, the Paper Body Collective for several years respectively, and I cast them for their strong contributions to a puppeteering ensemble. Noxolo Blandile, Lulama Mame and Mandiselli Maseti were invited as winners of the Active Puppets township puppeteer's development programme conducted by the International Union of Marionette Art of South Africa.

The logistics of staging the live production *Plot 99* depended to a large degree on the amount of funding raised and allocated to the production and preproduction research. This affected the venue we would be able to perform in, the platform we would perform on, the equipment we could use, the length of time and amount of performers we could employ, the quality and quantity of every element to be employed. The production was proudly supported by the National Arts Council of South Africa, Business Arts South Africa, The University of Cape Town Drama Department and income from door takings. I also received kind support from Digital Brothers Studios, Photo hire and Sourcing, The University of Cape Town Drama Department, The Little Theatre at The University of Cape Town, Props for the Stars and The Provincial Government of the Western Cape.

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Williamstown in the Eastern Cape. The secretary of The Church of the Prophetess Nonhetha, Eric Tole and his wife, Portia Tole (secretary of the church's women's movement), provided translation for various interactions. These included interviews with the Tole's, an interview with the Bishop of the church, Mr. Jadi, and a group meeting between the body of the church elders and myself, in front of the full church congregation. I was also allowed to attend and document a Sunday Service in the church.

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University of Cape Town

## **Thesis Abstract**

The following research paper explicates a four year Practice as Research enquiry into the potential of puppetry and visual performance in the representation of a Feminine Semiotics for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This enquiry manifests in a series of creative and research outputs that form the research body of the project entitled **Plot 99**. The Feminine Semiotic is, I believe, key to the developing methodology of a creative thesis and its imminent issue: the extent to which the governing principles of theorization, documentation, research production and output, guide and constrict the vortical confluences of hunches, knowings, bodies, presences, performances, live experiences, media, distillation and creativity that is at the heart of visual performance. In this light, process becomes the most important guiding outcome to the myriad theoretical and practical distillations that characterise the Practice as Research in performance project.

Through the paper, the Feminine Semiotic, expressed in the performance of sexual and spiritual emergence(y) is investigated as a representational strategy for innovative performance. It theorizes representation of the sacred, the liminoid and the inappropriate other as complex approaches to performing the feminine, specifically around the experience of women's spiritual and sexual crises. Using the metaphor of alchemy as a starting point for the consideration of multidisciplinary research in **Plot 99**, it interrogates the role of binary in crises of identity and representation. It also examines the potential of the surface and threshold as a conduit for meaning and cultural identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Binaries are re-explored through combination and reconfiguration in the complex production of the alchemical *third* in performative representation. The paper investigates the potential for binaric categories of performance and gender, through ritual, intersection, integration, transmutation, slippage, dislocation and deconstruction, to express the liminal and inappropriate other that provides representation for narratives of complex women's experience.

Puppetry, largely incorporated into the umbrella term of visual performance, is one of the oldest forms of creative multidisciplinary in cultural evolution. In

Africa, the iconic object has been used in liminal rituals of the sacred for thousands of years. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the liminoid applications of the sacred object are finding expression in contemporary performance. In women's contemporary performance, puppetry proffers a strategy for expansive creative distillations that explore sacred trajectories for sexual and spiritual representation. This thesis explores how a multidisciplinary Feminine Semiotics may find expression through the cross-disciplinary medium of puppetry and visual performance. It investigates puppetry's relevance to the developing academic field of Practice as Research in performance. It considers the theoretical and creative applications of this multidisciplinary art form in the innovative Feminine Semiotics of emergence(y) in the production *Plot 99*.

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## Introduction



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### **The Feminine Semiotic and Feminist Performance Praxis:**

**Plot 99** is a Practice as Research enquiry into the possibilities of puppetry and visual performance for complex feminine representation in South Africa today. The thesis investigates the unitary as well as the multiplex in artistic representation through the strategy of the Feminine Semiotic. It explores the possibilities of what it terms the Feminine Semiotic, as expressed through puppetry and visual performance as a practice for the re-presentation of the experience of spiritual and sexual emergence (y).

The **Plot 99** process began with a re-imagining of the traumatic and mysterious life experiences of the Prophetess Nonthetha Nkwenkwe (circa 1885-1935). Nonthetha, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Xhosa prophetess from the Eastern Cape, rose to prominence in her community as a renowned spiritual leader, was arrested by the colonial state for insubordination and incarcerated in the Fort Beaufort Tower Asylum for mental insanity in 1922 (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). The Feminine Semiotic proposed by this enquiry is both a practical and critical excavation of the history and mythology of emergence (y) in Nonthetha's story, offering an approach to invigorate the complex interplays of feminine theory and creativity in order to gain new understandings of the potential of puppetry and visual performance.

The theorization of the Feminine Semiotic as a route to the complex theoretical terrain of **Plot 99** presents both possibilities and problematics within the existing discourses of feminist performance studies and performance studies at large. The practice involved in the making of the thesis and its central performance project **Plot 99**, considers the performative possibilities of puppetry as a tool for kinesthetic sentience and construct in complex performance created by women. It also investigates puppetry in the transitional representation of spiritual and sexual emergence (y) as a potentiate for a transgender, transpersonal and transdisciplinary performance landscape.

Diane Wolkstein describes a structure or pattern of death and rebirth, based on the research of Mircea Eliade and William James, that uncovers a common

trajectory in rites and rituals of descent in mythology (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). This pattern provides inspiration for the practice and theory of the puppetry investigations of **Plot 99**. The Feminine Semiotic in **Plot 99** plays with the multiple meanings of emerging, emergency and emergence that characterise both the traumatic materialist conditions of Nonhetha's historical context and the radical feminist underpinnings of her spiritual and sexual empowerment. The Feminine Semiotic is used to explore the rites and rituals of emergence (y) in Nonhetha's narrative through liminal puppetry performance, intersection, surfacing and alchemical-syncretic representational strategy. The manifestations of these theories find expression through the patterning of sacred ritual transitions through descent, death and rebirth as explicated by Wolkstein and Kramer. It is thus through the mythological narrative of descent and rebirth through puppetry that Nonhetha's Emergence (y) finds representation in the Feminine Semiotics of **Plot 99**.

Puppetry is both an ancient and contemporary interdisciplinary practice. The Feminine Semiotic uses the interdisciplinary potential of puppetry as a strategy to create expansive creative distillations in both theory and practice that explore sacred trajectories for sexual and spiritual representation. Exploring the practice of puppetry in this theoretical context, the Feminine Semiotic seeks to locate puppetry as relevant to the developing theoretical terrains of postcolonial feminist performance and representation as well as Practice as Research in Performance.

Visual performance and puppetry present an embodied knowledge system that engages multiple levels of meaning and aesthetics simultaneously. The capacity of puppetry to exist in this syncretism promotes its importance to the field of performance studies but also provides new ways of knowing for women's performance. Puppetry embodies the artifice of construction and identity whilst simultaneously endorsing embodiment through the inheritance of life. This both exceeds and integrates theories of women's performance, facilitating a deeper engagement with women's emotional, physical and psychological experiences.

The layers of meaning and semiotics at play in the explorations of **Plot 99** thus serve to locate in the specific moments of live performance, the embodied knowledges of a burgeoning Feminine Semiotic invested in puppetry. **Plot 99** is an expression of theoretical and performative landscapes, which are attended to and dismantled by multimodal performance. Contemporary women's practice and puppetry both hold as key to their innovations, the moment of being, or being in the moment. If, as Geraldine Harris and Elaine Aston suggest, the key to innovation in women's performance is the realisation of embodied knowledge in performance, then the Feminine Semiotic employs puppetry to locate these moments in the performance of **Plot 99**. **Plot 99** thus presents an innovative approach to South African women's puppetry that considers the intersections of these points as a catalyst for women's contemporary performance.

Uncovered and created through the specific analytic structure of the Feminine Semiotic, **Plot 99** explores South African women's performance with a view to the alchemical and syncretic landscapes of women's puppetry and visual performance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Feminine Semiotic arises as a term, which embraces feminist cultural theory, in order to re-imagine where materialist and radical divisions might meet with puppetry and visual performance, in order to imagine embodied knowledge strategies for feminine performance in South Africa today. I develop the terminology of the Feminine Semiotic from the transgressive body of the *female imaginary* proposed by radical feminist theorists Helene Cixous (1975) and Luce Irigaray (1985), integrating Julia Kristeva's notion of the semiotic as that which disrupts the order of the masculine symbolic (1982). I also align it to the converging materialist/radical underpinnings of Sue Ellen Case's *new poetics* (1998) as well as Geraldine Harris and Elaine Astons search for 'embodied knowledge' as a paradigm for knowing (2008). It is my aligning of these concepts, as the Feminine Semiotic, which has guided my understanding of the performative research at play in **Plot 99**. It is the very use of the term that aligns the practice of the Feminine Semiotic to the complex interplays of meaning and subversion.

The Feminine Semiotic is proposed as a performance strategy that addresses the spaces of the sacred feminine, liminality, transition and transformation within

the practices of puppetry and visual performance. In order to locate the research of the Feminine Semiotic within the work of innovative and experimental performance studies today, it is necessary to contextualise both contemporary feminist performance research trends as well as the discursive field of practice based research that has been to a large extent formalised by the Practice as Research in Performance field.

Some of the key theories that have circulated within women's performance practice in the past thirty years have been primarily focused on addressing the radical and resistant gender strategies that artists have employed to intervene with the institutionalisation of the representation of women. When looking to trends in theory, practice and process in contemporary women practitioners, theorist-practitioners such as Geraldine Harris concur that resistant gender practice is at the heart of the creative process (Aston & Harris, 2008: 1)<sup>1</sup>. Some of the key theory based practices for this investigation are what Aston and Harris call the familiar theoretical tropes of 'gender performativity, subversive repetition, parody and pastiche', mimesis and the crossing of boundaries in the personal and political, individual and communal, fantasy and reality (2008: 12).

The problematics of identifying women's performance and specifically feminist performance today, is the fear of homogenisation, isolation and exclusivity that may stereotype a 'women's' practice. Yet, it is the misconception of the academy that gender as a discursive category is no longer of concern in what it considers a post feminist, post deconstructive era that undermines the importance of such practices informed by women and their specific identities, which do inhabit their experiences within and without gender. A greater fear for feminist practitioner-scholars is the lack of focus and attention paid to performance practice by women, declaring it within the performance landscape as Harris and Aston insist, on its own terms. The idea of post feminism,

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<sup>1</sup> Within these practices, many women artists have necessarily engaged complex intersections of discourses including race, sexuality and gender. Susan Melrose suggests that the historical terrain of feminist, women's performance has sought to take nothing for granted when dealing with dominant cultural convention, 'performing a highly dramatic theory-dialogue carried out across time and space' (Melrose, 1998:131). Gayle Austin also insists that a feminist approach to performance necessarily draws attention to women exposing the mechanisms of invisibility in dominant culture.

according to Harris, mistakenly stigmatizes work with a focus on women and gender as something that is not located within 'more important' developments in the field of performance and suggests that it only serves a minority with vested interest in the subject matter (Aston & Harris: 2). The intention of such practitioner-scholars is thus to locate the various practices of work produced by women within the field of theatre and performance as a whole.

If we look to the historical theorizing of women's performance, Gayle Austin declares the terrain of feminist critical enquiry to still hold great relevance to performance theorization and practice, provided it does not limit the potential for liminality, of 'woman in the cracks between major categories' (1998: 137). Harris and Aston draw our attention to the dangers of simply sustaining feminist performance theory that limits rather than expands critical thinking around women's practice.<sup>2</sup>

Case considers the complex cultural encoding of signs and the complex interplay of feminism and semiotics. Theorists such as Theresa de Lauretis consider the concept of woman as sign, rejecting women's biology, essentialism and the natural as fictional constructs of patriarchal conventions, in which biology and culture, identity and ideology are very clearly separated. Case also looks at other theorists such as Cixous whose radical feminism has sought to explode the canons of performance by seeking women's own language and form. Radical feminism calls for a new, feminine morphology in which 'by writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her' (Cixous, 1981: 250). Case points out that these radical feminists seeking a feminine form have been criticised repeatedly as essentialist. The radical feminist emphasis on biology is often considered as subscribing to biological determinism, which opposes the interests of materialist critique, ignoring the distinctions of race, class, economics and history.

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<sup>2</sup> Sue Ellen Case and Jill Dolan in the 1980's provided valuable discussions on the political divisions of feminism in relation to theatre and performance. Austin insists that Case and Dolan have both located some of the most useful points of departure for a feminist performance criticism. The first is a point raised by Dolan, that theatre is a 'laboratory in which the concept of gender can be dismantled' (1998: 141) and the second is raised by Case, that the divisions in feminist politics 'offer strategic opportunities' (1998: 141).

In South African women's performance specifically, Miki Flockemann highlights this emphasis on materialist discourse, contained within the history of women's struggle within historical race and class conflicts. Flockemann explores the stages of women's performance in South Africa. She considers how South African and Black women specifically were made invisible historically in the tropes of resistance theatre, locked in the presence of types always related to their position to men in political and domestic spheres. Many female performer-theatre makers have been resistant to calling their work feminist, and yet when women of various races did start performing their own stories, many expressed how their work encompassed both political and personal conflicts, issues and identities (Flockemann, 1998: 220). In the past thirty years in South African women's performance within the visual performance and live art spheres, there has been a shift towards representational strategies that offer more than narrative based materialist enquiries. The exclusive focus on materialist concerns around class, race and history present a gap within South African women's representation that asserts material concern over women's complex psycho-sexual experience and complex representation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The Feminine Semiotic addresses both the inexpressible feminine and the complex relationship of binaric meaning making to the libidinal body. The meeting points between difference in representation, identity and performance become key to the theory of the Feminine Semiotic as strategy for performance making in **Plot 99**. In this paper, the Feminine Semiotic is explored as performative alchemy, which is it employs the syncretism of multiplex identity, culture and representation at the heart of South African performance and representation today. Liminality is key to understanding the embodiment of the Feminine Semiotic. Let us consider the syncretic tendencies of South African performance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Visual performance artists creating work in South Africa today seek to embrace rather than separate the layers of cultural, social, economic, historical, racial and gendered identity.

If the Feminine Semiotic is to truly embrace the complexities of South African women's experience and narrative then it must be located in the intersections of

both radical and materialist feminism with a view towards those theories that have yet to be uncovered in the experience of multiplicity. Exploring the issues at the heart of identity, representation and embodiment in South Africa today, the Feminie Semiotic seeks new pathways to imagining women's form, theory and aesthetic. It interrogates the meeting points of history and presence, audience and performance, surface and meaning to provide theoretical inspiration for women's representation. The application and development of visual performance through the Feminine Semiotic facilitates trajectories of transformative experience in the arena of multidisciplinary performance.

### **Women's Performance and Practice as Research**

Contextualising the contemporary feminist practitioner in this relationship to critical thought through practice necessarily locates feminist performance in relation to the established and developing field of Practice as Research in Performance studies (PARIP). Harris and Aston remind us of trends in interdisciplinary performance and semiotic theory that were located very specifically in feminist, queer and sexual theory and which influenced the creative enquiries of practitioners in the 1980's and 90's. Baz Kershaw, a leading Practice as Research in Performance scholar in the UK also expresses the view that practice as research is not especially innovative given the history of such meeting points in the field of performance. In gender-aware performance, this engagement with complex material has been happening for decades. Harris declares this proliferation of critical theory within practice has been both the instigator of crucial feminist thinking in performance, but also worked to globalise the practice (2008: 7).

In the United Kingdom, Practice as Research (PaR), has been institutionally defined and consolidated in higher education over the past twenty years<sup>3</sup>. PaR has sought to legitimate the intention of higher education to insist on both the practical and critical intersections of performance, whilst also raising the status

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<sup>3</sup> As early as 1992 the third Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), established to periodically review the weight of research conducted by higher education institutions in order to allocate government funding, encouraged the development of PhD programmes that contained PaR elements (Aston & Harris, 2008:8).

of practice within the academy. Transdisciplinary research in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has become crucial to the evolution of PaR knowledges, emphasizing what Kershaw suggests are the foundational principles upon which the field has established itself. Kershaw states this foundation of Practice as Research as a 'democratically deconstructive and decentring agenda', which thrives on diverse emergences of creative and theoretical difference (Kershaw, 2009: 15). This resistance to hegemony expressed by Kershaw, which characterises the 'always-already' resistance of PaR to dominant systems of knowledge, has not always held fast in the implications of an established theoretical paradigm within which performance studies has evolved. The globalisation of traditions of innovation and radical performance practice has come under scrutiny by women practitioners such as Harris. In fact, while PaR asserts its commitment to questioning the dominant political, social and cultural status quo, its theorisation and implementation within the academy seems to have located itself firmly in the discourses of western cultural and performance critique. Kershaw says that PaR has received criticism of being neo-imperialist, that while it has not specifically aligned itself to western cultural research interests, it has been seen as a 'subset in the continuation of performance studies' imperialising tendencies' (Kershaw, 2009: 15).

This theorization of practice has come under scrutiny by feminist practitioners, who criticise the focus within practice to exemplify interdisciplinary performance studies theory 'in ways that do not always take account of the specificity of the work itself' (Aston & Harris, 2008: 7). Harris declares that often this emphasis on particular theories supports theory rather than practice within institutional hierarchies of performance studies. She considers academic analysis to be a system that tends towards the global and general in its considerations, and insists that in order to generate a practice as research culture we need to remember that the two fields may sit alongside each other but cannot simply be appropriated into each other. Harris and Aston are wary of what has been termed 'theoretical hygiene' within feminist as well as postmodern and postcolonial anti-essentialist critiques (18). The concern is that in the hyper-paranoid attention paid to political correctness beyond essentialism in deconstructive thinking and analysis, another set of binaries is produced and we

overlook the potential revelation of what performance itself offers. This revelation is described by Harris as 'excess', that it is the performance of theory or concept that actually loosens up the anti-essentialist hygiene (Aston & Harris: 10). According to Harris, the body in performance has even been seen to offer an excess of theory, that is in the process of embodying theory and discourse, the creative process opens and reveals more than the limits of what is contained in the language of theory.

If presence and being have been as Harris puts it, exhaustively deconstructed by interdisciplinary theorists, the performance process itself often reveals uneasy slippages into essentialism and duality. The question becomes one not only of the dangers of political incorrectness but our tendency to censor and reject the academic taboos of contradiction and binary. Yet, what appears to be essentialist gesturing, is often an intersection or blurring of traditional boundaries, which as Harris suggests is interdisciplinary and critical in its performative manifestations nonetheless. According to Harris often the artists practice and process is

More radical than the theories...that is they were able to go beyond the theories towards realising the implications of and possibilities for imagining and doing otherwise, in ways that theory can only signal in advance or analyse retrospectively (Aston & Harris, 2008:14).

It is this complex interplay between theory and performance that Harris and Aston suggest requires practice and its processes to be in dialogue with theory, but in its own languages and terms that are not prescribed or limited to those critiques.

### **The Terminology of Emergence(y) in Plot 99**

The term Emergence(y) is appropriated throughout the thesis specifically as it relates to mental illness and the debates around sexuality and spirituality that inform women's experiences of crisis and transformation. Nonhetha Nkwenkwe's story encompasses a crucial time in South African history at the

turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in which tradition was facing the huge uncertainty of the modern era, colonialism had reached its peak and the Xhosa nation was dealing with the realities of migrant labour, land loss, violent conflict and cultural eradication (Edgar & Sapire, 2000).

The depth of context in Nonhetha's particular story is evident in the scope of the research that encompasses postcolonial cultural studies, clinical, theological, psychoanalytic, anthropological and feminist analyses. What it also raises is the problematics of understanding women's spirituality and sexuality through the lens of mental illness. My artistic hunch was that Nonhetha's story could provide a lens on a complex feminine identity, revealing an historical context within which to explore issues of women's oppression and empowerment through the lens of emergence (y). Her particular story provides us with a window into the problematic terrain of women's mental illness. **Plot 99** began by addressing the narrative of Nonhetha Nkwenkwe in relation to the complex political and social history of psychiatry in South Africa. It provided me with a contextual starting point for a theoretical interrogation of femininity, race and madness that connected at many points to issues of sexuality, culture and disease involved in psychiatry today. The research terrain of Nonhetha Nkwenkwe's history was one of personal empowerment, political subversion and, what I term in this thesis, spiritual and sexual emergence and emergency.

Investigating Nonhetha's historical narrative through a postcolonial feminist lens, the Xhosa concept of surfacing which I re-configure as emergence (y) raises itself in her archive (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). It is explicated through a number of research documents as the culturally informed spiritual rite of passage called *ukuthwasa*, which presents itself to both male and female individuals who are called by the ancestral spirits to become a diviner or prophet in their communities. Through research into the Xhosa cultural and spiritual experience of *ukuthwasa*, I later began to draw correlations between experiences of surfacing and the personal and political crises of identity, sexuality and spirituality affecting Nonhetha at the time of her incarceration. Terminologies, rituals and concepts of *ukuthwasa* as spiritual emergence appear in diverse cultures, geographies and milieus under diverse names and traditions.

It is a phenomenon as well as an experience that Western medicine, psychiatry, academia and anthropology has attempted to acknowledge and understand through 'an epistemology which includes the overlapping domains of physiology, diagnosis, divination and religious and magical practices' (Davis-Roberts, 1981:309).

Her narrative of surfacing as a prophetess through personal transformations and empowerment reveals itself through the archives of her sexual difference, which informed her embodied and threatening potential to the patriarchal state. This represented both a revelation of power and place for the female prophet, but also the emergencies of her time, her narrative of incarceration and eventual demise in the psychiatric systems of colonial South Africa (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Nevertheless, this emergency could also be read in terms of a transformational spiritual and sexual emergence. Emergence (y) is read in its dual meaning as a rite of passage for women's spiritual and sexual experience contained in mythologies and archetypes of descent. Archetypes of descent in rites of passage as well as women's representation and mythology offer a key entry point to a creative interpretation of the experiences of Nonhetha Nkwenkwe.

A factor contributing to the state of emergency in psychiatry in South Africa today is the misrepresentation and stigma attached to mental illness and the mentally ill. Writer Nadia Rosenthal expounds

We may no longer chain up the mentally ill or keep them hidden from view, but a heavy stigma stills weighs down people with psychiatric illnesses (Rosenthal, 2011:16).

Mental health stereotypes are often created and exacerbated by the media that pervades our society. The extensive history of stereotype attached to black women, deviant sexuality and madness is explored at length in this research paper through the theorizing of McClintock (2001), Gilman (1985) and Jackson (2005). Psychiatry in South Africa today, as in Nonhetha's times, reflects a state of emergency. The realities of this emergency are particularly hard-hitting for patients of mental illness, and especially for South African women. The reality is

that despite increased knowledges in mental disorders such as depression and anxiety, very little is known about mental disorder and its deeply personal emotional, spiritual, cultural, psychological and physical effects amongst women (Ngcobo & Pillay, 2008).

The constantly evolving nature of women's psychology means that psychiatry needs to adapt as well to women's social, economic, cultural and political daily experiences and changes (Ngcobo & Pillay, 2008). Attention needs to be paid to creating sensitivity to accommodate trans-health seeking practices. Not only is there a severe lack of services available for women, but also the occurrence of mental disease is heavily influenced by socio-economic factors, political and gender violence, illiteracy and domestic abuse (Ngcobo & Pillay, 2008). Sally Swartz notes that severe psychiatric problems are usually dealt with by western-based state treatments, and Pillay takes this further by suggesting that cultural influence may contribute to patients with more severe cases seeking medical rather than traditional care. Community care, support structures at home, and a healing environment are crucial to recovery and potential healing in women (Ngcobo & Pillay, 2008).

The realities of the crises facing women with mental illness today influence the dilemmas, problematics and possibilities of representing these interpretations through the lens of the Feminine Semiotic and puppetry. Nonhetha's story reveals the interwoven levels of emotion, spirituality, desire, need, conflict, politics, empowerment and disempowerment involved in African women's psychological experience, illness and treatment. The crude diagnoses of colonial psychiatry reflect the deep fear, surveillance and containment of sexual, cultural and political difference through historical medical practice (Jackson, 2005). It reveals the inadequacies of western psychology to address the cultural, personal and political aspects of the patients interred in the system in Nonhetha's time. It also raises significant questions around South African women's psychiatric treatment today as well as the stigma surrounding women and mental illness.

Choosing to create the *Plot 99* production as an event that was site-specific to the colonial mental asylum was a choice of great risk for the production and thesis. The presence of the asylum brought issues of stereotype and stigma surrounding race and gender in mental illness to the forefront of the enquiry. The site invoked years of historical bias, misinformation, invisibility, subterfuge and containment around the subject of women, race and mental illness (Swartz, 1999). It immediately placed every exploration within its walls in the spaces of psychosis and stereotype. It also, in its derelict, distressed and filthy state, largely embodied the architecture of fear and neglect that informs perceptions of state asylums, mental illness and patients (Swartz, 1999). The pauper-patient ghosts of the past and the residue of the unnamed homeless vagrants, who made temporary shelter in this building, were an unavoidable reality of the site and its history.

How was I to combine this density of materialist reality with a Feminine Semiotics that seeks to use puppetry to go beyond materialism in to the new poetics of meaning and aesthetic? Mythology, ritual and the symbolisms of descent, *ukuthwasa* and re-emergence play a key role in expressing the Feminine Semiotic at the intersections of theory and practice, history and personal experience involved in Nonhetha's experiences.

I explore the concept of emergence (y) through the surfacing of embodiment and transformative sexuality in Nonhetha to the application and relevance of puppetry performance. The Feminine Semiotic explored in this thesis aligns concepts of women's emergence (y) to the embodied practices of puppetry. The potential of puppetry in complex women's performance is its kinaesthetic theoretical position. The puppet literally embodies the emergence of sentience in the constructed form. This emergence of life in the object is at the heart of the theoretical potential of puppetry for feminist performance that at once embraces the theory of deconstruction whilst existing in the moment of embodiment. It is this linking of seemingly disparate elements through the theoretical and performative action of emergence (y) in women's puppetry performance, that combines the materialist concerns of Nonhetha's narrative of oppression with the sexual and spiritual kinaesthetic of her more radical feminine experiences.

## Reading Plot 99: A Guide to Users

The Feminine Semiotic is presented in this thesis through an evolving Practice as Research approach to Puppetry and Visual Performance and its theorization. In the reading of the thesis, an acknowledgment of a process-oriented nature of practice and theory in the field of performing arts is required. This process-driven aspect of the creative thesis asserts an approach to doctoral study that would be considered different to traditional research processes. The central research paper thus serves to ground the study but it must be stated at the outset that a reading of both creative and theoretical material is required in order to serve the evolution of the research progressions.

The thesis considers a number of complex and researched areas, within a myriad of theoretical and creative contexts; to investigate its proposition that puppetry can represent a Feminine Semiotics of the experience of emergence (y) in the story of Nonthetha Nkwenkwe. This working hypothesis guides my research into a number of territories for the purposes of detailed theoretical and creative immersion in the questions surrounding the conjecture. These include, but are not limited to, feminist psychoanalytic and cultural theory, postcolonial cultural theory, semiotics, anthropology, performance and film studies, historical and archival studies, Xhosa cultural and historical studies, psychiatry, clinical psychology and architecture. In terms of my creative proficiency, the areas in which I have worked include creative writing, scriptwriting, translation, sculpture, dramaturgy, installation, puppetry design and construction, puppetry performance training, website design and creation, video directing and editing and sound design. In some of these creative areas, I introduced collaborators, such as in sound and video technology, in order to realize my outputs as fully as possible.

My research goal is not to prove my in depth knowledge of each area of specialized technology, theory and science, nor to extend the theoretical debates in each field. The writing presents un-debated material that provides roots for understanding what led to the innovation of the Feminine Semiotics of **Plot 99**. **Plot 99** is an engagement with core material that facilitates kinaesthetic

and artistic thought, process, material and outputs. The creative material in turn stimulates a set of theoretical questions. The theoretical platform that facilitates the growth and expansion of my artistic ideas in turn thus creates a conceptual basis for puppetry and visual performance explorations of the Feminine Semiotic.

The study comprises three Primary Submission Research Documents: a written theoretical research paper, a Dvd of **Plot 99 live** and the **Plot 99 Script**. These primary submissions form the critical component of the central arguments and thesis of **Plot 99**.

The context of my primary research material, presented in the form of a research paper, Plot 99 Dvd and Plot 99 Script, helps the reader of the thesis to understand the spaces, which generated creative material. Each chapter contextualizes how **Plot 99** developed as a creative response in relation to material based on the inspirations of Nonhetha's history and representing her possible and impossible emergence (y) in puppetry performance. The Dvd and Script offer a creative manifestation of the practical trajectories that arose from theoretical research. They locate the theoretical sources in relation to the imaginative quest. The creative thesis is epistemologically, aesthetically and semiotically oriented to the meaning of source theory through its curation of creative inspiration in the form of presences, surfacing, bodily knowing and, importantly, the receptivity of a third presence, that of the audience or viewer/participant. The question of authentic and inauthentic sources of theoretical debates needs to be placed in the context of creative process, where the female artist-academic creates not only under the complexity of sacred, liminoid and embodied practices, but under the constant assumption of the *third*, that is the unknown and uncontrolled observer of the practice.

The particular process of creative discovery conducted for this thesis touches on areas of debate central to the core questions of my hypothesis. My source of authority in my area of research stems from my ability to explore multiple creative and research sources in order to understand the complex explorations of the Feminine Semiotics in the creative material of the performance *Plot 99*.

This in turn opens questions around the representation of women's sexuality and spirituality through puppetry. These sources must be read, however, as starting points that encourage exploration of representative modes of performance analysis and practice.

Simon Jones from the University of Bristol in the United Kingdom elucidates on a useful model, presented by Robin Nelson, for writing alongside the practice project. He brings our attention to three different kinds of knowledge that inform the research writing of Practice as Research in Performance. The first is performer knowledge, into which the personal and embodied spaces of experience, physicality, phenomenology, and expression find their places. The next is critical reflection, expected of the author-director in the form of 'action research, audience research, explicit knowledge of aesthetic or performance histories' (Jones, 2009:26). The third level is of the conceptual framework of the project, the underpinning theory and context within the political, social and cultural aspects of spectatorship studies (Jones, 2009).

Regarding the live event, many PARIP theorists especially have argued the problematics of documentation and archive (Kershaw, 2009). The video archive specifically, as the ubiquitous archive of live performance, reveals a problematic and theoretically complex area of representation in performance (Piccini & Rye, 2009). The process of documentation reveals the very structure of order, visibility to the exclusion of elements that homogenous discourse has exerted on embodiment and sexuality throughout my critical explorations. Documentation has developed to provide risk management on ephemerality, a stable object to prevent disappearance, and a convenient epistemic text for examiners who cannot make the live show (Piccini & Rye, 2009). It is the ephemerality of the live event, specifically as expressed in the crucial moment of animism involved in puppetry, which is at the heart of my proposal for a Feminine Semiotics.

The degrees of separation between the elements of process haunt this illusionist evidencing of presence. For the construction of archive is the construction of the body. It preserves the fallacy of permanence, and enforces the privileging procedures of rendering visible. In specifying coherent frames of time and space

on the artistic process, the documentation of **Plot 99** engages the Feminine Semiotic within a container of authentication.

However, in reflecting on the implementation of a Feminine Semiotic, the video of **Plot 99** reveals another level of creative enquiry. Composed of footage shot by photographer Anthony Strack in three minute sequences, the process of editing reveals yet another semiotic, framing and theoretical intersection to the processes of slippage, liminality and surface involved in **Plot 99**. The video stands on one level as textual evidence of the live performance, as presence of process, but it also facilitates the new emergences of the creative exploration in the present moment, allowing myself the space to explore and reflect on the complex semiotics of the feminine.

In the spaces between the binaries of documentation and performance, another third arises where the various captured forms exist in complementarity rather than conclusion. The video of the live event is not the live event but is its own curation of the work. The spectator's receptivity of the semiotic and critical defines how we approach the archive. Now the moment of dissemination, place, space and time of viewing continues the evolutionary life of the project, within whatever medium it is manifest. Total awareness of this complexity, rather than total documentation, is what practice as research theorists Piccini and Rye deem necessary by both artist and witness in such a dynamic (Piccini & Rye, 2009:42).

The technological availability and possibility of the Internet provides a complex trajectory for commentary and archiving of the **Plot 99** process. The Creative Appendices operate as the residue of process in the form of additional creative writing and relevant archival information presented in an **Online Visual Performance Research Archive**. I have chosen the blog format as the most economic and creative format for submitting material that is comprised primarily of designs, photographs, videos, commentary, poetry and prose. The **Online Visual Performance Research Archive** is presented as documentation of the density of process, evidencing the weight of creative research that fed into the linking of practice and theory, culminating in the **Plot 99** live event and thesis. I have chosen to place this wealth of material as an appendix to the Primary

Submission Documents. This provides a continual emergent presentation of knowing and creating. This is evidenced in the creation of the hugely successful **Plot 99** online blog, started in late 2010. The blog, which has had almost 5000 views at the time of writing this conclusion, evidences the vast possibilities for creating performance research in a co-creative and public environment. The blog uses photography, images, intertextuality, creative writing and historical research to communicate the systems of thought and practice leading up to the first viewing of the *Plot 99* live event at Oude Molen.

The blog was also used to develop the character of Dr Pascharama Pukmidas Stardreamer, who published his prophecies, sermons and thoughts weekly online. This contributed to locating the role of prophecy and healing strongly within the 21<sup>st</sup> century ethos of the Internet, as well as the barrage of 2012 apocalyptic online content generated in anticipation of the upcoming year. In short, **Plot 99** has been able to enter this creative and ever-changing public terrain as a project that continues to exist between and within its own mythologies. If the video archive is a work complete in itself, as itself, the Internet and online blog, web and collaborative forums provide infrastructure for dialogue on process as well as the opportunity to allow a project to 'live' in its own online forms. The key is receptivity, involving the audience as witness and participant in the processual nature of the artistic project.

The Online Visual Performance Research Archive, for the purposes of this enquiry, is to be used as a reference to the density of process and not as a specified critical component of the thesis. The sheer enormity of the material is testament to the complex meaning and creative processes that fed every moment of constructing **Plot 99**. To engage every aspect of this process material critically would be counterproductive, I believe, to the focused interrogation of the complex discourse in the live moment between puppet, puppeteer, audience, time and space involved in the Feminine Semiotics of the live production. I have made the specific choice not to critically engage with every aspect of the pre-production process of creating Plot 99, because the density of the live performance, as captured in the Dvd, is in this presentation of the **Plot 99** hypothesis the key instigator for questions surrounding the Feminine

Semiotic in Visual Performance. The layers of conceptualisation evident in the written research paper, the Plot 99 Script and the Plot 99 Dvd, demonstrate the depth of collaboration, group exploration, rehearsal, production and improvisation processes necessary to implement the political, social and cultural enquiry of the Feminine Semiotic. I believe that these challenges to coherent meaning are evidenced strongly in the output of the primary research documents. Thus, the secondary appendices provide the reader with the complex presence of process, but the processual nature of the Primary Submission material is our main concern for this particular investigation at this point of time in the development of the **Plot 99** enquiry.

The research and practice of a series of hunches around the central theoretical concepts explicated in the thesis result in various processes, wherein these hunches are explored in multiple theoretical and practical enquiries, leading to a three-month residency in the performance site of Valkenberg East Hospital Ward F and the public performance event Plot 99 (Appendix 5). It is in the culmination, revelation and reception of these enquiries of experience and theory, that the PhD project is realised fully.

### **The material outcomes of the thesis enquiry**

As a guiding principal to the understanding of the pretexts of this thesis, it is important to state at the outset that outcomes take the form of

#### **Primary Submission:**

(These are provided in the PhD submission pack)

**A Written Theoretical Research Paper**

**A DVD: Plot 99 Live**

**Creative Writing: The Plot 99 Script**

#### **Creative Appendices:**

(These are only accessible online)

**Online      Visual      Performance      Research      Archive:**

[www.plot99par.wordpress.com](http://www.plot99par.wordpress.com)

(This blog is only accessible to examiners. Examiners may only access this material by contacting my supervisor Jay Pather. He will then send examiners a link that will allow them privileged access to the blog through a password and username. Once the PhD is approved, this blog will be made accessible to the public).

**Online Plot 99 Blog** (open to the public)

[www.plot99.wordpress.com](http://www.plot99.wordpress.com)

The outcomes of the thesis are thus realised in both theory and practice. The interdisciplinarity of the project is showcased in the correspondence between theory, curated video and creative writing. The primary submitted material should thus be read not as thesis and appendices, but as three coalescing bodies of enquiry that produce a platform for reception and analysis. The examination requires an awareness of multiple points of creative and theoretical reception. These include but are not limited to the reception of responses to the live Plot 99 event that occurred in June 2011, as well as the ongoing reception of the creative and theoretical research material that arises in its ongoing contexts and forms.

## **Chapter Synopsis**

*Chapter One: The Entrance to the Plot 99 Asylum* investigates the narrative of Nonhetha Nkwenkwe as a key source of inspiration for the project. This chapter addresses how the historical narrative of Nonhetha Nkwenkwe can provide inspiration for an exploration of women's sexual and spiritual emergence (y). It considers the relevance of the experience of women's spiritual and sexual emergency in the context of psychiatry in South Africa. Two key historians who have provided the most thorough and succinct investigation into the life of Nonhetha Nkwenkwe are Robert Edgar and Hilary Sapire (2000).

Their study on the twentieth century prophetess examines the contentious issue of *ukuthwasa* and Nonhetha's spiritual and sexual emergence (y) in issues of cultural empowerment, black femininity, colonial suppression and mental illness (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Edgar's interests lie in the advent of cross-cultural

millenarianism in Xhosa cultural lands through the onset of conflict with colonialism at the turn of the twentieth century (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). He provides background to the role of Enoch Mgijima and other Xhosa millenarian prophets who influenced Nonthetha's Christian and Xhosa worldview (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Sapire's interests in the study consider African women and the colonial asylum, questioning the relationship between gender, sexuality, culture, race and mental illness in colonial perceptions and medical structures (Edgar & Sapire, 2000).

Out of this research, a significant question arises, considering the problematics between psychiatry and cultural illness, as well as the issues inherent to African women's psychiatry in South Africa today. Psychologist Ntombizanele Boo's 2004 study on Xhosa women's sexual and spiritual emergence (y), entitled *Three perspectives on Ukuthwasa: The view from traditional beliefs, western psychiatry and transpersonal psychology*, is highly relevant source material in understanding the various perspectives surrounding cultural illness in western as well as traditional medicine.

Historians argue that before she was reborn as a Christian prophet, Nonthetha had fulfilled a role in her community as a herbalist and *Igqira* or seer (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). This gift and status placed her in an unusually empowered position as a rural woman (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Nonthetha had had a number of prophetic visions and experiences throughout her life, which held great significance in defining her role within her Xhosa community context (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). When Nonthetha began preaching in her rural community near King Williamstown in her late forties, her husband had died in migrant labour, she had faced and lived through a huge epidemic, and factors were ripe to support her position as an independent female leader in a hugely threatened patriarchal context (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). In fact, her independence as a widow, somehow stripped her of the perceived weaknesses of her femininity under rural patriarchy, and placed her in a masculinized and therefore authoritative context with the chiefs and leaders of her time (Edgar & Sapire, 2000).

Nonhetha was heavily influenced by other political preachers bridging the gap between new Christianity and Xhosa pride and tradition, such as the revolutionary prophet Enoch Mgijima, and her preaching incited strong political and cultural feelings amongst her followers (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). At the same time there were also strong influences reaching South African preachers from post-slavery evangelical liberation leaders in the US, Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Movement (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Nonhetha became famous in her area for her enigmatic preaching, characterised by heightened states of being, speaking with spirits and ancestral figures, evangelical ecstasy and symbolic visions.

When her following began to grow, the British, who were the Colonial authority in the Eastern Cape, were anxious about rural insurgency and uprising after the Bulhoek massacre of 1920 (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). They began specific surveillance of Nonhetha's activities and her influence on her community of followers. After a number of conflicts and challenges, the state, unable to arrest Nonhetha for proselytising Christianity, had her arrested for mental insanity and incarcerated in the Fort Beaufort blacks-only mental asylum, The Tower Hospital, in 1922 (Edgar & Sapire, 2000).

Nonhetha's startling experiences, firstly as an *Igqira*, her rebirth as a Christian prophetess and community leader, her diagnosis of schizophrenia and her traumatic journey through state psychiatry and asylums, provide me with a contextual starting point for a theoretical interrogation of femininity, race and madness. The research terrain of Nonhetha Nkwenkwe's history is one of personal empowerment, political subversion and what I term in this thesis, spiritual and sexual emergence and emergency. I have developed the concept of emergence(y) as a terminology that relates specifically to women's sexual and spiritual crises as well as empowerment. Mental illness comes to the fore as a specific crisis in the debates around sexuality and spirituality in women.

Historian Robert Edgar considers the link between race, spirituality and sexuality in Xhosa women's religious practice in the late 1800's (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). He looks specifically at Nonhetha's experiences within the South African mental

asylum systems in the 1920's. A psychiatrist at the Weskoppies mental asylum where Nonhetha was incarcerated attested that with 'the Africans being a race of strong emotions, both sexually and sentimentally, we should almost expect hysteria to be rife among them' (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:42). Similar to the 'illness' of Saint Theresa, who expressed her faith through ecstatic visions and divine embodied experiences, 'Nonhetha was observed by the staff of this institution to enter states of religious exaltation and excitement' (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:58). In the eyes of Western psychiatry these cultural 'delusions', expressed through sexualised states of embodiment, were used to clinically diagnose her as psychotic. A document from the Pretoria state mental hospital in 1930 declares that Nonhetha was detained in the hospital on the grounds of suffering afflictions of 'acute hallucinosis, delusions of a grandiose nature, delusions of poisoning, religious exaltation and restless excitement' (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:132).

*Ukuthwasa* is the term for a spiritual and cultural illness in Xhosa and Zulu, which means literally 'to emerge' and is the call of an initiate to become a spiritual healer as a *Sangoma* (in Zulu) or an *Igqira* (in Xhosa) (Booi, 2004). Some of the recorded characteristics of this illness include chronic anxiety, violent behavior, depression, epilepsy, paralysis and serious illness (Booi, 2004). Similarly, the Ndebele in Zimbabwe also refer to *Ukuthwasa* to indicate a coming out or emergence that is associated not with insane behavior, but with emergent personality and spiritual gifts, specifically a call from the spiritual world to become a traditional healer (Jackson, 2005).

Shula Marks, considers the many ironies of the state interpretation of divination and madness:

Colonialism had brought the evangelical and millennial Christianity she espoused to the African Continent... religious ecstasy and divine insanity had long been intertwined in Christian theology and experience... In indigenous cosmology, too, divine inspiration and the inspiration of divining were arrived at after a period of 'madness' (Marks, 2000:xi).

At the time just before Nonthetha's surfacing, healing practice was 'directed at curing not only physical symptoms, but the wider societal ills they might symbolize' (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:6). Illness and its clinical diagnosis were as symptomatic of the crises in culture and tradition as were politics, kinship and religion. That Nonthetha was 'conversant' in healing is not a far stretch if we consider the facts of her experiences, illness and personal transformation that led to her role as a prophetess and community leader (Edgar & Sapire, 2000).

Unfortunately, these symptoms were also what promulgated the state's intervention in her community resistance and her ultimate hospitalisation under western psychiatry on the grounds of mental insanity and a crude diagnosis of schizophrenia.

Ntombizanele Boo (2004) has written on the gaping discrepancies between western psychiatry and traditional cultural understandings of *Ukuthwasa* as a cultural and spiritual rather than medical condition. Edgar and Sapire also comment that 'the very symptoms of "becoming visible" themselves were described in that classic psychiatric term hysteria' (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:56). The diagnosis of psychosis, rather than emergence, was used by the Colonial state to support the incarceration of Nonthetha in the asylum.

By exploring the multiplicity of meaning in the term emergence(y) within cultural and postcolonial feminist readings of women's crises, dis-ease and transformation, some of the inherent ironies of patriarchal stigma and stereotype come to the fore. The crisis of *ukuthwasa* in Nonthetha Nkwenkwe arose in her individual confrontations with her own life changes within Xhosa tradition and patriarchy. Her self-transformation would forever change her role within her community in Khulile, a community that was struggling with the social and political upheaval, violence, and oppression of Xhosa traditional culture and systems at the turn of the 20th century. Nonthetha's spiritual transformations challenged firstly the patriarchal dimensions of tribal life, while her later growth into *isitunyo* (Christian prophecy) challenged the colonial status quo of the frontier territories of the Eastern Cape (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). It was thus

Nonhetha's emergence(y) that lead to her prolific rise as a community leader and political antagonist of the colonial state.

Additional significant information on Nonhetha Nkwenkwe's story in relation to the overview of psychiatry in southern Africa during her era, is from Lynette Jackson (2005). Jackson's revelatory study on psychiatry and social order in southern Africa provides a source of theoretical debate around the historical problematics of colonialism, power and the psychiatric institute in Africa (Jackson, 2005). Issues of racism, land control and oppression, labour exploitation and containment provide an entry to the guiding pretexts of colonial psychiatry (Jackson, 2005). Jackson explores the relationship between Southern African women and mental illness as perceived by the colonial regulator, arguing the problematics of sexuality, race and stereotypes of abnormality and perversity in the colonies (Jackson, 2005).

Issues of race, sexuality, madness and disease are also debated and theorized by Anne McClintock (2001), whose writing on sexuality and imperialism explores mental illness and gender problematics in this dynamic. McClintock (1995 & 2001) uses feminist, post-colonial, psychoanalytic and socialist theories to explore the intersections of gender and race in cultural representation. Sander L. Gilman is another influential theorist whose writing on stereotypes of sexuality and disease explores the complex and perverse history of aesthetic representation of blackness, sexuality and stigmas of mental degeneration in colonial mentality (1985). These theorists facilitate my own debates around the dilemmas, problematics and possibilities of representing women's spirituality and sexuality through the lens of cultural illness. It also raises issues of stereotypical representation of mental illness in women today. What are the dilemmas, problematics and possibilities of representing women's race and sexuality through the lens of mental illness?

Issues that Nonhetha's narrative raises around the construction and functioning of the colonial asylum itself and the history of psychiatry are expounded on by psychiatrist and historian Sally Swartz (1999). Swartz has specifically researched gender, history and mental illness in the Cape between 1891 and

the 1920's (Swartz, 1999). Swartz's study gained further importance in my creative and theoretical research as the opportunity arose to stage the live public performance of **Plot 99** as a site-specific production in the original black women's Ward F of the Valkenberg Mental Hospital in Cape Town (Swartz, 1999). Shula Marks' study on the microphysics of power in the colonial asylum in South Africa, provides invaluable insight into the mechanisms of the nursing and custodial bodies of the asylum, patient experiences in Valkenberg during the era of Nonthetha, as well as descriptions of the environment gathered through archives (Marks, 2007).

*Chapter Two: In the Waiting Room of the Post Colony* considers key issues around women's representation through contemporary performance practice. It articulates my location of the Feminine Semiotic within feminist performance praxis and critique as well as attending to its key syncretic approach to binaric representation.

Anthony Elliott investigates notions of the *female imaginary* and a feminine language as presented by Cixous and Irigaray (Elliott, 1992). He also interrogates Julia Kristeva's theory of the semiotic as an entry point to complex feminine language outside of the masculine symbolic (Kristeva, 1982). It presents my theoretical adaptation of a Feminine Semiotic as a representational strategy for innovative performance languages in the present. In the Feminine Semiotic, I refer to both arguments for libidinous representation of the feminine body as explored by Cixous (1975) and Irigaray (1985) encapsulated in the *jouissance* of multiplicitous feminine sexuality. Cixous writes that woman

Has the capacity to deappropriate unselfishly, body without end, without appendage, without principal 'parts'... Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide (Cixous, 1975:259).

I consider the complex liminal relationship between this state of feminine imaginary and the sacred skin between critique and aesthetic, binary and difference.

I investigate how the intercultural semiotics of performance relates to gender problematics in representation. Feminist cultural theorists Anthony Elliott (1992), Theresa de Lauretis (1984) and Judith Butler (1989, 1990) provide valuable key theories on sexuality, psychoanalysis and the cultural containment of sexuality and desire within patriarchal representation, gaze and semiotic languages. The chapter looks at the writing of Cixous (1975) and Irigaray (1985), considering both the limits and possibilities of looking towards the female body itself as ‘a means to disrupt women’s inscription within male-dominated gender relations’ (Elliott, 1992:213).

The Feminine Imaginary for these thinkers offers recourse for contacting the female sacred sexual in representation (Elliott, 1992). However, it also creates another category for containment through separation that excludes the dynamic binary of masculinity from feminine representation. Anthony Elliott provides an interesting interpretation of the *feminine imaginary*, which, while addressing the imbalanced domination of patriarchy, presents the feminine yet another political paradigm predicated on separation (Elliott, 1992). My proposal is for the dynamic of a new Feminine Semiotics, grounded in the liminal potential of the sacred feminine, where such paradigms for representation need to be constantly questioned and re-imagined.

Performance scholars Geraldine Harris and Elaine Aston’s ‘embodied knowledge’ in performance also holds relevance to the deployment of a Feminine Semiotic in performance (2008). I explore how materialist and radical feminisms might be able to integrate diverging critical concerns and reference the *new poetics* of performance scholar Sue Ellen Case. It is my aligning of both the radical and the materialist feminist concerns of these practitioner-scholars and critical thinkers in order to begin to develop the possibilities of the Feminine Semiotic, as it would eventually emerge in **Plot 99**.

South African cultural theorist Sarah Nuttall inspires central arguments to contemporary representation and critical cultural thinking in South Africa (2011). Nuttall’s arguments on interdisciplinarity in cultural practice as well as the necessity for exploring the *surface* as a potentiate for meaning-making, raises

key critical concepts around representation strategies for a Feminine Semiotics (Nuttall, 2011).

Nuttall's interest in the surface as signifier of meaning raises the question of binary and its usefulness in representation of a Feminine Semiotic (Nuttall, 2011). The suspicious instincts of postcolonialism and feminism to seek immediately forms of resistance to stereotype may in its own interests render invisible the very complex and creative binaries that facilitate innovative and creative friction in performance modes. It is the intersection of multiple levels of experience of binary and the in-between that characterizes South African identity and culture today (Nuttall, 2010). I argue that these surfaces herald creative intersections for complex representation may emerge and evolve to facilitate innovative performance practices today.

It is the intersections of metaphor and critique, surface and innovation represented through the threshold, which take on great significance for a strategy of Feminine Semiotics. Performance scholars research the threshold as the critical and practical concept of liminality, expressed in contemporary performance as the liminoid, which takes its own origins from the sacred in performance and ritual.

The dilemmas and potentialities of representing sacred experience come to the fore through the writing of performance theorist Joy Crosby on liminality in performance (Crosby, 2009). Joy Crosby researches the sacred and the liminal as it arises in contemporary women's performance art and it is from these explorations that I begin to designate the sacred and the spiritual in contemporary women's visual performance as that which facilitates change, transition, slippage, the shifting of thresholds, the meeting of surfaces and the crossing of borders (Crosby, 2009). This re-designation of the term sacred poses a re-thinking of women's spirituality for performance studies, not through religious institutionalization, but through its ambiguity and complexity that creates new pathways for visibility and invisibility in performance (Crosby, 2009). I argue that the sense of slippage involved in ritual, which accentuates the expression of the in-between, reiterates the potential of intersection in the

representation of South African identity today (Du Preez, 2007). This holds especially relevant when contacting ways of representing feminine spirituality and sexual experience through an application of the Feminine Semiotic.

Syncretism as defined by Coplan and Balme becomes a significant approach to understanding how complex identity and culture in performance. I align the use of the term syncretism to the alchemical and the third in representation. In the chapter, I make connections between the alchemical, as a combination of binary that produces the third, as an unspecified manifestation of this combination and recombination of elements. I propose this as a representational strategy for performing a Feminine Semiotic in **Plot 99**. The theories of film maker and cultural theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha inspire my research into what she terms the inappropriate other that characterises the emergent third (Minh-ha, 1987). Through the expression of the inappropriate other, identities of difference recreate, deconstruct and refract each other, rather than simply replicating or resisting traditional conventions (Minh-ha, 1987). Representation through an inappropriate other in this light may lead to alchemy in practice, that is a sacred, liminoid intersection between the new surfaces of women's performance through the binaries and differences of critique and surface. The chapter thus explicates my interpretation of a Feminine Semiotics, as I would later apply it to the creative process of **Plot 99**, through a syncretic-alchemical marriage between content and form.

*Chapter Three: Pathways to Puppetry* explores the historic and contemporary fields of puppetry and visual performance in both theory and practice. The writing considers how puppetry is incorporated into the broader visual performance landscape through its inherent interdisciplinarity on both practice and theoretical levels. Puppeteer and academic Jill Joubert's masters study (2010) on South African puppetry provides a key source for understanding its growth and development over the past thirty years. Joubert (2010) and puppetry academic Petrus Du Preez (2007) offer significant perspectives on puppetry, object and mask performance in African traditions. They look at the liminal and liminoid ritual history and prevalence of object performance throughout the

African continent, considering the relationship between the puppet as a ritual object and its influences on fine art and performance in the twentieth century.

In *Chapter Three: Pathways to Puppetry* I touch briefly on the world history of puppetry through research sources offered primarily through academic archives from The International Union of Marionette art (UNIMA) (Seigel, 1967). Here I cite European puppetry theorists such as Jurkowski (1967), Beaumont (1958), and Francis (2007) to explicate the historical import and occurrence of the field in international theatre history. I explore the significant intersections of theory and practice as well as multidisciplinary that puppetry offers to the performance landscape. Puppetry historian and theorist Penny Francis provides succinct and informative writing on the history of puppetry as well as its relevance and power in contemporary performance practice (Francis, 2007).

The chapter uses the source theory of South African puppetry thinkers such as William Kentridge and Jane Taylor to consider the constructed sentience and kinaesthetics inherent in puppetry performance (Taylor & Kentridge, 1998). My research follows from the writing of Francis (2007) and Joubert (2010) considering the connection between puppetry and its potentiality for animism, anthropomorphism and abstraction in performance. Francis' theorizing inspires my exploration of the connections between spiritual, cultural and artistic puppetry practice (Francis, 2007). I also look at the UNIMA archives on puppetry technique and specialization to understand the practical underpinnings of kinaesthetic, semiotic performance expressed through the syncretic, multidisciplinary and energetic practice of puppetry (Obraztsov, 1967).

I provide case studies of international female puppetry practitioners Ilka Schönbein (2011) and Charlotte Puyk-Joolen (2011), who explore specifically the metaphoric and imaginative terrain of women's archetypal sexuality and spirituality through puppetry. Here I consider how the symbolism and alchemy of puppetry allows a Feminine Semiotics into the cultural representations of women's spiritual and sexual landscapes.

The chapter explores the writing of Adrienne Sichel (2007) and Roselee Goldberg (1988) in order to investigate further the role that visual performance has played in South African contemporary performance. It is also relevant to situate puppetry within the continuing expansion of interdisciplinarity with other genres such as physical and mask theatre, video art, dance, video dance, fine art, live art and installation, amongst others. I briefly consider case studies of visual performance that explore specifically issues of feminine identity, ritual, liminality and slippage. These are evident in the performances of Julia Raynham's *Resonance Bazaar* (Raynham, 2010) and Mwenya Kabwe's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (2011), written by Adrienne Kennedy (1969).

Through these case studies of international and South African female artists, I ask whether the complex theoretical and aesthetic potential of puppetry and visual performance can offer entry points to the complex representation of feminine identities of difference today.

Chapters Four and Five provide a detailed insight into the methodology, process and creation of the Feminine Semiotic in **Plot 99** through theoretical and creative research that culminated in a five-night public live event at the Oude Molen Eco Village in Valkenberg Hospital Ward F. The chapters attempt to address how the core feminist and postcolonial cultural questions raised in the historical narrative of Nonthetha Nkwenkwe feed into a puppetry and visual performance practice that instigates innovative connections between thought and form. It also interrogates whether these practices inspire a Feminine Semiotics in performance representation. It asks whether the historical narrative of Nonthetha Nkwenkwe can indeed facilitate the representation of women's emergence(y) through contemporary puppetry and visual performance and whether puppetry practice can provide innovative representation for complex feminine identities. *Chapter Four: The Wards and Holding Cells* provides the function of a textual analysis of key characters, themes, imagery and meaning provided through the creative writing process of the production, specifically in the form of the *Plot 99 Script*. This is central to understanding the background and base from which the live performance arises. The creative writing facilitates key intersections between my theoretical and field research over a two year

period, allowing me to simultaneously express my research in both academic and creative languages.

A central question guiding Chapter Four is: how does a 21<sup>st</sup> century visual performance company bring the myriad contexts and inspirations of Nonhetha Nkwenkwe's story and its evolving discourses, into the context of visual performance and representation? Can women with mental illness be represented as identities in the process of spiritual and sexual emergence(y), rather than stereotypes of patriarchal disease and disorder? My own positionalities as the author and creator of the practice of **Plot 99** came into consideration through the influences of my lived experience, my theorized position and my choices for a metaphoric or aestheticized position.

My experience and my theoretical contextualisation of that experience arises in terms of my South African identity and my position therein today. I consider my positionality in the creation of the production from my personal experiences of the construction of life for women living with mental illness and emergence(y) under patriarchy. This instigates my need to locate a Feminine Semiotics in comparison with the metaphor of life under colonialism. My experience has led me to explore the theoretical terrain of contemporary gendered tensions around sexuality, spirituality and mental illness. This interest in transforming the personal experiential space into its broader context and theorization allows my interest in my own experience of mental illness, as a woman who has experienced her own emergence(y), to facilitate points of meaning and connection to the history of Nonhetha Nkwenkwe. This, in turn, inspires me to consider the relationship between women's experience of *ukuthwasa* and mental illness in theory and research.

Taking inspiration from the arguments raised by Crosby (2009) around liminality and the sacred in performance, I consider how emergence(y) as a rite of passage is used thematically for the purposes of creating puppetry and visual performance in *Plot 99*. I analyse how analogies of *descent*, as expressed through rites of passage, provide inspiration for key metaphors in the *Plot 99* script. The archetypal mythologies of La Selva Subterranea as feminist narrative

strategy, particularly through myths of descent and the dark goddesses, come to the fore (Estés, 1992). The writing and theorisation of Jungian psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estés (1992), historian and philosopher Diane Wolkstein (Wolkstein & Kramer 1983), mytho-psychologist Vlad Petre Glaveanu (2005) and eco-feminist Chandra Alexandre (2001) provide theoretical and creative entry points to the analysis.

I explore the creation of the production's three central characters, Patient Number Three, Inanna, Nonhetha Nkwenkwe and Dr Pascharama Pukmidas Stardreamer, as expressions of the inappropriate other, the third. The Sumerian myth of the descent of the goddess Inanna, as explored specifically through the seminal publication of historian Diane Wolkstein, provides the material for an abject strategy for staging a Feminine Semiotics (Wolkstein & Kramer 1983). The chapter explores the textual relationship in the *Plot 99* script between Patient Number Three, Inanna and Nonhetha, using the experiences of sexual and spiritual emergence(y) in the asylum as their point of possible and impossible connections across cultural and racial divides. It explicates my own social, theoretical and aesthetic positionalities to these characters.

I explore the development of the performance strategy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century prophecy show and the character strategy of Dr Pascharama Pukmidas Stardreamer as a performance device for considering the role of ritual, prophecy, spirituality, *communitas* and receptivity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Taking the contentious writing of performance scholar Anthony Kubiak as inspiration, I analyse the role of performance as group ritual through the 21<sup>st</sup> century prophet (Kubiak, 2009). This in turn brings to the forefront the role of the spectator and the significance of receptivity in *Plot 99*. The 21<sup>st</sup> century prophecy show brings to the surface the contradictions of 21<sup>st</sup> century, cross-cultural consumerist cyber-shamanic spirituality, our voracious desire for meaning and coherence as well as the subsequent (and contentious) influence of the transpersonal perspective in psychology today.

*Chapter Five: Exploring the Feminine Semiotics of Plot 99* is the last chapter in the research paper and analyses in detail the material manifestations of the *Plot*

99 live production in response to the central questions of theory and context raised. Chapter Five explores, through an in-depth analysis of practice, the possibilities and problematics of the Feminine Semiotics of the *Plot 99* live production. It describes how I address some of the dilemmas, problematics and possibilities of representing Nonhetha's spirituality and sexuality through the lenses of visual performance and puppetry. It considers specifically how I utilize ritual, surfaces and threshold through puppetry and visual performance in order to facilitate a postcolonial feminist enquiry into the representation of emergency in South African women's spirituality and sexuality. It also attempts to explicate my own interpretation of the Feminine Semiotic through the elements of production, performance creation and public presentation.

This thesis explores puppetry and visual performance as a practice for the representation of spirituality and sexuality, a sentient tool that simultaneously exposes the constructs of identity whilst engaging in performative alchemy. As we seek new insights into re-conceptualising the true pathology as well as creative friction of binaric dysfunction in representation, the Feminine Semiotics of the intersecting surfaces of the live moment present innovations for the present. This transformational quality of performance, expressed in my research as the sacred, the liminal, the inappropriate other and the alchemical is characterised in the **Plot 99** process as a new Feminine Semiotic in representation.

## Chapter One

### The Entrance to the Plot 99 Asylum



University of Cape Town

## Exhuming Nonhetha Nkwenkwe

This chapter considers the links between race, spirituality and sexuality in the story of Nonhetha Nkwenkwe, a female *Isitunyo* (Christian prophet) arrested for political subversion and incarcerated in the Tower Mental Asylum, Fort Beaufort, in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, in 1922 (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). She died in the Weskoppies Asylum in Pretoria in 1935 and was buried in an unmarked grave. Sixty years later, it would be US professor of African history at Howard University, Robert Edgar, and South African historian Hilary Sapire who would unearth her story, as well as her bones in their pauper's grave, to bring her home to her final resting place (Bennett, 2007). Nonhetha was reburied in her home location of Khulile on 25 October 1998 (Bennett, 2007).

The highly contentious areas of madness, femininity and political subversion come to the fore in Nonhetha's story and her eventual demise in the Pretoria state asylum (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Shula Marks suggests that Nonhetha's prophecies, 'so revealing of the power relations of the colonial state, threatened...to disrupt the ordered non-communication between ruler and ruled' (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:xi).

The development of a Feminine Semiotic theory for puppetry performance explored in this thesis, is primarily concerned with the possible performative and theoretical narratives involved in the complex history of Nonhetha Nkwenkwe. The problematic of this particular thesis is the re-interpretation of the layered theoretical contexts of women's experiences of sexual and spiritual emergence(y) through the practice of puppetry and visual performance. The task is to understand creative pathways to represent the complex cultural, gendered and postcolonial theories of sexuality, race, spirituality, politics and madness involved in the multiple narratives of Nonhetha's life story.

The challenge of performing the Feminine Semiotic is how to involve the distinct narratives of patriarchal history and limited archives with Nonhetha's personal experiences and the intimate, indefinable spaces of sexual and

spiritual emergence(y) that affect the individual. How do we access in the performative the spaces of desire, faith, ecstasy, emotion, intimacy, pain, memory, senses and intuition derived from both the personal and the experiences attested to, and hidden within, the colonial record?

The world of Nonhetha was heavily located in a patriarchal Christian environment and strong colonial presence. Her personal story is one that exists in two spheres: the national archives of the state and in the oral culture and living present day traditions of her community and following. The Church of the Prophetess Nonhetha is still alive today, and as my field research would reveal, supporting and facilitating the interests of its rural and urban followers (Bennett, 2007). The Sunday Times Heritage Project states that her present day church consists of almost 30 000 members, with congregations throughout the old Ciskei area of the Eastern Cape, and branches in Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, Jeffrey's Bay and Knysna (Bennett, 2007).

Nonhetha is believed to have been born in 1870 near King Williamstown and is described as a

Typical woman in the "native reserve" that would become the Ciskei homeland. She was a widow with 10 children; five survived childhood. She could not read or write (Bennett, 2007).

The emphasis on Nonhetha's stereotyped position as a rural and uneducated wife and mother within a patriarchal traditional Xhosa environment, would seem to preclude the potential of such a woman to take up political, cultural and spiritual prominence. Nevertheless, as Edgar and Sapire (2000) record, between 1920 and 1960, many African women began to take up active leadership roles in their various communities. In this period, an unprecedented number of women came into leadership of independent churches around South Africa. What the prophetic movements in particular provided for these female spiritual leaders, were avenues for greater freedom outside of patriarchal institutions dominated by men (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Without these restrictions, women who took up roles as healers, priests and prophets

were free to create their own systems of worship. As Edgar explores, Nonthetha's preaching did not arise from the canon of established missionary theology (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). She preached on her personal experiences, visions, and a physical reading of the Bible through her own right hand. She wove apocalyptic imagery with Xhosa oral tradition and culture influenced by a century of Xhosa Christian religious prophets (Edgar & Sapire, 2000).

Before Christianity, female diviners in rural communities held much higher status than regular Nguni women, due to their community-acknowledged calling to ancestral worship (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Becoming a traditional healer provided autonomy, income and independence for women. Nonthetha is captured in both archives and oral testimonies as a strong, forceful and charismatic woman (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). This was enhanced by her social standing as a diviner (known as an *Igqira*) (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Her independent status as an older woman and mother who had passed through her major life rites of passage was further supported by her widowhood and independence as the head of her household (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). The spiritual quality and ferocity of her visions, her otherworld gifts of oration and dreams, would have further contributed to her mystique. These personal characteristics and her independence of widowhood meant that Nonthetha was not subject to the demands and expectations of a husband and patriarchy that younger or married women would have been (Edgar & Sapire, 2000).

In 1918, Nonthetha's community fell victim to a widely devastating influenza epidemic that scourged the Eastern Cape and Transkei, known in local oral legend as *Isibeto* (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). The *Isibeto* killed thousands of people, including some of Nonthetha's own children (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Nonthetha herself was also struck by the illness, and it was during this time of malaise and personal grief that she dreamt of her rebirth as a prophet under Christianity (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). In many ways, she aligned the cause of the *Isibeto* to apocalyptic visions of God's punishment of her community, and the desperate need for reform and change (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). The turn of the century and the economic, social and political position of black South

Africans created a climate of anxiety for rural Africans and chieftainships fighting to maintain tribal lands.

Mongameli Mabona, in his book *Diviners and prophets among the Xhosa (1593-1856): a study in Xhosa cultural history* (Mabona, 2004), investigates the roots of Xhosa culture and spirituality through anthropological and historical perspectives. He explains the rise and prominence of diviners and prophets from the pre-colonial to the colonial periods (Mabona, 2004). The earliest records of diviners within the Xhosa community<sup>4</sup> is believed to be 1593, by the writing of a Portuguese chronicler who was part of a shipwrecked crew on the Eastern Cape of South Africa (Mabona, 2004). Mabona describes the massive confrontation with the alien culture of colonialism between 1816-1856, that led to the confrontational climate of Nonthetha's years, as a period producing fear and identity crises amongst the Xhosa (Mabona, 2004). The influence of Christian missionaries, their biblical cosmologies and their zeal and haste for conversions, created additional trauma to traditional daily lives (Mabona, 2004). Mabona cites the London Missionary Society's reports on their encounters with indigenous tribes, where perceived religious frenzies, fainting and hysteria were caused in tribal Xhosa women by the heightened evangelism of the missionaries (Mabona, 2004). These impositions of alien culture, according to Mabona, manifested in abnormal behavior and spiritual crises within the Xhosa (Mabona, 2004).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Mabona states that although this was the first evidence he found on Xhosa diviners, there are many accounts of diviners in Bantu culture and society by capuchin missionaries in the Congo and Angola, priests in Mozambique and Zimbabwe (Mabona, 2004:294).

<sup>5</sup> Prophet-diviners amongst the Xhosa who rose to prominence in this period included the war doctor Makhanda of the great chief Ndlambe of the Ngqika. Makhanda had been fully initiated as a diviner in traditional cosmological lore (Mabona, 2004). He had also worked on Dutch farmlands where he became a keen follower of the missionary J.T. Van der Kemp. Makhanda also interestingly spoke often in his traditional cosmology of the divine feminine, the All-Mother '*umfazi omabele made/umfazi obele lide*' (the woman with the long breast/long breasts) (Mabona, 2004:301). The missionary reports, however, did not take his preaching seriously and were not clear in their chronicling of this fascinating matrilineal aspect of Xhosa mythology. A gifted seer was the prophet Ntsikana, a tribal Prince, who had also been a follower of the missionary J. T. Van der Kemp (Mabona, 2004). In 1833, another hugely influential male prophet arose at the young age of seventeen (Mabona, 2004). Mlanjeni became war doctor to the defeated Xhosa Rharhabe under the colonial governor Sir Harry Smith, who heavily underestimated the influence of the 'poor sick

While the power of the male prophets was confirmed in the eyes of the tribes, it would be the bizarre case of an obscure female prophet, the young girl Nongqawuse, which would cripple the Xhosa nation and lead to their complete submission to the colonists (Peires, 1987). While still a girl, Nongqawuse received a message from the tribal ancestors, that the tribe's cattle were vilified by witchcraft and defiled hands (Peires, 1987). In an apocalyptic vision of the second coming, she predicted that the ancestors would rise from the dead if all the living cattle of the tribes were slaughtered (Peires, 1987). All corn crops were also to be destroyed. In the following event, known as the historical Xhosa Cattle-Killing (1856-1857), an estimated 400 000 cattle were slaughtered, 40 000 Xhosa's died of starvation and another 40 000 left their homesteads to seek migrant labour (Peires, 1987:43). This final event marked the end of the Xhosa resistance to colonial expansion after eighty years of war and land loss (Peires, 1987).

There are many misconceptions and conflicting accounts as to why this event occurred and how such a thing could happen (Peires, 1987). One historian has pinpointed motivating factors for the widespread appeal of the killings for the majority of Xhosas at the time, and which link to the Millenarianism of Nongqawuse's preaching which reflected the shifting boundaries of Xhosa belief, and the links between traditional belief and Christian prophecy (Peires, 1987). A great epidemic of lung sickness had reached Xhosa land and infected the cattle, brought over on a ship from Europe, and many measures were in place to avoid and deal with this physical epidemic (Peires, 1987). Another cosmological influence was the idea of the resurrection of the dead, a major part of biblical doctrine that resonated strongly with Xhosa traditional beliefs. Although the missionaries had been in the area only since 1817, their

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boy' conducting cleansing ceremonies (Mabona, 2004). Mlanjeni gave orders to the Xhosa Kings and chiefs to sacrifice all dun-coloured beasts, an event that caused great friction between the tribes and the colonial government (Mabona, 2004). This resulted in a ferocious three-year war, the worst one fought between Xhosa and British. The Xhosa war effort eventually collapsed and Mlanjeni died at the young age of 23 (Mabona, 2004).

messages had spread everywhere in tribal society (Peires, 1987).

Smallpox epidemics and colonial dispossession had forced the Xhosa out of their homesteads (where the worlds of the living and the ancestral were clearly demarcated) to more cramped and unstable areas (Peires, 1987). 'The picture is one of an increasingly overcrowded population unhealthily squeezed together in a rapidly deteriorating environment' (Peires, 1987:58). The spiritual effect, Peires says, forced them to abandon many burial and mourning rituals, thus bringing the lands of the dead much closer to those of the living (Peires, 1987). The beliefs of *uHlanga* (sacrifice), *lungisa* (redemption) and the prospect of a re-birth after sacrifice on a much broader scale, were upheld by both the traditional beliefs and the highly influential Christian doctrines (Peires, 1987). Peires also states the widely held assertion that it was in fact Nongqawuse's Christian uncle, Mhlakaza, who was the orchestrator and instigator of the killings (Peires, 1987)<sup>6</sup>.

Fifty years on from the great cattle-killings, the situation of Xhosa people in the homelands was one of poverty, dispersion and great instability. At the time just before Nonhetha's surfacing, the advent of the devastating influenza as well as colonial rule manifested in political violence, religious conversion and frontier wars. The advent of colonialism's civilising mission was instrumental in the establishment of boundaries of space, body and mind of not only the colonial other, but the colonialists themselves. Southern Africa at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a transforming environment of rampant economic and urban growth (Jackson, 2005). The proliferation of mining in both South Africa and her adjoining territories had great impact upon internal and external populations (Jackson, 2005). Historians speculate on the process of domestication that Colonialism imposed and fostered on indigenous

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<sup>6</sup> Mhlakaza's ambitions were grounded in a desire to become an Anglican gospel preacher, and there were both strong Christian and traditional elements in Nongqawuse's visions (Peires, 1987). The girl prophet's story is one filled with controversy, blame and horror. In many respects, her words can be seen to be manipulated by both sides of the patriarchal politics. Nongqawuse's vision, however, lives on in history and her story is perhaps one of the most famous representations of Xhosa female divination before the arrival of Nonhetha (Peires, 1987).

inhabitants, especially in the development of the labour economy. The concentration on the domestication of what was perceived by European colonisers as the uncivilised African other, was as historian Lynette Jackson suggests, a way of reorganising the interests of one group to serve and profit the continuation of power and dominance from another (Jackson, 2005). 'African labour was recognized as key to viable colonial order' (Jackson 2005:31).

The economic and political interests of the colonial 'invasion' of southern Africa led to the violent clashes between the colonists and those opposing their imposed rule (Jackson, 2005). Frontier wars in the Eastern Cape and Natal had left a menacing threat for African rulers, such as the violent decapitation of Xhosa King Hintsa in the Eastern Cape, the Anglo Boer wars between British and Afrikaners and the destruction of the Ndebele monarchies in Zimbabwe (Jackson, 2005). Many other African leaders found their way to incarceration on Robben Island in the Cape (Jackson, 2005). The British were also keenly aware of the possibilities and casualties of native uprisings that threatened their interests and investments.

Mine labour and urban development saw the migration of mostly black male labour from rural areas to growing city centres such as Johannesburg in South Africa and Bulawayo in the then Southern Rhodesia (Jackson, 2005). Nonhetha Nkwenkwe's husband, Bhungu Nkwenkwe, was one of the many who left their homelands to seek employment in the mines (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). The development of colonial control was centred on the process of domestication carried out through the creation of boundaries through the patrolling and protecting of territory and labour (Jackson, 2005). The white settler populations and their ruling structures maintained a close eye on the potential threat of resistance and violence (Jackson, 2005). Chiefs had to report regularly to the Native commissioners of their areas, who reported to their superiors who reported to regional authorities as they

formalised the system of exploiting and administering the territory, of locating huts and labourers, mapping and taxing them, setting up

settlements and reserves, patrolling, and getting to know the Africans and their movements (Jackson, 2005:30).

The establishment of boundaries, borders and communities was a further attempt to domesticate and control African space (Jackson, 2005). The reorganisation, mapping and obsession with controlling the borders of space and place, and the movement of the people therein, became of paramount importance to social containment (Jackson, 2005). The patrolling of black rural areas, pass laws and curfews were some of the measures put in place to control the movement of black people through white towns and areas (Jackson, 2005). These laws were used to keep a close eye on native activity as 'location inspectors were appointed to search any hut, house, or habitation within the limits of any native location for idle or disorderly persons' (Jackson, 2005:30).

Many of the laws designating the 'right places' for people were made male-specific, such as tax and pass laws, due to the British investment interests in black labour (Jackson, 2005). The black labour population was also predominantly male, with black women not only ignored by the British but considered as virtually invisible in their containment in the patriarchy of the rural areas (Jackson, 2005). Black women did not fall under pass laws as they were regarded as non-existent by the Colonial authorities (Jackson, 2005). The assumption was one of patriarchal prerogative between ruler and ruled, that kept black women on the margins of a domestic war of wills.

Nonhetha's messages showed a grappling with the influences and relevance of Christianity in her changing society. Nonhetha preached for the purification and education of her people (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). She called for black unity in faith, to remove the difference between Christian and non-Christian and to focus on the messages of renewal and salvation offered by Christianity (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). She stressed the importance of rejecting corrupting influences such as alcohol, tobacco, ritual and dancing (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). In fact, Edgar and Sapire state that some authorities saw her preaching in this regard as conservative rather than subversive (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Nonhetha sought increased access to what she believed were God's messages and

teaching (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). She spoke primarily to those who were uneducated and illiterate in the Colonial system (like herself) and provided inspiration through her intuitive and visionary pathways to faith and a united community.

The colonial climate was one of fear resulting in observation and surveillance. Although Nonthetha's anti-liquor sentiments were approved of by the colonial law, her preaching came under the spotlight as 'cloaking a more serious objective, for...the overthrow of the Europeans by a combination of the Black races' (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:24). Nonthetha incorporated prophecies of Xhosa and African liberation in her messages, condemning the greed of existing white churches as her following grew, and calling for natives to free themselves from white interference and conduct their own services (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Nonthetha believed it was an American who would save her and her people from colonialism, and then, from her later incarceration.

While African-Americans were gaining ground on political freedom and rights issues in America, rumours were reaching African leaders, even in the old Ciskei and Transkei homelands, about their African 'brothers' coming over the seas to liberate them (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Xhosa leaders sought inspiration from political leaders such as Marcus Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association, whose role

Was to work for the general uplift of the people of African ancestry of the world. And the members pledge themselves to do all in their power to conserve the rights of their noble race and to respect the rights of all mankind, believing always in the Brotherhood of Man and the Fatherhood of God (UNIA-ACL, 2011).

Other political inspiration of the time came from Clements Kadalie, leader of the Industrial and Commercial Union Workers of South Africa (Edgar & Sapire, 2000).

Enoch Mgijima was a Christian prophet, founder of the Israelite Church of South Africa and Xhosa leader with whom Nonthetha was associated (Edgar &

Sapire, 2000). His preaching encouraged the incorporation of American political figures into Xhosa interests at the time (Edgar & Sapire, 2000).<sup>7</sup> Nonthetha was influenced by the oral theologies of Xhosa Christianity and its leaders such as Ntsikana, Mgijima (with whom Nonthetha consulted, and received support even in detention) and the independent church leader James Dwane (Edgar & Sapire, 2000).

Authorities were wary of prophetic movements after the Bulhoek massacre of 1920, which led to the murder of over 200 Israelite followers of the prophet Enoch Mgijima (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Despite the redeeming features of Nonthetha's preaching, the state was eager to put an end to her messages of black unity and empowerment.

Nonthetha drew on the prophecies of 19<sup>th</sup> century Xhosa prophet Chief Ntsikana who spoke of African liberation beneath the mountain stronghold of Ntaba ka Ndoda. By invoking this image

She was tapping into a long line of Xhosa religious innovators who, responding to the challenge of European intrusion, conquest and domination of their societies, had crafted messages drawn from Christian and Xhosa symbols and beliefs (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:xxii).

Edgar talks of two prophetic poles that arose in Xhosa society at the time. Many of these prophets spoke of the complete rejection of white supremacy and Christianity (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Nonthetha, however, followed the vein of Ntsikana, seeking 'a message of accommodation to Christianity and the expanding European presence' (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:xxii). Nonthetha believed that the prophet Ntsikana had spoken to her in a dream and told her she had a special calling, as Edgar says, to minister to the chiefs and teach

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<sup>7</sup> 'Mgijima joined the Church of God and Saints of Christ in the early 1900s. An African-American, William Crowdy, had founded this in America. He claimed that black people were descended from the lost tribes of Israel. This appealed to Mgijima and he joined the local branch, which had its headquarters in Uitenhage. His contact was John Msikinya, who at one time had also been a Methodist local preacher. However, Mgijima's visions continued and eventually he was asked to leave this church as well. He called the new church that he established the Israelites' (DACB, 2011).

them to pray to God (Edgar & Sapire, 2000).

Elements of Nonhetha's preaching, similar to those of her prophet predecessors, had biblical resonances that provide a glimpse into the power Christian doctrine held in Xhosa beliefs at the time, as well as her gifts of oration. Nonhetha was not educated and could not read, but she proclaimed that God gave her the power to read his Bible from her hands (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). This simple gesture not only aligned her with her everyday followers but also promoted her mystical connection to the spirit world and the divine. In a key incident that aggravated conditions for her arrest, Nonhetha predicted a plague of locusts would ravage the area, but instructed her followers that they were on no accounts to clear or harm the insects (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Nonhetha considered the plague an act of God, a punishment for aberrant behaviour and a call for change. Edgar describes the event as it is recorded in state archives:

When a swarm of *voetganger* [pedestrian] locusts descended on the area in September and October 1923, government officials ordered the people to kill them, invoking the Agricultural Pest Act of 1911, which empowered the government to order any citizen to kill insects. When Nonhetha's followers refused to kill the locusts, officials had a legal pretext for disrupting the movement. (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:129).

Nonhetha was arrested for 'seditious activities' and

On December 6, 1922, at the King William's Town magistrate's court, the prophetess Nonhetha Nkwenkwe was committed to Fort Beaufort mental hospital for "medical observation" as hundreds of her followers sang hymns outside... Nkwenkwe was released from the hospital on January 5, 1923 on six months' probation — on condition she did not preach. She preached, was re-arrested and, on April 7, 1923, was recommitted. Her followers say she had predicted she would be arrested twice (Bennett, 2007).

In a colonial state that promoted and insisted on Christianity, Nonthetha could not be arrested for preaching and was not tried for any civil offence. Instead, she was sent for medical observation at the Tower Mental Asylum.<sup>8</sup>

Little attention has been given to the individual experiences of rural women and men who were, as Edgar states, 'forced to change the existing patterns of gender relations' (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:113). There is, in fact, much evidence pertaining to rural women's creativity and expression, their positions of respect in hierarchies and their potential political subversiveness (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Edgar gives the example of Nonthetha's most loyal supporter, the wife of chief Ngangelizwe Kama, who was dissatisfied with some areas of Kama's authority (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Such dissention caused upset with local chiefs. This particular dissention was also part of the aggravation of the government who were reliant on the chief's cooperation, and which resulted in Nonthetha's arrest (Edgar & Sapire, 2000).

Women were prominent in the protests and campaigns to free Nonthetha. Nonthetha's mystique and power was further consolidated when her followers continued to serve and pursue her guidance, even putting their bodies into hardship and dangers (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). In Nonthetha's movement, the most prominent members were women who used their positions in the church to influence the social order (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Many studies on African women's activism are located with women from urban areas. A large amount of the images and reports on rural women have been concerned with the hardships of sustaining their homesteads in the wake of their husbands' migrant labour and shouldering the domestic burden of poverty (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Yet Edgar writes,

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<sup>8</sup> As Jannette Bennett writes

Nonthetha was not the typical asylum inmate. Her initial incarceration was motivated on political grounds, with the intention of dealing her movement a deathblow. When it became apparent that African male figures of authority were unwilling or unable to restrain her from preaching, drastic action on the part of state officials became imperative (Bennett, 2007).

Nonhetha's life deepens the enquiry into the particular appeal and meaning of redemptive message for rural women. Her case offers a fascinating counterpoint to the better-known aspects of female activism in urban centres at the time (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:114).

While she was at the Tower Mental Hospital in Fort Beaufort, Nonhetha's followers, including her daughters, would walk as far as eighty kilometers to consult with her (Bennett, 2007). Incensed by the disruptions, the authorities had Nonhetha removed and taken to the Weskoppies Asylum in Pretoria in 1924, hoping that it would dissuade her tenacious following (Bennett, 2007).

On November 26, 1926, Nonhetha's followers proceeded to embark on a pilgrimage of grace to see their prophet, almost one thousand kilometres away (Bennett, 2007). The pilgrims walked on foot for 55 days, gathering impetus and additional followers as they moved through the landscape. Once in Pretoria they lobbied for Nonhetha's release and the pilgrimage was widely acknowledged in the media (Appendix 4). It was to no avail. In 1930, Nonhetha's followers set out again. The prophetess sent word that they should not take passes or provisions with them, that they should trust in the power of God to provide and bring them to her in safety (Bennett, 2007). With biblical echoes of the exodus of the Israelites under the leadership of Moses, the followers once again walked the vast and exhausting journey to Pretoria. This time, however, the male *Mtetes*, who were required by law to carry passes, were arrested (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). The female followers, who were not required by law to hold passes, walked the rest of the journey (Bennett, 2007).

Nonhetha's *Mtetes* managed to create enough public presence to convince the authorities to conduct a medical review of Nonhetha's condition. In 1930, Nonhetha was re-examined and a report was sent from the office of the mental hospital in Pretoria to the Commissioner of Mental Hygiene (Bennett, 2007). The report, dated June 2, 1930 stated that the staff were unanimous in the decision that Nonhetha, who still claimed to be divinely blessed with vision and prophecy, was mentally disordered (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). She was

diagnosed with the following conditions: acute hallucinosis, delusions of grandeur and of poisoning by the staff, an emotional nature of religious exaltation and restless excitement (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:130). As Edgar and Sapire's research in the national archives shows, Physician Superintendent Crosthwaite's diagnostic outcome stated however that Nonthetha could in fact be returned to the care of her own community and that the matter should be brought before a judicial inquiry for final adjudication (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). A letter written by the Commissioner for Mental Hygiene, J.T. Dunston, to Major Herbst in the Department of Native Affairs overruled any potential for release on the grounds of Nonthetha's continued preaching and the possibility of recurrence of political upheaval and native challenge to the state (Edgar & Sapire, 2000).

While the truth of Nonthetha's mental state is still contestable, what did escape the doctor's diagnosis was that Nonthetha was dying of stomach and liver cancer (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). On May 20, 1935, she died and two days later was buried in a pauper's grave (Bennett, 2007). A notice was sent to her family stating they should make arrangements to collect her body, but it took months to reach them. Edgar states that authorities were not even sure where she had been buried and her family's repeated requests for her return were ignored (Edgar & Sapire, 2000).

When Nonthetha's body was finally traced to the Rebecca Street Cemetery in the late 1990's (more than fifty years since her death), it lay in an unmarked grave, plot 99, along with another unnamed body of a man (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). In July 1998 she was finally exhumed and returned (Appendix 1)

On the same route used in the pilgrimages of grace — to her home in the Eastern Cape. Provincial officials played a major role in shepherding the process, as did religious leaders and her family, including her grandson world champion boxer Vuyani Bungu. According to a church member at the exhumation: "Nontetha told us she would not return in the same way she left." (Bennett, 2007).

## **Diseases of Culture and Employment: Race and State in the History of Psychiatry in the Southern African Colonies**

Kenyan playwright Ngugi Wa Thiong'o cites Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* in his reading of the metaphor of state as a panopticon prison of control and containment (Wa Thiong'o, 1988). 'The prison is the enclosure in which the state organises the use of space and time in such a way as to achieve what Foucault calls 'docile bodies' and hence 'docile minds' (Wa Thiong'o, 1988:448). Before the Victorian asylum in Southern African territories, dissidents, lunatics and the criminally insane were arrested and placed in jails amongst ordinary prisoners (Jackson, 2005). Jail also would become the first step in the journey to the asylum for black men and later on black women. The subjugation of the body, as the first mechanism to domesticity of black labour, would soon extend to the British preoccupation with 'mental health' and the surveillance of mind and body of difference and its potential threats to the colonial state (Jackson, 2005).

The control of space and body is of integral importance to an exploration of colonial psychiatry in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Jackson, 2005). The European standards for mental health care were ever-increasing and the asylums in southern Africa felt the pressure to maintain standards for its European patients (Jackson, 2005). Treatments at the time included mechanical restraint, 'strong rooms', electroconvulsive shock therapy, surgeries and medication (Jackson, 2005). But as Jackson (2005) asks, what was the route of the black man to the asylum and where did black women figure in this imposition of colonial order?

The complex meeting points between cultural and social difference come to the fore in issues of mental illness, as Africans confronted the new systems imposed on their environments and selves. African spiritual and cultural beliefs, such as the use and presence of witchcraft in their cultural activities, were blamed for some cases of mental illness (Jackson, 2005). Stereotypes of superstitious, uncivilized natives governed the state's reaction to traditional belief and the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1899 attempted to remove the

centrally important system of traditional healing from African communities. Under this act, African patients were not allowed to consult traditional healers over issues of mental illness (Jackson, 2005).

In Ndebele cultural belief, mental agitation was often due to an unhappy spirit or ancestral presence called *shave* that needed to be mediated through ritual and herbalism (Jackson, 2005). *Nyangas*, or diviners, were employed to assist and perform these processes with the family (Jackson, 2005:125). Patients and their families continued to practice traditional healing despite the laws. Jackson highlights the many ways in which cultural disconnection, stereotype and translation interrupted and maintained perceptions of African madness (Jackson, 2005). The problematics of African madness are not the perceived misguidedness of superstitions, but rather the unstable intersections of the perceived rational colonial self with their own imposed stereotypes of the other. Speculations of what led to African insanity were numerous (Jackson, 2005). Language played a large part in the misreading of cases, and cultural signifiers were reconceptualized as signs of illness through displacement from their traditional contexts into the western frameworks of reason (Jackson, 2005).

One of the essentialist reasonings of the state for African madness was the idea of mental illness as a 'disease of employment' (Jackson, 2005:125). One perception that dominated European explanations for the high rate of African inmates, was the perceived inability of 'the African' to adjust from rural incivility to the pressures of western civilisation (Jackson, 2005). Many cases of madness were discovered at the workplace, and then directed to the asylum and attributed to this 'native' inability to adjust to the new order (Jackson, 2005). Speculations arise that the myriad conditions of poor diet, violence, oppression and injustices of the mines in which contracted migrant labourers toiled were so poor 'that they made men lose their minds' (Jackson, 2005:69). A report from a Doctor Flemming found by Jackson, confirms the detrimental conditions of African men's employment as hazardous to their health (Jackson, 2005). Diseases of employment in Africans included 'pulmonary diseases, scurvy, pneumonia, dysentery, phthisis, syphilis influenza and pellagra' (Jackson, 2005:78). As Jackson observes, these are mostly infectious

diseases spread by filthy and overcrowded environments enforced through geographical redirection (Jackson, 2005).

The maintenance of such horrific conditions and the reluctance of the state to educate or uplift the native labour force and population led to the underlying colonial psyche that feared the political upheaval, rebellion and uprising of whom they considered the hyper-sexualised, dangerous and naturally under-evolved Africans. Queenstown Mental Hospital Psychiatrist, B.J.F. Laubscher in the 1930's observed that

proximity to a place of European habitation was a key component... believing it [madness in Africans] to be caused by the general irrationality of African communities who failed to recognise madness as madness, and instead confused it with ukuthwasa or some other supernatural disposition (Jackson, 2005:69).

The problematic, fragile boundaries between traditional belief and colonial thought and control is highlighted. The cultural process of *ukuthwasa*, a traditional surfacing up of a calling to empowerment through healing, raises itself again (Jackson, 2005). Western psychiatry was sceptical of this significant spiritual and cultural system, which they regarded as an African justification for backward and abnormal behaviour that was considered dangerous and disruptive within a progressive western society.

### **African Women and Mental Illness: Sexuality, Race and Abnormality in the Colonial Regulator**

'Woman does not exist' (Elliott, 1992:201).

Lynette Jackson considers the political, economic, cultural and general disavowal of the existence of black women in the legislature, laws and governance of the colonial authorities in Southern Africa (Jackson, 2005). In her research, she considers what she calls black women's normality as abnormality (Jackson, 2005). In many instances, the stereotype was that black

women were not in fact mentally ill but mentally deficient and lacking in mental agility from a point of biological, cultural and social difference (Jackson, 2005). Jackson quotes a Victorian woman called Mrs Chataway:

Our girls are mentally inferior to other natives. They are merely accustomed to being regarded as goods and chattels. It would take a long time to develop sufficient self-respect to enable them to be employed with safety (Jackson, 2005:105).

The blatant racism and complicit misogynist oppression of these views highlights not only how stereotypes operated to exclude black women from colonial urban society but the economy as a whole. The example of exclusion that black women experienced in the operational reality of the developing laws and infrastructures of the state highlights not only the perceived unimportance and invisibility of their presence in colonial regulatory processes, but the perception of them as sub-human on mental, physical and emotional standards of civilisation. Black women posed no physical or psychic threat to the colony, that is, as long as they were maintained spatially, within the confines of domestic patriarchy in the rural areas (Jackson, 2005). Black women who strayed into the urban areas in the early 1900's were considered to be either sexually or mentally uncontained (Jackson, 2005).

Charmaine Pereira (2003) states that it was the recent colonial structures of Catholicism and the Victorian era, which shamed and pathologised African women through the stereotype of hyper-sexuality in the 1800's (Pereira, 2003). Sander L. Gilman, in his provocative written work, *Difference and Pathology* (1985), considers stereotypes of women's, and more specifically, black women's sexuality. He looks especially at the supposed links between gender, race and madness, as asserted throughout the colonial and postcolonial eras (Gilman, 1985). Gilman asserts that the association of sexual excess with the body of the black [woman] dates back to the Middle Ages (Gilman, 1985). He recalls the tales of a Jewish traveller called Benjamin of Tudela, who described his encounters with people in Seba on the river Pishon as

people who like animals, eat of the herbs that grow on the banks of the Nile and in the fields. They go about naked and have not

the intelligence of ordinary men. They cohabit with their sisters and anyone they can find... and these are the black slaves, the sons of Ham (Gilman, 1990:81).

The derogatory assertions of primitivism with black sexuality fed into the development of an iconography of black bodies overtly involved with sexual and bodily deviance (Gilman, 1985). In comparison, perceptions of the white female body in the Victorian worldview saw themselves as not only higher on an evolutionary scale, but thus more appropriate, rational and contained. The body of the black female became, as Gilman says, 'by the eighteenth century an icon for deviant sexuality in general, almost always, however, paired with a white figure of the opposite sex' (Gilman, 1990:82). He further investigates the link between women's bodies perceived as pathologised through this hypersexuality and the patriarchal colonial assertion that madness, hysteria and sexuality were integrated aspects of the black female condition (Gilman, 1985).

The South African state, in Nonhetha's time, upheld the stereotypical belief that a black woman would not ordinarily be found wandering alone in an urban area unless she was a confirmed sex worker soliciting economic benefits from the large migrant labour force (Jackson, 2005). Jackson remarks at how adept the police were at determining whether a black woman was present in the town as a solicitor or if she was an abnormal 'stray' (Jackson, 2005). While women did not carry passes, those entering European urban areas were policed by the medical control of their sexuality:

Mobile African women were so defined by their perceived licentious sexuality that mine compounds and various municipalities directed influx regulations at the women's genitals. In other words, instead of passes, or *situpa*, the women carried certificates of their venereal health (Jackson, 2005:107).

While black women were afforded neither status nor urban community, they were seen as an essential control mechanism against rape and the perceived sexual disorder of the over-sexed black migrant working class (Jackson, 2005). Moreover, as Jackson observes in the Criminal Investigations

Immorality files at the time, many European supervisors engaged in black female solicitation (Jackson, 2005). Although this information was kept secret, she observes that colonial authorities saw their use of prostitution as another deterrent in the rape of white women (Jackson, 2005).

Some of the diseases associated with women's mental health could also be attributed to urban sexual diseases that were circling developing economic areas, such as syphilis (Jackson, 2005). Jackson recounts cases in which abhorrent behaviour in females could probably be medically attributed to sexual disease (Jackson, 2005). Symptoms of sexual disease were often misdiagnosed and overlooked, and medication thus incorrectly prescribed (Jackson, 2005). The methods of psychiatric treatment given to women who were probably suffering sexual disease were in no way beneficial to stopping the root cause of mental disturbance or irritation in these patients. In some cases it exacerbated the underlying medical reasons.

The problem of venereal disease in the growing colony was a matter that brought women into light as doctors blamed the spread of disease on stray African women (Jackson, 2005). As Jackson says, the occurrence of 'stray women was a metaphor for African women's relationship to colonial space when they were anywhere but in the reserves' and this straying quality rendered them either sexually 'deviant or insane' (Jackson, 2005:109) in the colonial gaze.

Independence in black women represented a danger to the order of things for both the coloniser and the colonised. Many of the women committed to the mental asylums at this time were arrested for straying or, to use Jackson's turn of phrase, *surfacing up* where they were not supposed to (Jackson, 2005). What was lost in these simplistic and constraining denigrations was the powerful autonomy and self reclamation of mobile women. The independence displayed in women, seeking pathways to support their families in the face of urbanisation, migrant labour and capitalism, their defiance of containment, paid testament to women's attempts to regain control over their own lives, bodies and spaces (Jackson, 2005). The defiance of independence in rural African

women, especially as demonstrated in the actions and course of Nonhetha's story, reveals subversion of the dominant orders of patriarchy. Nonhetha's own sense of personal freedom, spiritual and sexual empowerment and choice, were the very qualities that led to her diagnosis and containment in the panopticons of the state psychiatric systems.

As an entry point into these central concerns with women's mental illness as perceived by the colonial regulator, I return to the Xhosa cultural terrain of the *Igqira*. In Nonhetha's original social position as an *Igqira* she illuminated 'the separate worlds we all inhabit, but which are made more frightening and separate by the divisions of age, ethnicity and race... paradoxically [she] also illuminates the connections between these worlds' (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:xxii). Nonhetha maintained a dualistic rather than simplistic position in a changing society.

While Edgar provides a thorough examination of Nonhetha's preaching as a mechanism for colonial resistance and integration, I think that he does not fully expound on the complexities that her embodied spirituality posed for patriarchal defiance and intervention (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Nonhetha's incarceration highlights not only a paranoid and threatened colonial state, but also the hysterical need of colonial patriarchy to oppress her highly subversive embodied presence. The exotic ecstasies of the black female diviner speak not only of religious subversion but also of political transgression in their defiance of patriarchal oppression and control of the female body itself.

As a woman, Nonhetha straddled the realms between the visible and the invisible, between Western Christianity and indigenous belief, between feminine desire and colonial oppression, madness and resistance. It is the site of the female body itself that provides these links between the physical and the sublime and threatens the rationality of the contained masculine systems of rationality and reason, subject and object, self and other. It is ironic that a woman gifted with what the Xhosas term *ukuthwasa*, or 'to become visible' (Edgar & Sapire, 2000), should be made so invisible by the oppressive

mechanisms of a patriarchal colonial state. Nonthetha would seem, in her position as both a Christian leader and a subversive female diviner, to operate as an inappropriate other within the colonial period of her day. Her subversion arose from her political defiance of the state's oppressive mechanisms against the black community and her own femininity. However, it was the invisible sites of her unquantifiable feminine sexuality and desire, made visible through her divining, which caused so much fear within the heart of patriarchal authority.

### **Life in the Asylum: Nonthetha and the Colonial Psychiatric Systems**

Nonthetha's experience of incarceration at Fort Beaufort is most predominantly detailed through carefully kept case records and surveillance of her behaviour as a particular concern for political uprising (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). In fact, due to these operations of political surveillance, Nonthetha's story provides us with a rare view into the experiences of a black female patient in the state psychiatric system between 1920 and 1935. Edgar and Sapire (2000) state that in order to compile an account of her stay there we must rely on psychiatric records and oral testimony.

Nonthetha was consistent in her claims to be directly inspired and filled by God, which manifested in her ability to preach by reading God's words through messages in her hands (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). She would preach and pray constantly while in the asylum. This preaching was described as

Vehement, passionate, militant, noisy and hostile, which the psychiatrists interpreted as signs of "religious exaltation" accompanied by acute and constant hallucinosis. They concluded that Nonthetha was delusional (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:58).

Other behaviours that psychiatrists used to substantiate these claims were Nonthetha's absolute conviction that doctors were withholding a letter directly addressed to her from Queen Victoria's father, and that queen Victoria herself communicated directly with Nonthetha (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). She was also adamant that the nurses and staff were trying to poison her (Edgar & Sapire,

2000). Given her cultural inclination to African traditional medicine and the distress of white supremacy and control, western medical treatment must have felt truly like a poisoning of her traditional self. There is also a suspicion she was given a concoction of anti-epilepsy drugs, mainly paraldehyde, chloral hydrate and bromide, a routine treatment for the unruly (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:61).

Besides the disagreeability of its taste, paraldehyde has a number of side effects including halitosis, right heart failure and haemorrhage, rashes, irritability, toxic hepatitis and metabolic acidosis (Engel & Pedley, 1998). It also affects the liver as seventy to eighty percent of the substance is metabolised by the liver and prolonged use has been seen to develop a physical dependence with a withdrawal symptom similar to alcoholic withdrawal (Engel & Pedley, 1998).

Nonhetha was diagnosed in her first admission with schizophrenia, in 1923 termed dementia praecox of the hebephrenic type (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Characteristics of hebephrenia included emotional disturbance, wild excitement, tears and depression, strange impulsive conduct and thinking, vivid hallucinations, visions and auditory hallucinations (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Edgar and Sapire say that at that time, the prognosis for praecox dementia was not a positive one and patients were considered incurable with a steady deterioration (Edgar & Sapire, 2000).

Edgar and Sapire state that whether or not Nonhetha was truly mad is a question that cannot be answered.

In light of what we know about her living conditions and disciplinary regimes in mental hospitals we might also consider that there was some substance to her paranoid representations and feelings of persecution (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:68).

This was exacerbated even more by a complete disavowal of Xhosa cultural and community symbols, language, communication and mythologies by the colonial authorities. For Edgar and Sapire, the question of Nonhetha's

madness is less provocative than evidence of a scientific and psychiatric imperialism based on prejudice, ignorance and neglect, its inept perceptions and actions regarding black women, cultural expression, self-empowerment, healing and mental illness (Edgar & Sapire, 2000).

While Nonhetha's living descendants and community testify that she was in no way demented but rather tortured by a system of political fear and racial prejudice, it is interesting to consider the symptoms of her supposedly incurable dementia (Bennett, 2007). A process of holistic treatment, so conducive to recovery and healing, was undermined by the horrific, squalid conditions of life at the Fort Beaufort Tower hospital where Nonhetha was interred. Such stressful and unhealthy conditions have further confirmed the resolve of historians such as Edgar that Nonhetha was indeed not mad, but a victim of an unhealthy and decaying system of control (Edgar & Sapire, 2000).

In their research, Edgar and Sapire try to reconstruct Nonhetha's routine at the Fort Beaufort asylum (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). The female section of the asylum was situated more than a quarter mile away from the male administrative side of the institution (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Poverty and neglect led to the wretched condition the women faced at Fort Beaufort (Swartz, 1999). As in the male hospital, infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and typhoid were rife (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Edgar and Sapire suggest that Nonhetha would have shared a bare dormitory with mainly elderly and chronic long-term patients (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). They also suppose that given the seriousness of their conditions, there would undoubtedly have been fights and violent incidences under such close, unmonitored conditions (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:60).

Edgar and Sapire surmise Nonhetha's monotonous daily routine as follows:

Well before breakfast at 7am patients were dressed (in standard khaki dresses, but no shoes or underwear) and shepherded into the courtyards outdoors where they spent their days... long hours outside in the heat or cold... meals were served outside on

the veranda at wooden benches and tables, and patients were only bathed once a week (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:61).

Edgar and Sapire describe the lack of activity or sports for women and say that Nonhetha might have been given work chopping stones to make gravel pathways (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). They note that there is also evidence of Nonhetha being isolated in an airing garden for noisy behaviour (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Various methods of restraint were employed to keep patients in line.

The general practice of seclusion at Fort Beaufort involved locking up of psychotic patients in a room with a coir mattress on the floor, where they were left until they became calmer. Although there were clear procedures for this practice, it was one open to abuse by overworked and demoralised staff (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:61).

Violence was a constant fear factor of life at Fort Beaufort for both staff and patients and it is not surprising that Nonhetha had a sense of fear and paranoia of her keepers.

A visitor described the Weskoppies male yard in 1937 as 'a grotesque crowd of social debris' (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:81). Patients of all degrees of illness were kept in the same areas. Throughout the 1920's, attempts were made at expansion of hospitals only to be ceased by the effects of the Great Depression (Swartz, 1999). While the overcrowding of white hospitals was a serious condition, in native hospitals it was disastrous (Swartz, 1999). Inmates at Weskoppies slept shoulder-to-shoulder, 'making a solid layer of humanity' (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:83). Many patients slept on the floor or spilled into the dining and veranda areas (Edgar & Sapire, 2000).

After her transference to Weskoppies in Pretoria in 1929, doctors noted that Nonhetha's behaviour had calmed and that she showed no aggressive violence and reasonable good health (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:69). The same reports, however, said that she had started to show symptoms of distress and

agitation, poor sleeping habits and a loss of appetite. She also continued to express what they deemed a delusion of burning on the right side of her body (Edgar & Sapire, 2000).

On 20 May 1935, Nonthetha died of stomach and liver cancer at Weskoppies (Bennett, 2007). It would seem that the long term effects of the anticonvulsants administered to her, the huge negligence of the hospital institution, its poor care and facilities, could very well have been the roots of Nonthetha's disease.

### **The Dilemmas of Custodianship: Nursing and the Asylum**

Fear and trepidation around the mental health system extended not only to the mentally ill or aberrant, but, as Shula Marks observes, the deeply controversial and complex managerial and nursing bodies in whose responsibility lay the containment and cure of the inmate-patients (Marks, 2007). Marks looks specifically at Cape Town's Valkenberg State Psychiatric Hospital prior to black admissions in the early 1900's, and the blacks-only asylum at Fort Beaufort, where Nonthetha Nkwenkwe was first hospitalised (Marks, 2007). She has written on the neglected area of nursing within the colonial asylum, drawing emphasis to the fact that, outside of minimal case records and data archived, it is really the nursing body who had the most direct and day-to-day experience of the patients (Marks, 2007). It is also mainly in their hands that the health management and cure for illness lay.

She considers the major problems that the asylums faced, not only in the colonies of the empire, but also in Britain and the USA (Marks, 2007). Extreme overcrowding due to increasing patient numbers, 'escalating bureaucratisation, the absence of cure and therefore silting up of hospital space with chronic and congenital cases' was only further exacerbated by the dire shortage of professional and trained nurses (Marks, 2007:72). In the early 1900's, before the establishment of the Union in the colony, South Africa had a policy of only employing white staff at the asylum, especially white-only asylums such as Valkenberg (Marks, 2007). There are records of coloured staff at black-only

hospitals such as Fort Beaufort (Marks, 2007). Menial labour was, however, assigned to black 'convicts' (Marks, 2007). While Marks says this declaration was also in support of securing white employment in the colony, work in the asylum was highly unappealing employment (Marks, 2007).

Recruitment was a hard task with severe staffing shortages and many problems surrounding the hiring of trained staff (Marks, 2007). Most senior, better-trained nurses were brought in from the UK and Scotland (in fact most of them were not British but Irish or Scottish and many, immigrants), as their contracts were generally longer with better pay, and return home was not as easy (Marks, 2007). A large number of the recruits were Afrikaans women, which Marks says could attest to their post-Boer War proletarianisation, although they did not remain in service long (Marks, 2007). The turnover in the jobs among local attendants was high, with more than half of the recruits not having any previous nursing training and coming from the working and lower middle classes with minimal education (Marks, 2007). Most women did not stay more than two months, and 'the average length of service was less than a year' (Marks, 2007:73).

The attitude of men at the time was that asylum work was for women (Marks, 2007). Male attendants who did apply for work were possessed of 'neither the aptitude nor inclination for such work' which Marks reveals is evidenced in the high level of dismissals for 'insubordination, desertion, drunkenness, general unsuitability and assaulting patients' (Marks, 2007:74). In a case where black male staff were engaged, due to chronic shortages, doctors reported carelessness and unreliability. This, however, Marks insists, was made possible by the discriminatory wages afforded black staff and the friction between them and their white counterparts (Marks, 2007).

Wages were extremely poor for both races. Female nurses earned on average a third less than male attendants and were expected to terminate careers upon marriage (Marks, 2007). Stigma also remained a great deterrent, and as Marks points out, despite any attempts to eradicate the association of mental illness with lunacy, middle class families were reluctant to send their paying ill to the

hospital (Marks, 2007). Thus, most of the inmates at Valkenberg were not only poor but only sent there in a demented or dangerous state (Marks, 2007). The work in the asylum was often exhausting with little reward. Nurses were also subject to physical confrontations, insults and injuries from patients. Nurses did not receive any insurance or compensation for such injuries (Marks, 2007). Despite formal requirements for the asylums to be kept spotless and contained, nurses had to face serious overcrowding, squalid conditions and unpleasant work (Marks, 2007). By the 1930's, Valkenberg and the Pretoria state asylum, Weskoppies, where Nonhetha was taken and kept for five years, were the most overcrowded mental hospitals in South Africa (Marks, 2007).

In the black-only hospitals such as Fort Beaufort, racial stigma and fear further contributed to the shortage of attendants. White staff that did work there were also underpaid, struggling with language and lack of communication. There were often allegations of abuse from attendants (Marks, 2007). Fort Beaufort had no resident psychiatrist and all senior staff were white (Marks, 2007). The native nurses were employed to do mostly menial jobs and to ensure the patients were kept clean and dry (Marks, 2007). The demoralising status and conditions of their work with minimal wages must have made conditions close to unbearable for these assistant attendants (Marks, 2007). We can only imagine how these conditions affected the patients. Marks comments in her research that

The incidence of seriously disturbed and dangerous behaviour on the parts of patients in the black mental wards was even higher than in the white (Marks, 2007:75).

This high level of disturbance could again be attributed to the horrific social circumstances surrounding incarceration. Rural Africans were even more unwilling to subject their ill to the white institutions (Marks, 2007 and Jackson, 2005). Therefore, an African patient would have to be in a deranged or dangerous state to be admitted by their families. Looking at the Fort Beaufort hospital in the 1900's, many of the patients were chronic, incurable and unreleasable (Marks, 2007). The fact that acute and short term cases were not

sent to Fort Beaufort highlights the custodial rather than therapeutic function the hospital served (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:56).

The conditions of the asylum as articulated above, present a picture of neglect, ignorance and inability of Colonialism to understand the complex systems required for effective psychiatry in South Africa. It evidences the political project of colonialism and its medical and scientific discourses as recourse to the oppression of racial and gender difference rather than a system for healing. It is this legacy of political, social and cultural stigma that still haunts the relationship between western psychiatry, race, gender and mental illness in South Africa today.

### **Western Psychiatry and Cultural Illness: The Problematics of *Ukuthwasa***

The associations of illness (be it mental or physical) with religious and spiritual etiologies span global contexts (Koss-Chioino & Hefner, 2006). Ntombizanele Booi, in her study on *Ukuthwasa* and western psychiatry, elaborates on the western psychiatric view in which she states that illness is perceived in physical and psychological terms, but does not accept spiritual interpretation in diagnosis (Booi, 2004). In Pillay and Ngcobo's (2008) study on depression in African women in South Africa, research shows that many African women's psychological distress manifests in psychosomatic and conversion disorders. These physical symptoms manifest deeper psychological, and as Booi argues, spiritual afflictions (Booi, 2004).

Shamans (traditional healers and diviners) 'have been labelled by westerners as hysteric, neurotic, epileptic and schizophrenic' (Booi, 2004:1). In my field research, I conducted interviews with three South African female shamans of various ethnic and social backgrounds, who have experienced or are in the process of experiencing the illness of *ukuthwasa* (Appendices 2 & 3). In two of these interviewees, the diagnosis of epilepsy occurred

Always I thought it was epilepsy or mental illness... I thwassaed 1968, I was 13 years, ja 13. 1968 I started to Thwasa. Isizulu. I couldn't walk, I couldn't sit. I was very sick, I never dreamt of

anything or ancestors, I was catholic. I was going to church where there's lots of people and I got fits, epilepsy. So I ended up not going to church. They took me to the sangomas but I never dreamt of anything. So after. My parents didn't know what was happening (Appendix 3).

When I was growing up, I was funny, not quiet, but *belililolo*. I was *olilolo*, a loner you know, ja. And just remember, *dikulelu umntwana okulayo*, from an early age I was sick, I had epilepsy. So, everyday, it was everyday thing, I would faint and start doing fits, and people thought, maybe I would be mentally disturbed. My parents put me on medication and it didn't help, they took me to sangoma and it didn't help, they don't know what happened but I am better now (Appendix 2).

In both instances, epilepsy and fits were experienced as children, but in both cases, these fits eventually stopped through a number of processes that came back to the necessity of either training to become a Sangoma or *Igqira*, or addressing the creative, spiritual and traditional impulses of belief.

Booi states the classical course of schizophrenia is one in which psychosis is suffered in the form of delusion and hallucination, with no recourse to understanding the pathological nature of these delusions (Booi, 2004). Schizophrenia thus subjects the sufferer to processes of recurring exacerbation and remission (Booi, 2004).

People with *ukuthwasa* are given diagnoses of somatoform, affective, anxiety or psychotic disorders. Psychosis is generally believed to be a biological illness and is understood to be caused by a disturbance in the chemicals within the brain (Booi, 2004:7).

The difficulty is deciphering and diagnosing between the chronically ill state of schizophrenia, and the shaman in the process of spiritual emergence(y) (Booi, 2004). To suffer severe sickness, as Booi states, is the most basic aspect of shamanic experience and has been recorded as a process of cleansing that

opens the 'gateway to life' (Booi 2004:1). In this dichotomy, illness becomes a process of self-evolution, development and realisation. Sickness is a necessary path to the realisation of a healthy, integrated and functioning self in community (Koss-Chioino, 1992).

Some of the factors contributing to the process of healing in traditional South African shamanic initiations are divining with bones, communicating with ancestral spirits, trance, power animal relationships, ritual ceremonies and community events, dreams, visions, voices and intuitions (Booi, 2004). Working with, developing and applying these skills assists the individual shaman in their path to healing on all levels (Booi, 2004). The main difference, as Booi states, between the chronic schizophrenic and the shaman, is an ability to serve and heal their community (Booi 2004:2). The process of *Igqira* training is also known to have therapeutic effects and to relieve physical and emotional symptoms (Booi, 2004). This is largely due to the sense of connection and community support that surrounds the processes of becoming a healer (Booi, 2004). Connections to plants and animals as well as understanding deep mysteries as guarded, protected and guided by the ancestors gives a sense of security and hope, meaning and safety to life (Booi, 2004).

A leader in the meeting points between anthropology, neuroscience, spirituality and psychiatry, Professor Joan Koss-Chioino looks specifically at the psychiatric and anthropological links between societal conditioning, power relations and the social structure of dichotomies, especially in the healing practices of traditional spirit healers (Koss-Chioino & Hefner, 2006). Such healers, called *Espiritista* in her home territory of Puerto Rico, show many similarities to the Southern African *Igqira*. Central to the practice of the *Espiritista* is the belief that one's evolution is aided by the guidance of spirits, or *Guias* (protectors) (Koss-Chioino, 1992). The *Espiritista* develops her abilities to communicate with these spirit guides who are called upon through prayer and ritual (Koss-Chioino, 1992). This gift is used primarily for self and community healing through divine communication. It is also a relationship-orientated process (Koss-Chioino, 1992). The *Espiritista* does not have the

power to directly heal the person, she puts patients in touch with their own abilities to heal and communicate with the higher levels of self and spirit (Koss-Chioino, 1992). While they believe this to be a gift all human beings have in common, the medium needs to actively develop these abilities in order to be an *Espiritista* (Koss-Chioino, 1992).

From a traditional South African perspective, *ukuthwasa* in its illness form is a means for the ancestors to communicate with the community and the sufferer/initiate, in order to make them aware of the life course that the ancestors wish to prescribe to them (Booi, 2004). Illness in the Xhosa perspective is 'coloured by culture and people understand their illness in terms of culture' (Booi 2004:72). The shaman suffers certain signs of *ukuthwasa*, which include hallucinations, visions, auditory hallucinations and social isolation, but these also become positive attributes in communicating between the worlds as the spiritual aspirant or shaman evolves (Booi, 2004).

The cause of illness and subsequent actions associated with that illness come from an external force that gives cultural and traditional meaning to the experience of illness and relevant historical and social links to the community and family of the sufferer (Booi, 2004). The solution to illness thus becomes a process of surrender to the will of the ancestors and to the path that the ancestors chose for those granted *intwaso*, a calling (Booi, 2004). Often during the process, the surrender of the self is paramount in order for the ancestral spirit to speak clearly through the initiate (Booi, 2004). The connection to one's ancestors offers a deep sense of self, belonging, otherworldly and personal community and tradition (Booi, 2004).

You are singing and you think that it is you who are singing, actually it's not you, its them working through you and that is why when you are singing everyone feels like crying and touched, 'it's because it is not you' she told me and I'm like 'ja, I am an artist'. She said, 'ja, they are watching you and they are with you all the time you are performing on stage, because it is not you, it is them (Appendix 2).

An exclusively traditional Xhosa diagnosis presupposes that all experiences – external, environmental and internal (and I would add to this actions and intentions) – become the will of the ancestors (Booi, 2004). In this model, there is little room for an engagement with personal autonomy, history and choice. There is also sometimes a lack of insight into the processes of trauma and stress that affect the emotional and psychological development of the individual.<sup>9</sup> However, while the traditional belief viewpoint insists on the power of the ancestors and the mysteries of the paranormal, traditional western psychiatry completely omits the concept of spiritual transformation and traditional phenomenology from diagnostic explanation (Booi, 2004).

The process of clinical diagnosis and treatment, which Booi ironically calls the 'psychiatric ceremony' (Booi 2004:9), does not however pay attention to the mitigating factors involved in cultural, spiritual and personal inner experience involved in the processes of psychosis. Returning to Pillay and Ngcobo's conclusions in their study on African women and depression in South Africa in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we need to understand that depression and its western medicalization is a socially constructed phenomenon (Ngcobo & Pillay, 2008).

South African mental health care practitioners use the DSM-IV-R system (the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* published by the American Psychiatric Association) to provide a common language of definition to classify and diagnose mental disorders (Ngcobo & Pillay, 2008). The manual, first printed in 1952, has undergone five revisions to this date, and although it is widely used, there are many contentions and concerns around the validity and reliability, especially in an African and gender context (Ngcobo & Pillay, 2008). This particular system evaluates the individual based on five axes: clinical syndromes and conditions requiring clinical attention, personality

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<sup>9</sup> As Booi suggests, the insistence of suffering until training is fulfilled does spurn a sense of guilt and fear for the sufferer to fulfil these traditional duties (Booi, 2004). Often this causes much stress and distress itself as the training and initiate courses as well as ceremonies and sacrifices are costly, often in the region of tens of thousands of rands.

disorders, general medical conditions, psychosocial and environmental problems, and global assessment of functioning (Ngcobo & Pillay, 2008).

The predominant use of the DSM as the primary diagnostic guide, and the public privileging of western healing modalities over traditional ones in urban areas, further expounds the whitewashing of cultural difference and understanding in contemporary South African women's mental health (Ngcobo & Pillay, 2008). The prevalence of psychosomatic pain and the primary misdiagnosis of depression in African women highlights yet again the need for deeper cultural and linguistic understandings of illness (Ngcobo & Pillay, 2008). Perceptions of psychiatry and the destructive stigmas surrounding mental illness can account for many patients' prejudice against the psychiatric system, and presenting physical symptoms rather than psychological ones. (Ngcobo and Pillay, 2008).

The constantly evolving nature of women's psychology means that psychiatry needs to adapt as well to these changes. The changes should also transfer into treatment procedures and approaches (Ngcobo & Pillay, 2008). According to Ngcobo and Pillay, attention needs to be paid to creating sensitivity to accommodate trans-health seeking practices,

In a more discerning manner about the provision of treatments and intervention, giving more thought to the understanding and integration of socio-cultural factors (Ngcobo & Pillay, 2008:137).

Booi's explanation of transpersonal psychology as a potential go-between that bridges the gaps between traditional belief and psychiatry provides a research corridor into the experiences of personal emergence(y) in psychoanalytic discourse (Booi, 2004). The transpersonal perspective, which brings into consideration the self-transcendent and spiritual aspects of human experience, 'is a bridging perspective in that it is sympathetic with the traditional Xhosa beliefs but incorporates psychodynamic views as well' (Booi, 2004:75).

The *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* states that this relatively unconventional mode of psychology

Is concerned with the study of humanity's highest potential, and with the recognition, understanding, and realization of unitive, spiritual, and transcendent states of consciousness" (Lajoie and Shapiro, 1992:91).

Issues considered in transpersonal psychology include spiritual self-development, peak experiences, mystical experiences, systemic trance and other occult experiences of living (Rowan, 1993).

The sympathetic acknowledgment of culture is also verified by evidence before diagnosis can be clearly established. Transpersonal psychology accepts the process of shamanic illness and spiritual crisis as a process to healing (Booi, 2004 & Rowan, 1993). Carl Jung, considered one of the most important and influential transpersonal psychologists, has insisted on the interplay between the conscious and unconscious processes of self development and destruction (Rowan, 1993). The Xhosa belief that the ancestral spirits are tormenting the individual would be accepted by transpersonal psychology as a

profound emotional and psychosomatic crisis... They would also agree to the Xhosa belief that these crises can lead to healing and can have positive outcomes such as psychosomatic healing and deep positive changes in personality (Booi, 2004:65).

Transpersonalists see spirits not as separate entities but as representing parts of the self (Booi, 2004). Shamans who come into contact with 'beings' during states of altered and non-ordinary consciousness such as trance, communicate with these manifestations as spirit guides, protectors and teachers (Booi, 2004 and Koss-Chioino, 1992). Thus, transpersonalists accept claims of clairvoyance through a consideration of the ancestors as a broader manifestation of internal archetypes (Rowan, 1993). It is the individual's inner spiritual forces as well as their personal experiences of pain, crisis and trauma in life that prompts the process to self-healing and understanding (Booi, 2004).

Returning to the history of Nonhetha Nkwenkwe, the 'symptoms' of her prophetic surfacing and emergence(y) could be considered to have

exacerbated the state's intervention, providing an excuse for her ultimate hospitalisation under western psychiatry on the grounds of mental insanity and schizophrenia. Edgar and Sapire state that it was because of Nonthetha's gender that she was admitted to a psychiatric institution rather than arrested and taken to the brutal state jails for political resistance (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). They suggest that in many ways Nonthetha's story vindicates the state's use of psychiatry as a control mechanism for oppressive detention in the 'continuum of disciplinary and custodial institutions', such as prisons, migrant labor compounds and reformatories (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:xi). The devotion of Nonthetha's followers, or *Mtetes*, is seen throughout her journey from rural worship to the horrific conditions in the Eastern Cape asylum, to the Pretoria State Asylum (Bennett, 2007). Nonthetha's story is revelatory of questions of women's oppression, defiance, transformation and empowerment in the relationship between state resistance and 'religious madness' as Nonthetha was 'indeed leading a chorus of protest against dominant elite consciousness' (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:xiii).

If, as many feminists would argue, gender and sexuality are locked in a perilous battle with the patriarchal symbolic and phallic regime of coherence (Irigaray, 1985), then women's emergence(y) would seem to present a crisis, not only of self-identity, but patriarchal identity. Locating Nonthetha's emergenc(ies) in relation to sexual transformation through representation, requires a re-evaluation of polarity in the expression of syncretic and heterogeneous feminine experiences. As will be explored, spirituality and sexuality in this re-configuration are deeply interwoven with the empowerment of representations of the feminine, as we seek new semiotic insights into re-conceptualising the pathology of binaric dysfunction in white patriarchal society. In seeking an entry point to representational strategy of Nonthetha's experiences, emergence(y) presents the multiplicity of those aspects of experience that intersect positionalities of threshold, liminality and transition in relation to politics of power and domination.

In light of a Feminine Semiotic, the experience of emergence(y) presents a base for understanding the potential empowering transformations of complex

identity through crisis rather than the pathological presentation of feminine disease.



Fig.2. In June 2010, I conducted field research at the grave of Nonthetha in Khulile. Secretary of the church of the prophetess Nonthetha, Eric Tole, stands by her memorial grave.



Fig. 3. The Fort Beaufort Tower Hospital where Nonhetha was first incarcerated, now stands abandoned and empty.

## Chapter Two

### In the Waiting Room of the Post Colony



University of Cape Town

## Defining a Feminine Semiotics in Contemporary Women's Performance

The Feminine Semiotic is a key explorative vehicle of the syncretism of South African women's performance through the practice of puppetry and visual performance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Feminine Semiotic embraces feminist cultural theory, specifically materialist and radical feminisms exploring how intersecting theory might feed interdisciplinary puppetry and visual performance. In order to imagine embodied knowledge strategies for feminine performance in South Africa today the terminology of the Feminine Semiotic is developed from various feminist cultural and performance critique sources.

The transgressive body of the *female imaginary* proposed by radical feminist theorists Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray offers entry points to imagining a more radical immersion in a feminine libidinous landscape. Julia Kristeva's notion of the semiotic as that, which disrupts the order of the masculine symbolic, presents radical feminist pathways for the assertion of women's sexual and spiritual emergence (y) expressed through embodiment. Performance scholars Geraldine Harris and Elaine Aston's 'embodied knowledge' in performance also enters the processes of creating a Feminine Semiotic as a paradigm for artistic and theoretical knowing in theatre making. The converging materialist/radical underpinnings of Sue Ellen Case's *new poetics* (1998) offer a way to integrate diverging critical concerns within the field of feminist performance as it aligns to the representation of race, gender and sexuality in South African women's identity. It is my aligning of these concepts, as the Feminine Semiotic, which has guided my understanding of the performative research at play in **Plot 99**.

I return to the terrain of radical feminist critique that has guided approaches to women's representation in performance studies in the past thirty years. French poststructuralists such as Cixous and Irigaray argue the deeply problematic feminine subject position in which feminine sexuality is rendered incomplete by patriarchal language, meaning and representation. Feminine sexuality, they argue, is experienced as both a psychic and physical phenomenon that facilitates a link between the sublime and the body (Cixous, 1975 and Irigaray,

1985). In this light feminine sexuality is much more than Freud's failed masculinity or a Lacanian process of denial and opposition insisted on through binaric lack (Mitchell, 1984). Feminine sexuality is located in the *jouissance* of the feminine body as expressed by a *female imaginary* (Cixous, 1975 and Irigaray, 1985).

'The vital feminist task is to explore and valorize women's difference from men in order to go beyond the oppressive confines of phallogentric culture' (Elliot, 1992:213). The sexual female body, for Cixous and Irigaray, in their various diverging and converging theoretical pathways, is the locus of both a desire and pleasure that stems from a genuinely feminine subject position:

Woman has the capacity to deappropriate unselfishly, body without end, without appendage, without principal parts... Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide (Cixous, 1975:259).

The central problem is defining women's sexuality in language or the masculine symbolic. The dilemma is a gaping discrepancy between what Irigaray expresses as the libidinous multiplicity and pervasive unconsciousness of feminine desire, and the monosexuality of patriarchal normative rationality (Cixous, 1975 and Irigaray, 1985). Patriarchy, resident in phallogentric language, exerts a violent and suppressive control over the potentially expressive and multiplicitous sexuality of women, 'casting her outside of the symbolic, representation and language' (Elliot, 1992:214). If language and the terminologies of subjecthood are prescribed by masculine language and western philosophical tradition, then what is the language of the sacred feminine, of her cosmic libido and subjective sexuality? The contention that male-dominated philosophical categories are inseparable from binary oppositions, fixes language in those masculinities of language and construction (Elliot, 1992:216). *Binaric difference*, between men and women, becomes a fixed point of unquestionable linguistic and signifiatory closure and stability that foregrounds language and the symbolic.

Both Cixous and Irigaray insist that in order to begin to create a non-sexist and non-oppressive society we need to situate transformation in both the

symbolic/philosophical as well as the psychic/sexual. They posit the body as a site of truly feminine specificity in which the female imaginary, the alternative female unconscious and the feminine libidinal psyche can destabilize and challenge the phallogentric. For both Cixous and Irigaray the feminine imaginary exists in the body *before language* and the patriarchal symbolic, and is thus a site of radical subversion. It also forms an alternative symbolic order that Irigaray terms 'woman speak' (Elliot, 1992: 217) – writing from the feminine body in which the sexualized body becomes the locus of emancipation from the masculine (Irigaray, 1985).

The fundamentalism of a concept of 'woman', however, is one that haunts the feminist movement with exclusionism on multiple levels. Criticism of their idealism concerns the universalizing essentialism and biological determinism inherent in these assertions of a universal femininity and language. Elliott questions whether 'some form of essentialism is necessary to affirm the specificity of female subjectivity or whether it is ultimately reactionary' (1992:217). Margaret Whitford, however, argues that Cixous and Irigaray's ideas do not deny the complexities of the symbolic field and its myriad mechanisms of dominance and opposition, but rather re-imagine, re-configure and de-construct the symbolic status of women (1991). The female imaginary and sexuality becomes a psychically and analytically distinct category in itself that presupposes femininity as a preexistent foundation for the feminine.

Yet, in order to avoid the pitfalls of reductionism, we cannot assume a feminine biologism and essence that pre-exists patriarchy and which is prevented expression in male-dominated culture. To essentialise the female imaginary cannot be, as Irigaray claims, the only vehicle for radical change of the symbolic order. Can a radical feminized change of the symbolic order only happen at the eradication and denouncement of the masculine? Reactionary essentialism, I would argue, is a desperate scramble for balance on both sides of the gender chasm. Positing the feminine as a new symbolic order and language operates to bring about an equalizing of exchange, a search for parity, even an overbalancing of patriarchy's imbalances. Yet, as much as performance art privileges resistance as its *modus operandi*, feminine

essentialism creates another safe paradigm for representation and knowledge, privileging another group of adherents and dominant ideas.

Theresa De Lauretis examines the structuralist concepts of systems and signs that dominate social symbolic exchange and that rule our participation in everyday life. She argues that these concepts do little to dismantle systems of bourgeois patriarchal oppression and power, or even to consider that the feminine is at once constructed within hegemonic discourses whilst operating as her own historical subject. For De Lauretis, semiotics is influenced by both subject-effective and culturally shared codes. She considers women's subjectivity in the process of semiosis and receptivity, and looks not only at the semiotics of language but of visual image making, corporeality and nonverbal practices. She regards feminism's reading of language and meaning in the everyday personal life of women as indicative of how social values and symbolic systems are 'mapped into subjectivity' through the very codes (of meaning, language, cinema, writing, performance) that make representation possible (De Lauretis, 1984:4).

French theorist Julia Kristeva has further advanced a feminist position on feminine sexual signification by re-interpreting the word 'semiotic' into a Post-Lacanian theoretical approach to analysing the construction of sexuality and division. This re-reading of the term provides a feminist distinction between what Kristeva interprets as the *semiotic* and the *symbolic* and the resultant signification composed of these two binaric elements. Kelly Oliver describes the semiotic element of Kristeva's theory as the interpretation of libidinal bodily drives associated with the rhythms, tones, and kinetics of signifying practices. It is a 'discharge of drives' (Oliver, 1998:2) linked to the maternal body which create her semiotics as a destabilising feminised element of representation. The symbolic aspect of signification for Kristeva is linked to the grammar, rigidity, and structure of reference and language. For Kristeva, the imaginary/semiotic can never be clearly separated from the symbolic/thetic, but always operates to destabilize the process of subjectification. The stasis of structuralist approaches to cultural production, poses a problem for Kristeva whose theories of subjectivity look towards the potential heterogeneity of

subjective experience rather than the fixity of homogeneity in language and consciousness (Moi, 1985:166).

A proposal for a Feminine Semiotics then, it would seem, requires a reading of cultural signification that embraces this potential heterogeneity as described by Kristeva and De Lauretis. The plurality of 'subject' destabilises the inherent homogeneity of the symbolic. Visual performance in its own right facilitates meeting points of diverse elements, the purpose of which may or may not be to intentionally render sutures in dominant discourse, but which through their very intersections express the complexity of visuality today.

Cixous calls for contiguity in the feminine form, 'working the in-between...it can be elliptical rather than illustrative, fragmentary rather than whole, ambiguous rather than clear, and interrupted rather than complete' (Case, 1998:147). Performance scholar Sue Ellen Case has also asked what can be gained at the intersections of these differences, where do practitioners and theorists gain from both sides of materialist and radical perspectives. Case proposes what she terms a 'new poetics' aimed at dismantling institutions and inciting Cultural Revolution, 'a blend of activism and theoretical practice' (147).

In 2008, Geraldine Harris and Elaine Aston explored the relevance of what the term *embodied knowledge* (as borrowed from Bill Nichols) as a key to understanding the position and importance of women's knowing in performance today. It emphasizes the importance of the experiential, physical and material as well as acknowledging the abstract discursive and intellectual within women's performance. Embodied knowledge heralds but does not privilege the experiential and the physical but acknowledges that

There is no speaking, writing, or doing that is not based in some sort of theory of the world and who we are within it...'embodied knowledge' accepts the impossibility of entirely separating out the embodied from the abstract, the discursive and the intellectual. Yet, this does not mean that they are reducible to the same (Aston & Harris, 2008: 9).

This focus on embodied knowledge asks not that we put aside critical enquiry but that we seek the ways in which performance is able to *know* differently. Embodiment allows knowledge to be realised in both body and mind, exploring both time and space to 'think beyond the versions of what we already know, or what we have already learned to look for' in critical thinking (Aston & Harris, 2008:10). The performance process often requires that practitioners look beyond what they would previously have deemed essentialist. Aston and Harris consider the rejection of notions of being and presence in deconstructive critique as terms that denote essentialism. Yet, they point out in practice it has a much more complex referential relationship to sentience and heightened awareness that is specifically located in a specific time and space. Harris insists that the moment of performance is not only different to the theory but in excess of it. In the moment, performance artists 'were able to go beyond the theories towards realising the implications of and possibilities for imagining and doing otherwise, in ways that theory can only signal' (Aston & Harris, 2008:14).

In an exploration of emergent identity in South Africa in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, cultural theorist Sarah Nuttall suggests that we look towards the reproduction of separatist critical thinking, specifically in postcolonial theory (Nuttall, 2010). She laments the inefficacy of critique to deal with emergent cultural theories and identities today (Nuttall, 2010). Theories of difference, stemming from a specifically postcolonial and patriarchal western obsession with difference, limit critical thinking on contemporary emergences of South African identity, sexuality and artistic practice. However, how do we imagine the future of our own identity, theory and analysis from within South Africa (Nuttall, 2010)? How do we desegregate critical thinking and artistic practice today to understand the interstructural aspects of South African identity at play in the present (Nuttall, 2010)? The cross-referential, cross-gender, cross-racial and cross-disciplinary agency of South African identity today requires more in-depth complexity, what Nuttall calls a 'thinking across from the inside' (Nuttall, 2010).

The question of this paper then turns our gaze to the performative, or more specifically, how do we perform (bodies, identities, experiences, theories,

memories, abstractions, emotions) *across* the surfaces of meaning from the *inside*?

Nuttall further complicates her questions by considering our cultural criticism conventions (Nuttall, 2011). She examines the approach to analysis as a 'suspicious reading' used to understand the complexity of signification (Nuttall, 2011). However, she questions the service of such a symptomatic, detective-style hermeneutical reading approach to cultural production (Nuttall, 2011). For in this next decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, who is the giver and receiver of these complex cultural significations and how is meaning re-interpreted today (Nuttall, 2011)? She acknowledges an exhaustion with Marxian and psychoanalytic literary criticism, those theories seeking to demystify the ideological imperative and truth of the symbolic (Nuttall, 2011). She states that they no longer serve to respond to the wider culture of today, the political edge of contemporary experience that hungers for a reality-driven experience (Nuttall, 2011). In the reality-driven experience, the direct experience, meaning is received and interpreted at the same time (Nuttall, 2011). We do not need to look for hidden meanings because the political, social and cultural content bubbles to the hyper-surface of the media, Internet saturated present (Nuttall, 2011). Nuttall quotes Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus:

Those of us who cut our intellectual teeth on deconstruction, ideological critique and the hermeneutics of suspicion have often found those demystifying protocols superfluous in an era when images of torture... were immediately circulated on the internet; the real time coverage of hurricane Katrina showed in ways that required little explication of the state's abandonment of its African American citizens; and many people instantly recognised as lies political statements such as mission accomplished (Nuttall, 2011:1).

The meaning of the visual for Nuttall, then, is both on the surface as well as in the pre-con-inter-sub-text (Nuttall, 2011). Nuttall makes a case for the emerging significance of *surface* in cultural production today (Nuttall, 2011). The 'potency', as she calls it, of the interface, the screen, the skin, the surface

of the present, calls for yet another re-working of our concept of the semiotic and its contemporary interpretation (Nuttall, 2011). Culture has shifted, she declares, and critical textual detective work is no longer so convincing in a century that is redefining the surfaces of cultural meaning (Nuttall, 2011).

Critical suspicion is a 'curiously non-emotional emotion, an asocial emotion synonymous with professional culture which values detachment' (Nuttall, 2011:2). Nuttall looks back to Susan Sontag's assertion in the 1960's to 'show a work for what it is, even that it is, rather than... show what it means' (Nuttall, 2011:2). According to Nuttall, this brave and prophetic statement is re-iterated by writers today such as Marcus who call for the value of just reading, without a rigid focus on ideological demystification (Nuttall, 2011). Nuttall explains that this is not to take up an anti-theory position, as theory is a valuable illuminating process, but to look again at the pleasure of the text, the pleasure of the skin of things (Nuttall, 2011).

If we are already exposed and detached by the viscosity of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, how do we reconnect with the vulnerability of humanism that criticism hardens? Liminality, a term bandied flexibly about in performance theory, describes experiences of being on or in the 'threshold' (Crosby, 2009). This concept of threshold relates to an in-between of conscious and of unconsciousness, as defined in ritual experiences by anthropologists. It is perhaps in the liminal area of the surface skin, which is porous, which exudes our humanness, the state of things beneath and upon that can be ruptured and sutured, that potential for new cultural and representational emergence (y) exists. This requires a new direction from the rigid analysis of cultural signification to the surface that renders visible multiplexity in its myriad canvases. Nuttall proclaims

I wish that we would more often read down – for the past, the allegorical, the metaphoric, the symptom, apartheid – but also across – the horizontal, the surface, the new – the place where paradoxically the fugitive meanings of the now might reside... The surface becomes suggestive of somewhere else in South Africa (Nuttall, 2011:2).

It is this crossroad, or betweenness of theory and experience, surface and underground, internal and external, semiotic and critical in South African representation that guides the next theoretical stance. In the liminality of processes, binaries and identities is a revelation that emerges into the hypertext of the present. The surface now is inscribed in meaning and matter both above and below the skin of the present. It is in this liminal space of the threshold that potential for a semiotic representation of women's sexual and spiritual emergence(y) arises.

### **Liminality, the Sacred and Embodied Knowledge in Women's Performance**

The notion of 'embodied knowledge' as a practice and process of women's performance frames how I relate the Feminine Semiotic to the broader field of women's performance studies. If the Feminine Semiotic seeks out the syncretic and alchemical meeting points of difference, then it is in the moments of embodiment that these intersections are most amplified. Being in the moment of performance is very different to critical enquiry, which either exists before or after the moment (Aston & Harris 2008). It is this excess that also makes the process of embodied knowledge so difficult to document and capture outside of the present moment. As Harris insists, it makes it even more necessary to facilitate dialogue between practice process and critical thought, allowing each their own time, space and languages. The Feminine Semiotic in performative representation expresses the syncretic as that which defies and defines epistemologies in the complex production of embodied knowledges. The intersections of embodied and critical surfaces express not only theoretical excess crucial to women's performance theorization and practice, but also the liminal and inappropriate other that provides representation for narratives of complex women's experience.

The question I would like to explore is whether visual performance can offer an artistic strategy for representation of a new Feminine Semiotics that destabilizes oppressive symbolism. The problematics of Kristeva's guidelines

for the Feminine Semiotic lead us to the question of plurality in representation. Richard Schechner emphasizes that it is the intergeneric, interdisciplinary, intercultural ambiguity inherent in performance and its liminal dynamism that makes performance studies so unstable. If destabilisation exists naturally in the layered realms of visual performance practice itself, how can it be used to aid transformations in meaning that support innovative women's representation? If a revisioning of representation requires us to perform plurality, how do we negotiate the experience of states of binary as well as hybridity? If discourses of sexuality demand a radical renegotiation of the borders of containment and patriarchal ideologies, can visual performance provide the aesthetic paradigm shift to feminine representation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

In the field of visual performance, I would argue that the very elements intrinsic to the multidisciplinary nature of the art form facilitate a slippage of meaning and aesthetic that embodies a Feminine Semiotic. The difficulty in production that facilitates slippage, however, is by its very definition the uncontrollable and unpredictable in performance. The random nature of chaos comes into play, requiring dissolution whilst facilitating various points of distillation and manifestation. Visual performance presents a surface for signification where multiple meanings may arise, meanings that both complicate and support binaries as well as hybridities.

The fundamentalism of separation in binaric signification can be argued to both support as well as destabilize the processes of knowledge and privilege in patriarchal systems. Separation operates on both destructive and constructive levels. It constructs the stabilizing promise of life, body, mind, self and subjectivity (protected by the masculine and desired/lacking in the feminine) and insists itself into the processes of lived experience. However, ironically separation also insists on our own fragility, the closeness of borders between self and non-self, between body and psyche, between life and death.

An investigation and corrosion of established processes of knowing requires an intensive creative autopsy of both men and women's most basic paradigms

of binary. The binaries of life itself present an inherent crisis to the coherent subject as it tests our most basic instincts for self-preservation in the face of self and other, male and female, reality and non-reality. The mind of conditioning, paradigms and comprehension seeks visibility, repetition, boundary and cohesion. The condition of embodiment, of sexuality, spirituality and the lived experience of duality, however, brings even the most devout value systems of the mind into constant entropy. It is the transitional intersections of binary that illuminate the sacred, those aspects of liminality and change that foreground sexual and embodied experience and desire.

This concept of visibility and invisibility speaks particularly to identities that exist on the borders of the mainstream, of western patriarchal and racial discourse. The problematics of representing gender and race, of finding expression for that which homogenous discourse has rendered marginal, finds recourse in representation of the liminal. Liminal representation exposes, deconstructs and reconstructs marginality. The borders of hegemony, of social order as well as the body, as a microcosm of those ideologies, are challenged and transgressed with a view to exposing new statuses of being. The boundary as well as the transgression becomes visible.

Crosby draws links between a definition of the sacred, as she interprets van Gennepe's theorizing, and the discourse of performance art

“Women’s performance art has particular disruptive potential” (254) because it catapults “Woman” out of her structurally invisible and therefore liminal position as “the basis of the Western system of representation” (252) and positions her as a speaking subject (257) (Crosby, 2009:15).

Van Gennepe expresses his understanding of the sacred as a cyclical friction around transition within the realms of the social (Van Gennepe, 1960). Crosby considers this aim of instigating transitional friction through cycles to be enacted in performance art (Crosby, 2009). Performance art theorists, however, term it *resistance* rather than the sacred (Crosby 2009:15).

The difference between van Gennep's anthropological examples and performance art's manifestations is that rather than expressing the significant life stages, performance art has looked to the transgression of binaries, of hegemonic discourses around gender, postcolonialism, heterosexuality and normativity (Crosby, 2009). This 'performance can therefore be seen as an art form whose primary aim is to undo competencies' (Crosby, 2009:15). In Crosby's estimation, it is intrinsically concerned with expression of the sacred. She cites descriptions of feminist performance artists, Karen Finley and Orlan in particular, that she regards as linking their performance of embodiment and sexuality to the sacred (Crosby, 2009). Some of the most telling include the description of Finley as a performer with a calling, who performs with evangelical fervour, performing acts of ritual that invoke the sacred-profane elements of defilement and sacrament (Crosby, 2009).

Orlan titles her work with words such as *The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan*, indirectly addressing the sacramental, and exploding it with explorations of the profane (Auslander, 2003:56). The simultaneity of profanity with the sacred in the female body is held in feminist theories of abjection and the grotesque (Kristeva, 1982). Binarity tensions facilitate friction around the boundaries of the sacred and profane such as in the works of artists Hermann Nitsch and Marina Abramovic,

Whose actions refer directly to ritual, abound in words like "scapegoat," "exorcism," "cleansing" (Fischer-Lichte 237), "polluted," "healing" (243), "suffering bodies" (244), and "sacrificial victim" (248) (Crosby, 2009:16).

If we follow Crosby's arguments, then the value that a re-designation of the term sacred poses for performance studies is not institutionalization but a play of ambiguity and contractions that create new pathways for visibility and invisibility in performance (Crosby, 2009). She casts this in an ironic light considering how much of performance is invested in expressing the very complex logics and magico-spiritualisms of the anthropological concepts of the sacred (Crosby, 2009).

If liminoid performance deconstructs ritual through its re-interpretations, the pedagogical ideology is not only exposed but also subverted. Sacred and spiritual experiences, if they are placed in the terrain of transition, transformation and slippage, then sit at the heart of deconstruction, where bodies and ideologies intersect, to destroy and create each other. The sacred is therefore not outside of structure, but rather speaking to it from the inside, challenging as well as acknowledging the thresholds and intersections of binary.

### **The Alchemy of Syncretism in Representation**

After separation, drying out, moistening, dissolving, coagulating, fermenting, comes purification, recombination: the creation of substances the world until now has never beheld. This is the *opus contra naturam*, this is the spagyric art, this is the Alchemical Wedding (Mantel, 1989:79).

McKenzie talks of the valorization of liminal transgression where 'resistance itself becomes normative' (2001:50). Our perceptions as artists and theorists of what constitutes change and subversion needs to be radically rethought and re-expressed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Returning to Nuttall's interest in the *surfaces* of contemporary expression, the suspicious instincts of deconstruction and feminism to seek immediately forms of resistance may in its own interests make invisible the very complex and creative binaries that facilitate innovative friction (Nuttall, 2011). Binary facilitates creative elements for complex representation, which may emerge and evolve to facilitate performance practices today.

Christopher Balme (Balme, 1999) uses the term *syncretism*; a concept, which Marvin Carlson says, has a long history in religious studies that looks at the absorption of 'impure external elements into orthodox religious practice' (Carlson, 2008:138). This syncretic process of integration, absorption and melding, is described by David Coplan as 'the acculturative blending of

performance materials and practices from two or more cultural traditions, producing qualitatively new forms' (Coplan quoted in Balme, 1999:13-14).

James Clifford writes of an inventive syncretism that proclaims the ambiguous, multivocal world in performance through a nuanced network of pathways for representation:

With expanded communication and intercultural influence, people interpret others and themselves, in a bewildering diversity of idioms – a global condition of what Michael Bhaktin called 'heteroglossia'... makes it increasingly hard to conceive of human diversity as inscribed in bounded independent cultures (Clifford 1988:22).

It is at this point that I exchange the concept of inventive syncretism in performance with the term *alchemy*. Alchemy implies a bringing together of seemingly binaric elements and combining them to create a third element. This third element is not necessarily pre-determined, and in its surfacing may produce something of great and unexpected value to the researcher. Similarly, binaric distinction or difference is regarded as a simplistic, oppressive or base gesture of homogenous master narratives, creating a singular representation of difference in performance. As suspicious theorists and artists, we resist binaries in fear of supporting their ideological insidiousness. Yet, the elements of differences themselves hold great value and potential in light of their oppositionalities and convergences.

The alchemical-syncretic process presents a metaphor for a more complex methodology that accepts separation in order to combine and recombine in a search for the illusive gold of the unknown. The mystery of the 'third element' is central to the alchemical process. It is this process that I would like to re-align within my designation of a Feminine Semiotics through the alchemical strategies of the inappropriate other. The alchemical-syncretic process is an effective metaphor for a feminist approach to creative production and creative research through the concept of a 'third', that is that which arises out of binary, out of surface, in order to produce an unspecified and unpredictable element of

representation. That active explorations of binaries, which exist in the present moment, are brought into complex interplays that effect innovation, through both resistance and immersion. It is the point of creative discovery, the meeting point of creative collaboration in the intersecting moments of the surface, where binary may be used to effect a more complex representation of the feminine imaginary both inside and outside of language.

It necessarily implicates the meeting point of positionality, specifically reception, the unplanned-for correspondences that present new imaginings and the uncontrollable, spontaneous point of audience interaction through *receptivity* that is unique to live events and performance. These meeting points that herald unspecified outcomes pertain also to the scientific modes of research, of testing, of knowledge production and creation that holds at their core an element of discovery and mystery.

I would like to consider alchemy and the syncretic as a concept that embraces not only the liminoid slippage in the unpredictability between forms but also the potential of combination as a rendering of innovative representation through the inappropriate other. The metaphor of alchemy becomes significant, as it relates to the representation of syncretism in the sexualised body of the inappropriate other. Syncretism through alchemy then requires us to consider the following bases: 1) the complex relationship between the differentiated, the liminal and the binaric 2) the generation of the unknown third through the combining and recombining of separate elements, and 3) the sacred process as well as the manifestation of the Feminine Semiotic. This process allows the audience and artists to look again and redefine their own notions of simplistic division.

The question that then arises is what differentiates women's experience of the alchemical-syncretic and how do we propose to represent it? What is a representational strategy for the alchemical-syncretic that then facilitates a Feminine Semiotics through slippage in theoretical, creative and social surfaces? As a postcolonial and gender filmmaker and theorist, Trinh T. Minh-ha posits the theory of an 'inappropriate other' as a cultural and artistic

strategy for transformative approaches to feminine representation (Minh-ha, 1987). The moment the (artist) woman changes her position from insider to out, she stands in an ambiguous and complex space as neither subject nor other (Minh-ha, 1987). This position as an 'inappropriate other' both inhabits and confounds liminality. It illuminates difference while subversively straddling both the inside and the outside of coherent identities.

The moment the insider steps out from the inside, she is no longer just an insider. She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking from the inside out. Not quite the same, not quite the other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out (Minh-ha, 1987:3).

In this dynamic, the artist always has 'two gestures... that of affirming 'I am like you' while persisting in her difference...' (Minh-ha, 1987:3). I would like to re-invigorate the over-critiqued term difference with its liminal potential. In the body of the inappropriate other, definitions of clear-cut difference are destabilized and reinvented. The body expresses both separation and multiplicity. It is both defined and ill-defined, where boundaries become unstable and in the telling of her (the individual woman's) experience 'she knows she cannot speak of 'them' without speaking of herself, of history without involving her story' (Minh-ha, 1987:3).

Minh-ha calls for a renegotiation of difference, difference 'that is not opposed to sameness, nor synonymous with separateness' (Minh-ha, 1987:2). Perception of difference, in this paradigm, can operate as a mode of complex signifiers and contexts, where it does not give rise to conflict merely through separatism, where difference is 'beyond and alongside conflict' (Minh-ha, 1987:2).

Many of us still hold on to the concept of difference, not as a tool of creativity to question multiple forms of repression and dominance, but as a tool of segregation, to exert power on the basis of racial and sexual essences. The apartheid type of difference (Minh-ha, 1987:2).

Minh-ha insists that we cannot keep returning to this 'mutual enslavement' (Minh-ha, 1987:3). The theory of the inappropriate other raises important issues around transformative creativity, authorship and legitimacy in artistic production. The question is who has the right to tell whose stories? When looking at the complex terrain of South African identity and women's interstructural semiotic representation, how do artists negate the limitations that the simplistic and essentialist dividing lines of the insider/outsider dynamic places on the multiplicity of experience?

Minh-ha insists that we refuse the presumption that the insider can only speak with authority about their own culture (Minh-ha, 1987). Such presumptions of exclusive and legitimised knowledge imply that the outsider posits their self as the all-knowing subject of the outside environment, from which the insider is essentially excluded (Minh-ha, 1987). In this dynamic the oppressive hierarchies between 'us' and 'them', subject and object, self and other remain. This positioning denies the intersections of binary recourse to facilitate suture, rupture or new surfaces for meaning. Authorship in this dynamic is concerned with the power of validation and legitimacy that essentialist divisions such as stereotyping seem to insist upon (Minh-ha, 1987). Artists should consider the interdependency and cross-pollinations of experiences in the representation of South African female identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Nuttall, 2011).

As I interpret Minh-ha's designation, finding the inappropriate other in representation is not simply about blurring boundaries (translation models) or crossing them (resistance models) (Minh-ha, 1987). It facilitates intersecting meeting points that allow the possibility for new forms to emerge, without pre-determining them. In the body of the inappropriate other, the binaries of difference are both evident and challenged, in their intersections the boundaries of self are not only destabilized but also, most importantly, reinvented (Minh-ha, 1987). Difference can become empowerment (Minh-ha, 1987) as it recreates the individual through an alchemical and syncretic approach to representation.

The approach to representation in this instance displays how multiple levels of difference and experience can shift between the bodies of the individual and the collective in the artistic process. In this light, the inappropriate other as an alchemical representational strategy for a Feminine Semiotics might seem to walk a precarious line between separatist thinking through the use of binary (or stereotype) and the specificity of identity (resistance to stereotype). In order for the inappropriate other to provide a feasible strategy for innovation that is neither locked in stereotype nor its resistance, there needs to be an awareness of the tensions between the potentially essentialist generality of multiplicity (and multiculturalism) and the complexities of individuality. In the multiplicity of representation, identities of difference need to recreate, deconstruct and refract each other, rather than simply replicating or resisting traditional conventions. Representation through an inappropriate other in this light may lead to an alchemy of practice that is able to birth the new surfaces of women's performance, new surfaces of the female body and psyche in representation. Representation becomes a process of alchemy that requires that artists create 'a ground that belongs to no one... Otherness becomes empowerment, critical difference when it is not given, but re-created' (Minh-ha, 1987:3).



Fig. 4. Ntombi Gasa, performs in Resonance Bazar's *To be deprived on one's nature is a terrible loss*. Photograph by John Hoggs.

**Chapter Three**  
**Pathways to Puppetry**



## Visual Performance: Femininity, Liminality and Slippage

We are interstitial creatures and border citizens by nature — insiders/outsideers at the same time — and we rejoice in this paradoxical condition. In the act of crossing a border, we find temporary emancipation (Gómez-Peña, 2001).

Metaphors of liminality and threshold (if not the terminology as previously explored) abound in contemporary performance theory, manifesting in metaphors of slippage and transition (Schechner, 2002). It is also towards the surfaces of meaning that we seek new pathways for representation.

Director William Kentridge speaks of the artifice of puppetry, and asks:

What is it in us that can watch a carved piece of wood, see its manipulation, be aware of this the whole time and still be unable to stop seeing a transformation of the object (Kentridge, 2001:2).

This statement highlights the complex ambiguity of intimacy and alienation that puppetry brings to performance. It begins to elucidate the mechanisms of complex performance wherein the audience is simultaneously aware that what they are watching is a construct of the manipulator, but that the puppet exists for them in and because of construct (Kentridge, 2001). The subversive potential that puppetry represents for the female body, is its ability to transgress boundaries of subjectivity through the construct of the puppet itself in relation to the body. It is also the ability of puppetry to involve the audience in subtle ways, to contribute to its creation through their own suspension of disbelief, that makes the medium so effective.

Theorist Jane Taylor says:

Puppets can provide an extraordinary dimension to a theatrical project... because every gesture is, as it were, metaphorized. The puppet draws attention to its own artifice, and we as the audience willingly submit ourselves to the ambiguous processes

that at once deny and assert the reality of what we watch (Taylor, 1998:vii).

The puppet always exists through multiple levels of meaning and signification. These occur in the structure, form and symbolism of the object itself. The next is the puppeteer/puppet relationship and then the puppet/puppeteer/audience relationship. In many instances, more than one performer is required to operate a puppet, so the bodies speak to multiple points of reference operating in the singular subject. Through the body of the puppet, deliberate attention is brought to the constructs of the object/symbol/character/performer dynamic.

The use of puppetry and mask in *Plot 99* allows us to investigate these simultaneous levels of intimacy and alienation in performance and improvisation. Puppetry has the potential to simultaneously present and disrupt the body just as it disrupts static audience identification with the object/subject of performance. It troubles character as well as notions of the gaze of the audience, complicating their identifications through patriarchal notions of sexuality and gender as explored in Chapter Two. Its power emerges not only in this theoretical and political disruption of coherent reality, but in its creative offering of meanings of dismemberment and re-membering, uncanny and familiar construction and abstraction, the possibilities of artifice to co-exist with transformational sentient kinesiology. The Feminine Semiotic inhabits the concept and practice of puppetry, which celebrates corporeality both inside and outside of its objectification by both the audience and the narrative and artistic discourses within which it is created.

The performance practice of Puppetry exists to a large degree on the margins of mainstream awareness and engagement in South African performance, and as many theorists attest to, in global performance practice (Obraztsov, 1967). Puppetry itself is declared by European theatre historians and practitioners to be amongst the earliest types of spectacles in human history, perhaps even older than theatre itself (Obraztsov, 1967:17). Yet it is also one of the least documented and theorized areas of classical and contemporary performance.

Puppetry is also engaged in an epistemological battle with the stigmatisation of its practice as that which is for immature and amateur audiences and artists, European audiences and artists and not aligned to high art practices (Joubert, 2010). Jill Joubert sheds some light on the little recorded history of South African puppetry, since the 1970's (Joubert, 2010). She addresses two dominating presumptions about puppetry in South Africa (Joubert, 2010). The first assumption is that puppetry is an art class activity for children and that it is made with child audiences in mind and therefore is not afforded a place in fine art practice. The second assumption is that puppets are a European art form and not indigenous, or significant, to Africa (Joubert 2010:4). These assumptions may explicate the decided lack of theorization of the art form in South Africa and by default limit the postcolonial and feminist engagement with its significance to South African women's performance practice.

The dilemma of puppetry's acknowledgement in the mainstream of artistic practice, in many ways reflects feminism's fight for subjectivity in cultural production. How can South African female puppetry artists even begin to claim new voices of innovation, when their role in the history of this historically marginalised art form has barely been articulated?

Puppetry's status as an underdog to the acknowledged practices of performance and fine art, posits it on the thresholds of categorisation and legitimisation. If puppetry is neither performance nor sculpture, neither high art nor popular, neither purely visual nor purely performative, it exists in a state of collaboration, hybridity and liminality. This multiplicity also places it in a shared position of marginality to dominant discourse, as an inappropriate other of the performance and art worlds. It is this liminal and inappropriate identity of puppetry that I would argue offers potential to an expression of a Feminine Semiotic.

The beauty of puppetry lies in its not being anything like real life: it is an art form of artistry and artifice – it transcends, exaggerates and subverts in order to enhance, debase, ridicule, satirise, poeticise reality. The modernist artists... Lorca, Craig,

Maeterlinck, Falla, Klee, the futurists, the Bauhaus et al. understood the principle (Francis, 2007:5).

Penny Francis looks at the irony of the neglect of the art form of puppetry by performance theorists, especially when considering its highly complex integration into discourses of artistry and artifice (Francis, 2007). This discursive potential of puppetry, she states, was one acknowledged by early nineteenth century modernist artists, sculptors, painters, writers and composers, and yet was not fully understood by puppeteers themselves (Francis, 2007). Francis attributes the contemporary acceptance of the plastic arts as the core of puppetry practice, due to the influence of modernist art and principles, even the inclusion of puppetry in the work of the Bauhaus and Reinhardt (Francis, 2007). She regards this *sine qua non* of puppet theatre practice with fine art as a partnership that heralded the text of visuality, sound, image and stylisation as more imperative in the art form than text and dramaturgy (Francis, 2007). She even goes so far as to state that most of the great puppeteers of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century were trained as sculptors, painters and designers, including Stephen Mottram, Gavin Glover and Liz Walker, Lydia and John Wright, Luis Boy, Gavin Skerritt, Tanya Landman and Peter O'Rourke (Francis, 2007).

Harry Siegel talks of contemporary styles of European puppetry practice that reflect on the diversity of the forms, in contrast to traditional European marionette styles (Siegel, 1967). Siegel lists diverse styles of puppet manipulation such as having the operator appearing in full view with his puppet (Obraztsov) or marionette (Genty/Roser), mixing mime and mask traditions, the playing of hands only (Yvesjoly, Kovacz, Mensching), Czech black theatre, Polish masked and unmasked performances, rod, glove and string puppets (Guignol, Zwyrstrala, Pastoralka) (Siegel, 1967).

Theorists attest to cross-pollination and exchange as the key to puppetry's complexity (Obraztsov, 1967). Joubert looks at the foregrounding work of Lily Herzberg, who was Artistic Director of the Puppet-Space, a professional puppetry company that was part of the anti-apartheid and non-racial

environment of the historical Space Theatre in Cape Town (Joubert, 2010). Herzberg, who had been working in puppetry since the 1950's, established the South African branch of the Union internationale de la marionette (UNIMA) in 1975, thus incorporating South Africa into the world network of puppetry under the UNESCO Heritage Foundation (Joubert, 2010).

Herzberg's work in puppetry challenged traditional British colonial influence by introducing new generations of audiences and puppeteers to Asian and Eastern European styles of rod and shadow puppetry in order to perform African stories (Joubert, 2010). It was also in the innovative and experimental environment of the Space Theatre, under Herzberg's guidance, that the Handspring Puppet Company first began to play and develop their unique approach to South African contemporary puppetry (Joubert, 2010).

As a developing art form, South African puppetry has come to the fore in the global Visual Performance scene largely due to the work of the Handspring Puppet Company in collaboration with physical theatre director and fine artist, William Kentridge, since the early 1990's. Their contribution to South African puppetry, over the past thirty years, has been not only to develop an indigenous form of iconic South African multimedia performance rooted in a skilled puppetry design and performance, but also to put adult puppetry on the local map. Their experimentations in crossover disciplinarity with William Kentridge have set the standard for contemporary puppetry performance both locally and abroad. In the vaguely documented and defined puppetry traditions of South Africa, their work stands as the guiding canon of contemporary South African puppetry for adult audiences for the past twenty one years.

Considering the influence of the performing arts and fine arts landscape on contemporary adult puppetry and visual performance in South Africa, I think it is relevant to look at multidisciplinary practice as a foreground to the South African puppetry scene. A key to the revitalisation of puppetry and its import in contemporary performance, is its potential for interdisciplinarity. Today in South Africa, the term Puppetry is often loosely incorporated into the interstitial and interstructural category of *Visual Performance*. The genre offers an entry

point to contemporary performance and its many branches such as performance art, movement, theatre, multimedia, video, puppetry, stage design and visual art, amongst others. The genre of visual performance has also, in recent years, been termed as Total Theatre. A growing publication of performance in the UK proposes that the multidisciplinary landscape of contemporary theatre is indeed a Total Theatre.

We resist too narrow a definition of the term 'Total Theatre' but imagine artists and companies leading innovative work within devised theatre, live art, visual performance, mime, experimental theatre, clown, circus, street arts, mask, cabaret and new variety, site specific, dance-theatre, puppet-theatre... and more... (Total Theatre, 2012).

Past and recent works of South African artists who fall within the large category of visual performance attest to a growing body of material that touches briefly on traditional and experimental puppet modes. Often puppetry is adapted into once-off performances or used to enhance visual aspects of productions. The potential of puppetry in contemporary visual performance practice relates to its multifaceted, interdisciplinary approach to meaning and representation in both its semiotic and phenomenological potential and significance. Yet, despite the success and proliferation of visual performance, there remains only a tiny network of puppetry artists (either formally or informally trained) working professionally in contemporary adult puppetry in South Africa (Joubert, 2010).

As a leading South African arts critic since the 1980's, Adrienne Sichel pays testimony to the elusive term 'visual performance' (Sichel, 2007). Past and recent works of South African artists who fall within the large category of visual performance, attests to the developing body of multidisciplinary, visually-orientated material being produced in the last thirty years. Within that body of work we also see the rise of South African puppetry within traditional and experimental visual performance projects.

Sichel imagines visual performance within the context of the politically provocative work of South African artists whose artistry has grabbed attention both 'visually, conceptually and intellectually' for the past thirty years (Sichel, 2007:1). She acknowledges the role of collaboration in the production of visual performance since the early 1980's and the premise of collaboration as being a central point for thinking and creating the future of contemporary performance (Sichel, 2007). Collaboration between the artistic disciplines of sculpture, photography, dance, performance, fine art and drama, as well as the move into the technological multimedia of the digital age, has only 'upped the creative ante', she insists (Sichel, 2007:1).

Sichel says that in South African performance today, multimedia and multidiscipline cross-pollinations are far from unusual (Sichel, 2007). Her experience of the performance scene of the 1980's is where she locates the seeds of dissension and alternative performance, which were sown outside of the structure, genre and content of Protest Theatre (Sichel, 2007).<sup>10</sup> She states the work of such collaborative performance companies, such as the Possession Arts with John Nankin and Ivor Powell, 'making Dada-esque forays into performance art at The Market Theatre and elsewhere' over twenty years ago (Sichel, 2007:2). In 1983, the Laager at the Market Theatre hosted the work of

a highly aggressive, angry dancer called Robyn Orlin, back from studying at The Place London, who made her formal SA debut as a solo performer (with white human size soft sculptures by Karen Harber), in "One, So Many", which dabbled in racial and artistic identity (Sichel, 2007:1).

Another performance she recalls is the 'Boere Butoh' expressions of dance and vocal artist Tossie Van Tonder, invigorated by her exposure to the world of

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<sup>10</sup> 'As an amplifier of the struggle for liberation, South African protest theatre transported the voice of freedom fighters across the stages of townships and the world. It produced great names such as Gibson Kente and Mbongeni Ngema and trained a generation of talent; yet in its final phase, the fact that it had become synonymous with the liberation struggle raised questions about its lifespan once that battle was no longer' (Slachmuis, 1999:18).

1980's New York performance artist and musician Meredith Monk (Sichel, 2007). These artists blurred the traditional generic boundaries of performance and fine art and found their way onto various public platforms that would support their collaborative and multidisciplinary impetus, such as The FNB Dance Umbrella in Johannesburg.

In an interview with pioneering South African performance art theorist, Roselee Goldberg, artist Kathryn Smith spoke to her about the tentative relationship between performance and fine/visual art (Smith, 2006). Goldberg resists the terms of 'genre' in defining performance art and looks rather towards context.

Each has its own language and particular evolution. But then there are times when an artist crosses into a different milieu and takes from another discipline, or uses aspects of the other language to articulate their own experiments (Smith, 2006:31).

She uses the example of Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown who worked within both the art and dance worlds, as well as Steve Reich and Philip Glass who worked with avant-garde music and visual art (Smith, 2006). Such artists used the varying art contexts of the 1960's and 1970's to create 'their most experimental works' (Smith, 2006:31).

The reason I am asserting the link between visual performance as a genre that incorporates some of the major defining elements of performance art, is its links to experimentation and embodiment. Where performance artists may assert their own bodies as the core subject of their explorations, in visual performance every element (body, prop, space, architecture, object) is able to take on critical aspects of embodiment. Smith puts forward Goldberg's assertion that performance is central to the notion of the avant-garde – 'that it is at the core of some of the most radical, paradigm-shifting moments in modern art, corresponding with social or political upheaval or uncertainty' (Smith, 2006:31). Puppetry itself may exist in the very borders between embodiment, construct and ephemerality that characterize the problematics of liminality in performance art.

The elements widely reflected in performance art trends also vividly reflect on the multidisciplinary nature of the visual performance and contemporary puppetry fields. Gómez-Peña talks of the performance artist as one who is in exile from high art, visual art and genre, an artist who very rarely makes his objects for display in galleries or museums (Gómez-Peña, 2001). This statement might seem to ring as true for the practice of puppetry ostracized through the years by theatre and fine art circles (Francis, 2007).

Contemporary visual performance necessitates conceptualisation, theory and aesthetic to uphold its contradictions and paradoxes. As Gómez-Peña says, artists find themselves converging in the undefined terrain of performance art, as a sanctuary from monoculture and mono-artistic practice (Gómez-Peña, 2001).

In much the same way, the puppeteer-visual performance artist is never insider nor outsider, but ambiguous about genre and its appropriation. It is the sense of ambiguity in practice and meaning, that sends artists on a quest for inclusivity and collaboration, not only in aesthetic practice but also in thought, theory and concept (Gómez-Peña, 2001). This quest is both broad and specific. In challenging the borders of identity, culture, genre and classification, the aesthetic may, I believe, be liberated through the multidisciplinary intention of puppetry.

### **Puppetry, Liminality and the Possibility of Sentience Through Construct**

Puppetry speaks of the superhuman, the sub-human and the inner human. The mirror it holds up to us can expose our inhumanity, stab our conscience or agitate for change. It can also illustrate our spirituality and the poetry in our soul. Always, the animated figure carries within it the spirit of gods, devils, and magic and of other worlds. Animism lives! (Francis, 2007: 7).

Puppetry academic, Jill Joubert, writes that masks and figurines have been used throughout the African continent in as many diverse and myriad contexts

(Joubert, 2006). Masquerade, festival, ritual and community interaction has led to a liminal role of the objects within these societies. In a note on religious function in *An Introduction to African Art*, it states that

some figurines are guardians of ancestral bones while others are powerful partners to the diviner in maintaining law and order. Figurines are often covered with sacrificial libations when fulfilling their ritual function, the original carving becoming encrusted and therefore more powerful over time (Joubert 2006:7).

Addressing the religious and secular power of figurative traditions and figurine object in performance in Africa, Petrus du Preez explores ideas around the function of puppets as objects in traditional African ritual and performance (Du Preez, 2006). He explores particularly the developing hybridised relationship between traditional religious icons and industrialised cultural mediums of representation.

When a mask or a puppet functions as an icon in a performance, the icon does not only represent something else in that performance, it is or becomes that thing, thought, person, spirit that it represents (Du Preez, 2006:2).

In African puppetry, the iconic object holds specific meaning and supernatural power in performance. The icon has a traditional significance in its ability to convey meaning or messages within the context of local traditions, the community and its religious and spiritual milieu. Yet it is the point of performance, as Du Preez suggests, that provides an already symbolic object with its power and potential for meaning within the community (Du Preez, 2006).

Du Preez interestingly explores the relationship of the object in both liminal and liminoid performances in Africa (Du Preez, 2006). He describes the modern reappropriation of the fetish object and its removal from its ritual context, where power lies in the beliefs of the community in the religious significance of the object (Du Preez, 2006). He writes that in an industrialised environment both the liminal and liminoid (usually intended for entertainment)

may appear in hybridised forms, where the ritual is now framed 'as theatrical action' (Du Preez, 2006:5). The religious and spiritual context of the African fetish object is often displaced and appropriated in contemporary performance and cultural representations. Du Preez states that this evolution of the iconic object into a new system of cultural signification as a medium of representation has great potential for social transformation and action (Du Preez, 2006).

Indeed, there are many masking and figurine traditions that have evolved to meet the particular needs of various societies and transformed into contemporary modes of expression. The global economy has also shifted much of the contemporary workmanship of traditional artists into more western paradigms, to suit the requirements of trade and tourism (Joubert, 2006). The impact of consumerism presents a danger of imitation in the cross-cultural influence of the art form. Penny Francis states the necessity to resist this commercialism of puppetry and mask and 'to discover and develop art forms organic to their location, as an expression of its history, its aesthetics and its modern trajectory' (Francis, 2006: 2). She argues that within the media-saturated and coldly industrialised modern world,

Secularisation has resulted in the brutal damming up of puppetry's mainsprings of dramaturgy, which arose from the medium's natural affinity to things spiritual, to ritual, religious ceremony, fear of the otherworldly and the inexplicable (Francis, 2006:2).

It is the point of performance of the puppet that instigates what I consider a constructed kinaesthetic sentience in the object for viewers and manipulators. Objects of representation in the act of performance inherit the personalized energies of the viewer as well as the manipulator. The interpretation of this inheritance of 'life' through the act of performance with and of the object, allows the viewer or manipulators to read their own human condition in the animated object.

Animism has been stifled, and animism – belief in the life within Things – is the stuff of puppetry. If any of these is present in 21<sup>st</sup>-century European puppet theatre, it is through our fascination

with some exotic and unfamiliar culture, such as magic realism, which hails from southern America, from the American Indian, from the Australian aboriginal. In this fascination, we allow our old beliefs in the spiritual, the otherworldly, the illusionist, the magical to bubble to the surface like the source of the Nile, dammed but not eliminated (Francis, 2006:2).

The concept of animism, the belief that there is indeed a strong link between the spiritual and the material, is key to providing links between puppetry's ancient history and its relevance as a tool for performance today. If we consider Joubert's research on the origins of puppetry in indigenous tribal ritual, we see the huge influence of animism on the beginnings of culture and spirituality itself (Joubert, 2006). Significantly, what is foregrounded is the basic impulse of humanity to create constructions and belief systems in the transference and transformation of life. This insistence of life is in turn balanced by the presence of death, that the animate will become inanimate, and that the inanimate may obtain energy and life. This process of life and death in and of the object, is a key to the possibility of both sentience and construction inherent to puppetry practice.

Echoing the transformations of animism in puppetry performance, Gómez-Peña suggests that performance artists invigorate the object through an intentional or unintentional liminoid repetition; that is the more we use our performance 'artifacts', the more 'charged' and powerful they become. Just as puppeteers, the performance artist makes objects that

Are meant to be handled and utilized without remorse during the performance. We actually don't mind if these objects get worn out or destroyed (Gómez-Peña, 2001).

He states recycling as the main modus operandi that dramatically separates performance artists, and I would say visual performance artists, from most costume, prop and set designers, who rarely recycle or liminally invigorate their creations (Gómez-Peña, 2001).

Francis considers the close relationship between the puppet and puppeteer. In many ways, puppetry draws on the forms of the *commedia dell'arte* and the *commedia* technique acquired by performers of transferring the skills of their own body onto that of the puppet (Francis, 2007). Yet, puppets are able to perform acts the human body could never accomplish (Lee, 2007). Such abilities, impossible for the human body, are exploited on all levels of metaphoric and actual scale, as puppets are not subject to the laws of gravity. Francis even goes so far as to say that, in line with African puppetry ritual, the puppet can even 'embody godhead' (Francis, 2007:6).

The puppet's interpretation depends on its materiality (and its construction in various materials) to express itself and define its qualities of performance. Puppets demand of the audience a different type of hearing, to listen to the imagery of the symbol, to read the visual metaphor and to enter the symbology of the living construct of the object. For Obraztsov, the puppet is a plastic generalisation of a living being, a sculpture that in its animation creates a 'dynamic generalisation of a living being', and the process by which this birth, this inheritance of life occurs, in which the inanimate becomes animate, is for audiences young and old alike, a miracle (Obraztsov, 1967:19).

Francis laments the commercialisation of modern-day puppet theatre,

In Europe, in expressing the puppet's *modus vivendi* at its most basic level, we have almost lost puppetry's close relationship with animism, religion and ritual; we have forgotten almost all of its community and celebratory functions; in addition, puppetry's political teeth have been mostly removed by the subtle demands of official funding (Francis, 2006:1).

If puppetry has lost its spiritual 'punch' (Francis, 2006), it is perhaps the emerging balance of liminoid and multidisciplinary practices that characterise a Feminine Semiotics in women's puppetry today. Dutch puppetry artist Charlotte Puyk-Joolen is one female artist whose work has specifically inspired my investigation into the Feminine Semiotics of Puppetry. She explores the links between animism, feminine embodiment and spirituality in puppet

performance. In Puyk-Joolen's work, it is the connection between embodiment and sentient transference in ritual, that brings women's puppetry into the present moment of semiotic exploration.

Puyk-Joolen's puppetry company Magisch Theatertje (established in 1996), has long-standing links to one of Europe's most famous puppetry masters, Henk Boerwinkel of the Theater Triangel in the Netherlands (Puyk-Joolen, 2011). Boerwinkel and Puyk-Joolen worked together for ten years. However, while Boerwinkel's emphasis was on the surrealistic dreamscapes of the human (and specifically his own, male) psyche, Puyk-Joolen's aesthetics merge with a specifically feminine archetypal landscape.

Puyk-Joolen's latest piece, entitled *Cantos Animata*, is described by her as 'visual reflections on the circles of life as an endless transformation of physical and spiritual elements' (Puyk-Joolen, 2011). She uses gum strip and paper hand and rod puppetry, in the tradition of Boerwinkel, playing with scale through the addition of mask and the live feminine body. Every element of the work is ritualised through a process of transition. She explores the threshold of visual, energetic and aural landscapes. This transformation process, for Puyk-Joolen, reflects the myriad spiritual, emotional and experiential aspects of life, and specifically feminine experience. *Cantos Animata* holds many elements that continue her focus on visual and performative expressions of the internal landscape of the soul.

In *Cantos Animata* it is the experience of women's sexuality, and sexualised experiences of life, that encapsulate a specifically Feminine Semiotics. This is characterised by the influence of eastern philosophy and archetype on Puyk-Joolen's work. The highly stylised sculptural forms of the puppets give character to abstract concepts such as death, birth and re-incarnation. Dr Ranjana Srivastava, in her exposition on the art of Kathak dance, looks at the significance of spiritual process in creative development (Srivastava, 2004:5). Looking at the traditional practice of Kathak performance, which originated in the temples of northern India, the process of performance itself is inextricably

linked to cultural, psychological and esoteric experiences of devotion to the spiritual nature of the practice itself (Srivastava, 2004).

In Hindu performance practice, the links between body, mind, practice and devotion come to the fore,

in fact, the system... is entirely based on the cardinal belief that the truth is to be realised in and through the human body... The origin of the word Tantra... means to spread or to expand... It regards the world as a macrocosm and the body as a microcosm... (Srivastava, 2004:5).

Puyk-Joolen's imagery of birth, death, bodies and spirit is realised through what can best be described in her own words as

an experience of silent and dynamic fragment fluently merging into each other, sometimes with breaks to liberate the audience to assimilate a new stream of impressions of life and death... Sometimes radiating and moving like the life-force itself, sometimes melancholy providing thoughts about life as it is... giving and taking, creating and destruct, alienation and communion (Puyk-Joolen, 2011).

In puppetry tradition, the puppeteer is most often both the maker and performer of the puppet object. The levels of meaning contained in the sculptural form are intimately linked to the performance structure, concept, movement and thinking behind the layers of practice. Puyk-Joolen not only creates and gives form to the puppet-mask-visual art object, but is also the source of its spiritual and emotional interpretation. This manipulation of structure, movement and life is the force of the puppeteer's transference that creates the sentience of the puppet for performer and audience.

Obraztsov contrasts the act of puppetry, as simply animating an inanimate object for the sake of the illusionist's trick, and the actual birth of the puppet in the moment of live performance (Obraztsov, 1967). This birth becomes a process in which the puppeteer is justified in giving over to the object a living

soul and energetic presence (Obraztsov, 1967). The illusion of life seems to support a complex liminality between object and puppet through the alienation of knowing that what the audience is witnessing is in fact dead, and the essence of the illusion of life that is puppetry performance. This contradiction provides recourse for complex theorization in the act of puppetry itself. It returns the viewer to the synthetic yet sentient possibilities of the puppet performance to

condense, synthesize, all that is essential and characteristic in the various features of human nature. That in the collision of these characteristics something is created with a new and wider meaning to which our hearts respond with deep emotion (Obrazstov, 1967: 20).

A crucial and contradictory function of the puppet, explored by Stefan Lenkish, is its alienation effect (Lenkish, 1967). This is exemplified in the puppet's ability to break with sentimentality through artifice, to provide its own puppet solutions, and to offer shocking revelations to audiences through its 'ever-present ability to create poetic symbols' (Lenkish, 1967:28). The key is synthesis between material and character, plastic and human, fantasy and object. For in the world of fantasy 'the puppet remains the actor par excellence' (Lenkish, 1967:28). The puppet facilitates the uncanny in that 'the animated figure, the puppet, plays the essence of a character: pure symbol, uncanny witness of the life in things' (Francis, 2007:5).

### **Case studies of Liminality: Women and Visual Performance**

There are a number of influential women's puppetry and visual performance companies that are pushing the margins of sexual discourse within what I would term the Feminine Semiotic. I refer to both the qualities of the feminine imaginary as explored by Cixous (1975) and Irigaray (1985) as the language of the feminine body expressed in her multiplicitous sexualities. It is also an alchemical rendering of the semiotic as the inappropriate other, the sacred bridge between inside and outside, critique and aesthetic, binary and liminality. German puppeteer Ilka Schönbein and her company *Theater Meschugge* uses

puppetry and mask in an embodied and carnivalesque approach to what can best be described as a theatre of madness, in which the limits of the feminine body express the fragilities of metaphor and sexual experience (Schönbein, 2011).

Schönbein herself describes her work as exploring 'pain, suffering and love that leads to madness expressed through the body' (Schönbein, 2011). Exploring the landscapes of fairytales, archetypes and fable, Schönbein combines extensive choreographic form and liminal mask and puppet work. These metaphoric forms are then combined with poetry and music to explore images and experiences of embodied feminine abjection, childbirth, death, fragmentation and psychosis, often within a historical context. Performing one-woman shows, Schönbein uses her own body, often disrobed from the waist up, to integrate with the puppet as an extension of her own embodiment of character, emotion or abstraction.

Schönbein creates unforgettable expressionistic images of despair, of joie de vivre, of the painful concurrence of life and death like a metaphor for our own existence (Roser, 2011).

This fracturing of subjectivity may be perceived as psychosis, but in the space of re-imagined feminine experience, it is also a means of sexual and spiritual transformation. This insistence on change and mutability is expressed in the title of Schönbein's works *Metamorphoses 1 and 2*.

What constitutes the limits of the body is never merely material...the surface, the skin is systematically signified by taboos and anticipated transgressions: indeed, the boundaries of the body become...the limits of the social per se (Butler, 1989:131).

It is the surface of Schönbein's body that provides the catalyst for both creation and destruction. Christine Ramsay talks of the abject as being integrally linked to that which exposes the vulnerability and perviousness of the body and, by extension, the subject who exists through that vulnerable form (Ramsay, 1996). In her seminal piece, *Le Voyage d'hiver (The Journey of Winter)*,

Schönbein explores through poetic vignettes, the metaphoric landscape of a frozen lake through the boundaries of her own body and embodied puppetry (Schönbein, 2011). Here, her distinct style of puppet-mask is highlighted. Schönbein uses papier-mâché masks taken of herself, that extend from her body to combine flesh and plastique to create a living puppetry. In one vignette she wears a bust and face replica of herself on her back. Her double-sided, bare-chested body creates an uncanny image of a doppelgänger, a double self that multiplies through facemasks and body masks to emphasize the unstable interplays of form.

Schönbein also incorporates puppetry in abject scenes of birthing in which her body emits a life size puppet fetus, which later becomes a distorted-scale child in a rowboat crossing the frozen river. Ramsay theorizes specifically on the implications and threat of abjection to the coherence of embodied identity (Ramsay, 1996). She suggests that it is the looming of the monstrous feminine that heralds the threat of violent unconscious forces, always just below the surface of patriarchal understanding and reason, that strictly maintains the order of society, keeping abjection at bay, but which is itself most definitely not impenetrable or stable (Ramsay, 1996).

In South Africa, performance artist, composer and practicing traditional healer, Julia Raynham, seeks to create visual performance that

Bridges the world of spirit and the mundane in a risk society... defined by the crossover between ritual, sacred plant medicines, deterministic chaos, fashion and Performa art aesthetics (Raynham, 2010:1).

Raynham's work has a specifically collaborative approach to visual performance to articulate urban consciousness and South African spirituality. Working in collaboration with Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre's Ntombi Gasa, one of their earlier works, *tomorrow I'll rubbish someone else's airspace and no one will intercept me*, is based on the title of a poem by Katlehong poet Angifi Dladla (Raynham, 2010). The artists describe it as a work of indigenous resistance, but also of liminoid intersperses that challenge the engendered

body (Raynham, 2010). According to Raynham, the piece uses an aesthetic that values fragment and unexpected juxtaposition in order to facilitate its subversions. They integrate sacred ritual concepts, specifically a rendering of the yearlong ritual dance of an *Umtshilo* initiate, an *Abakwetha* youth, whose rite of passage is around male circumcision and coming of age (Raynham, 2010). The *Abakwetha*, however, in this instance is neither male nor female, and uses his/her rite of passage to deliver politically charged text about capitalism, race and gender (Raynham, 2010).

Gasa and Raynham's next piece together, *21<sup>st</sup> century animal; urban cosmology and afro-futurism on the edge of order*, presents a liminoid ritual of fashion-dance-art vignettes (or fragments) that inscribe dreaming and divination in a

conceptual scaffolding... which took the audience through scenes which describe our bodies' innate ability to dream, to imagine, to remix identities, to trounce violence, stereotypes and boundary violations, and to transcend these cellular memories, arriving into the sensual and sentient spaces of our being human (Raynham, 2010:1).

I describe the rituals present in the work as liminoid, because while they are transported directly through Raynham's experience as a trained traditional diviner, the ritual intersects with urban aesthetics, high fashion and pop art culture. The intention of the work is to contact the sacred transformations of urban spiritualism, connecting and desecrating the divide between profanity and the sublime, nature and industrialisation, capitalism and tribalism. She re-interprets her own experience of the sacred within a modern urban Afro culture, and her own disillusionment with the processes of apartheid and segregation in which she grew up (Raynham, 2010).

In *21<sup>st</sup> century animal*, Raynham uses new technologies to investigate identities and bodies through design and dance, cinema and sound (Raynham, 2010). A major technological influence is her use of surround sound through a 5.1 system that utilizes sub-base and hypersonic frequencies to influence brain

chemistry and activity (Raynham, 2010). Raynham states that this comes to her directly through her divination practice, in response to dreams that she has in which she is instructed 'to use very specific frequencies that correspond to catalytic plant medicines, such as 63 or 30Hz' (Raynham, 2010:2).

Performance academic Anthony Kubiak writes on the incubating electric dreams of global consciousness that characterise the urban shamanism and cyber alchemy of the Information age we are living in (Kubiak, 2009). He also explores the problematics of spiritualism and ritual in contemporary performance and the rise of quantum approaches that inform liminoid events (Kubiak, 2009).

The ideologically strident academic leftists began to find themselves at the ravelling selvage of rather uncomfortable theoretical impulses: the Deleuzian cosmos of becoming-Sorcerer, for example, in the articulations of chaos magick, or the rise within academic discourse of increasingly unsettling artistic and cultural forms (Kubiak, 2009:91).

Urban shamanism is considered a problematic term in academia. Accusations of cultural appropriation, multicultural essentialism, romanticisation, exoticism and the disillusionment of 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalist consumerism accompany the redeployment of the term shamanism (Kubiak, 2009). Anthropology's suspicion is what Kubiak calls a 'cashing-in' on exoticism that according to ethnologist H. Sidky 'does violence to ethnographic reality' (2009:117). Cultural critique also returns us to questions of exoticization and multiculturalism that haunt cultural essentialisms.

Yet, Kubiak calls new urban spiritualism a slippery and rhizoid terrain that is characterised by its indeterminacy (Kubiak, 2009). It is the violence of instability on systematised worldviews, which 21<sup>st</sup> century identity presents to both knowledge and practice. It also describes in many ways, the intention of Raynham's explorations, which integrate and absorb traditional medicinal knowledge systems, trance, ritual and anthropological elements into her own experiences of contemporary identity through performance.

Kubiak incorporates the use of the word shaman into his discussion on artistic communitas, considering the ecstatic aspects of liminoid performative events, and the facilitative role of the DJ-cyber technician and shaman as impresario of the space (Kubiak, 2009). The importance of his discussion on emergent urban spiritualism is that it brings both artists and critics uncomfortably back to the destabilising fact that 'visionary ecstasis continues to be the *raison d'être* of musical, dance and theatrical performance' (Kubiak 2009:91). Kubiak states the immediacy of presence and performance in communal experience as both spiritual, aesthetic and deeply ontological (Kubiak, 2009).

These connections between the liminoid and urban shamanism are apparent in all of Raynham's performance collaborations. It is also magnified by her own unstable position as an inappropriate other within mainstream South African culture, as a white female *sangoma* (diviner), and as a multidisciplinary visual performance artist. The theoretical and research content of her work explores globalisation, urbanisation, sexuality and gender discontinuities, inversions of being, postcolonialism, chemistry and indigenous medicine and herbalism. The practical manifestation of these elements then finds its presence in ritual, animation, high technology sound composition, dance, video and installation.

Raynham looks specifically at sexual identity in relationship to spirituality, such as in her short performance art piece *a new body will be assembled more brilliant than memory*, created for the Spier Contemporary in 2008 (Raynham, 2010). Here she incorporates her own body as fetish (Raynham, 2010), covering herself completely in a black plastic leather hooded body suit and stiletto heels. The liminality of this black plastic masked body, inscribed in fashion and urbanity, presents the sensuousness of the fetishized feminine form. It denies particular subjectivity in the construction of a multiplicitous, faceless character. Yet, the surface of her body is concerned with animism and alchemy, expressed as a form of power through transformation.

Raynham describes the character of the piece, herself, as inspired by the plant medicine *umhlonyane*, *lengana* or *Artemisia*, 'a plant that transmutes fear, is a huntress, an Amazon, a warrior, an anarchist. I based the work on the fact that

we construct our individual realisations' (Raynham, 2010:3). Raynham cites archetypes and mythology in the same breath as medicinal knowledges and chemistry. Through her disidentification with patriarchal subjectivity and re-identification with the chemistry and mythology of the plant *lengana*, she posits a multidimensional and rhizoid sexuality that questions the limits of identity and emphasizes the closeness of non-being, of invisibility and blackout (Raynham, 2010). This disjunction created by her costumed form is a form of mutation, a monstrosity that challenges discourse, category and boundary,

This is a hooded place, in which the mind is fixed upon a particular experience. Whether it be of the body or of the inner perception... it is that jet-black room, where psychic phenomena manifest for the benefit of the physical mind. It is the link between consciousness, the subconscious, and the superconscious. It is the point where dignity is concentrated, the space without form, where freedom is most easily perceived (Raynham, 2010:3).

Here, Raynham insists, she is offering homage to Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty; that is, a reflection on the 'essence' of humanity, that spirit is not separate from the body (Raynham, 2010). Indeed, in Raynham's explorations it is the alchemy of mixed identities, of cultural slippage and inappropriateness that facilitates her subject matter and its liminoid representation.

The next artist whose work in multidisciplinary visual performance is of significance to my explorations into the representation of women's sexual and spiritual emergency, is Zambian-born performer and academic Mwenya Kabwe. Kabwe says that notions of migration from, into and across Africa largely motivate all her works. One of her leading concerns is

What does it mean to think and perform Africa differently? How do we identify and introduce points of access that are porous enough to contain the hybrid nature of both 'indigenous' and 'contemporary African performance forms?' (Kabwe, 2011:51).

Kabwe states her approach to practice in theatre-making through production as a knowledge-making laboratory wherein she is able to expound and dissect

her central questions around her identity (Kabwe, 2011). She is always interested in developing a visual aesthetic and is conceptually inspired by the works of Yinka Shonibare and fine artist Mary Sibande (Kabwe, 2011). Kabwe defines her theatre-making signature as an Afropolitan aesthetic to form and content (Kabwe, 2011). The term Afropolitan, coined by writer Achille Mbembe, moves beyond the reactionary discourses of anti-colonial nationalism, African socialism and Pan-Africanism to create a term for the experience and identity of being African today (Mbembe, 2007). Afropolitanism is particularly concerned with cultural mobility, that is the and transnationalism of African cultural identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century through migration, movement and multiple racial legacies that embrace the flow of the global economy (Mbembe, 2007).

Kabwe's work, while directly concerned with migrant identity and her own Afropolitan identity and dilemmas, also explores the terrain of gender, sexuality and feminine experience. Her most recent production of Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1962) is perhaps the most explicit in contacting black sexualized identity and postcolonial dilemma. I am most interested in this particular production for the problematics it presents to representing black female sexuality and mental illness through visual performance.

Kennedy explores the devastations of stereotype on the personal psychosexual developments of the contemporary black female identity through sexuality, madness and mythology. We see how the development of an iconographically-based theatrical aesthetic allows Kabwe to interrogate popular attitudes of racism and sexism through Kennedy's text, but also through the interplay of body, projection and objects (Diamond, 1997). Kabwe explores a multi-layered visual aesthetic to create a visual sense of the struggle of the personal psyche of a black woman caught up in her own hysterical myriad of political stereotypes that construct her 'self'.

Adrienne Kennedy's texts provide access to identifications that are decidedly double, even multiple, wherein traces of hysterical mimicry (of playing all the parts), of narcissistic rage, ambivalence, and rivalry are all in evidence... the identificatory performances of Kennedy's personae bring to view psyches

brutalised by racism (Diamond, 1997:112).

Kabwe in turn interprets this mimicry through multiple bodies on stage that make up the various personae in Sarah's mind's eye. Three personae are women of mixed race, one of whom plays the main consciousness of Sarah, and two who are costumed as dancing clowns in the funny house of Sarah's world. The other two personae are men, the dark man, the African father who haunts Sarah's psyche, and the conductor, a musician who controls the rhythm, pace and ambience of Sarah's mental state.

Elin Diamond explores the work of Kennedy through a focus on the process of mimesis in the positioning of personal identity (1997). The rationalisations of classical mimesis substantiated the coherent identifications of white patriarchal selfhood through a mirroring and 'self reflection' which separated the 'correct self' from the reflections of the abnormal 'other' (Diamond, 1997). The conflict between identity and self-hatred expressed in Kennedy's text is effectively located in the stereotypes of the racialized body. Stigmas of exoticization, primitivism, evangelism and hyper-sexuality are encapsulated in the performance of the multiple representations of the selfhood of the main character, Sarah, through stereotypical characters who emerge from myths around the black female and male identities that make up her own history, which begin to expose the regulating coherences of racist, stereotyped difference on the body.

In Kabwe's version of *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, we see how the process of the stereotype manifests in hysteria. Yet, hysteria itself is a psychological state wrapped in a sexist perception alluding to woman's supposed irrationally emotional nature and weakness. Sarah's deterioration into hysteria literally plays itself out onstage through her multiple personas, which are further complicated by the layering of multimedia and sound that accompany their performances.

Hysteria as a strategy for representation of complex feminine identity is fraught with dilemmas. 'Her characters belie the representation apparatus whose

function is to deliver up a unitary ego, a self' (Diamond, 1997:14). However, the denial of coherence also serves to invigorate rather than denounce stereotype, offering no alternative to the paranoid, schizoid condition of Sarah's sexuality. Sexuality in this framework of hysteria represents fear, self-loathing and immersion in the patriarchal colonial. The myriad selves and encounters importantly undermine the rationalised position of otherness into which Sarah as a black woman falls. They also, however, recuperate transformation into the stereotypes of hysteria with no recourse for resistance or change. The audience becomes witness to the neurotic performativity of self and its complex stereotypes, mythologies and contradictions, but that is where identity remains.

Using grotesque physicality Kabwe parodies the loss of identity in the body of Sarah, through another aspect usually associated with the ideal of femininity and desire, her hair. But Sarah sees her 'unmistakably kinky Negro hair' (Kennedy, 1962:12) as her one defect, an abhorrence on the surface of her otherwise attractive body. Throughout the play, the loss of identity is intimately bound up in the excessive loss of hair, a horrific and grotesque gesture in which the corruptions of the internal return to haunt the external body.

One of Sarah's personas is Queen Victoria, which in Kabwe's production is presented as a giant sculptural installation, a three metre high white wedding dress that performers are able to sit in and perform from. In a personal conversation, Kabwe described this installation to me as the beginnings of a move into puppetry elements, in which the object/installation is another character in the performance.

Diamond calls these fragmentations, performances and theatrical images, the 'annihilating frame(s) of identification' (Diamond, 1997:118). Initially every object or 'other' in the performance is an image against which Kabwe shows Sarah's desperation to concretise aspects of herself. However, these simply emerge as raging discordances in a personal psyche deeply affected by stereotypes and constituted by the myths of society and history.

Kabwe's imagistic theatrical style extends towards visual performance, exploring images and the visual mirroring through multimedia repetitions of the fragmentations of racial and sexual identity. The themes arise imagistically through her re-appropriations of cultural icons, reflexive racist stereotyping, hysterical, theatrical representations of character and exploring of multiple truths. The predicament of her female protagonist lies in the confusions of a person whose identity is based on others' perceptions, on the expectations of society to maintain the black/white male/female dynamic. This binaric dialogue sets up a visual discourse in the play that constantly brings us back to differences which exist in those age-old structures of black versus white and male versus female.

When dealing with the problematics of representations of sexual and spiritual emergence(y), I find it necessary to interrogate the limitations of representing hysteria in the development of new theatrical subjectivities that interrogate women and mental illness. The levels of stigma, binary and stereotype regarding black women and their representation in South Africa has created so many gaping silences, that to overlook the complexities of personal emergence(y) means to exclude a vital area of contextual research into this terrain. In light of the performance of black women with mental illness, however, we need to question the problematics of stereotype that both locate and expose representational prejudice. Here we see how the multistructural aspects of visual performance both aid and problematise complex representation. In multilayering and multidisciplinary representation, identities of fracture, excess and hysteria find a fitting manifestation. When looking to represent complex sexuality and spirituality in mental illness and emergency, it becomes apparent that representation requires a very careful attention to both the surface of the liminal image, as well as the spaces of intersection and slippage.



Fig. 5. Ilka Schönbein *Le Voyage d'hiver*



Fig. 6 .Ilka Schönbein *Le Voyage d'hiver*



Fig. 7. Mary Sibande's *Long live the dead queen* present an exploration of stereotypes of domesticity, labour, imperialism and embodiment.



Fig. 8. Resonance Bazar performs *Umtshilo* through intersections of tradition, fashion and liminal knowledges of the body. Photograph John Hoggs.

University of Cape Town

## Chapter Four

### The Wards and Holding Cells



University of Cape Town

## **Analogies of Descent and Rites of Passage: La Selva Subterranea as Feminine Semiotic Strategy**

Historian and folklorist Diane Wolkstein, in her seminal publication on the mythologies and folklore of Inanna, one of the first known Goddess traditions to find expression in recorded history, explores the mythology of descent in the ancient poetry and hymns written of this complex and creative Sumerian deity (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). Wolkstein writes that the 'path of descent' has influenced, inspired and impelled mystics and rites of passage in tribal societies since the beginning of recorded human experience (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983:156). Here in this chapter I use the narrative of descent as a trajectory for the practice and theory that found manifestation as the live event **Plot 99** in June 2011. In this pattern of rite and mythological narrative, I interrogate creative aspects of the previously presented history of Nonhetha Nkwenkwe in the **Plot 99 Script**.

In scripting the production of **Plot 99**, the narrative of Nonhetha, her burial, exhumation, and her historical archive provides information and guidance on our explorations. The key elements of her story articulated in the production script, are those of her lived journey as described in Chapter One. Central to this story was the journey of descent, death and rebirth that figured in Nonhetha's actual story, as well as in her described experiences of *ukuthwasa*, and her birth as a prophet. This is captured in a retelling of a famous dream in which the prophet believed she had died and been reborn (Edgar & Sapire, 2000).

The dream itself holds images from both Xhosa cosmology and Christian iconography and morality. The story is recounted by Edgar & Sapire (2000) as told by Nonhetha's grandson, and as re-interpreted here as follows:

One evening, during the period that followed the infamous *Isibeto*, in which so many Xhosa had perished, Nonhetha had a significant, prophetic dream. Before she fell asleep, she had felt extremely ill. In her dream, Nonhetha was

awoken by two men, who showed her to two doors and asked her to enter one of them.

The men then flew her up into the sky, over the land where she saw various rural scenes mixed with scenes of depravity and sin, such as drinking and traditional witchcraft. Interpreted through the influence of Christian morality, these were considered profane and as reasons for suffering by Nonthetha. She also saw the dead body of a young man, her husband, Bhungu Nkwenkwe, who had died in the mines in Saldanha Bay where he had been recruited. Weeping, she looked up and saw a knob thorn tree, a tree held as sacred in Xhosa tradition (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). A dirty cloth, which she realises was the Bible, was hanging from the tree. It was inscribed with words but it was rotten. Nonthetha was told that the Bible has been neglected and that she was to be the catalyst for a new civilisation.

Nonthetha dreamed of her child who died in the *Isibeto*, remembering the plague as a warning of God's impending judgment to come. Nonthetha then saw the huge angry face of a man, her Lord God, shouting down at her from the sun, that the judgement day had come and that she should stop weeping and start praying (*Plot 99 Script: 35-36*).

When Nontetha came out of her deep sleep, she thought that she had been dreaming. People were hovering over her, holding her hands and splashing water on her. People kept asking what was wrong with her, and she wondered what was happening. Then she realized she had died and returned to life. Once she fully recovered from her illness, she shared her visions with other people, but they laughed at her. Then she fell ill again, and a voice told her the only way to get better was to wash in a river. Therefore, she instructed her eldest daughter to bathe her. When water from the river was poured on Nontetha, she felt healed (Edgar & Sapire, 2000:10).

The symbolism of Nonthetha's dream, as well as the events surrounding it, are so vivid and imagistic that they provided immediate inspiration for what would

develop as performance and installation spaces in the production of *Plot 99*. The intersections of colonial and traditional mythologies offer such a uniquely South African iconography. The specifically articulated spiritual and sexual experiences of Nonhetha are key to opening a door to a Feminine Semiotics for **Plot 99**.

Central to locating a Feminine Semiotics for the production, however, is my own positionality in the interpretation and direction of Nonhetha's experiences. While the character of Nonhetha was to be the central presence of feminine subjectivity in what would eventually become the *Plot 99* production, my positionalities as the director/creator needed articulation in both theory and practice. As mentioned in the introduction, my original interest in Nonhetha's story was not only in its historical and cultural wealth, but also in the personal gaps of narrative where I felt aspects of my own intimate relationship to mental illness and spirituality could be articulated. If, as James Elkins laments, the problematics of Practice as Research in fine art practice is its self-reflexivity in the artist-scholar (Elkins, 2009), in the terrain of performance, where the body is the primary mode of expression, self-reflexivity occurs in the very medium of expression.

As a scholar in postcolonial feminism, it is through a wary impulse, to tread this delicate and complicated terrain that I approach the arguments, especially considering the self reflexivity in the representation of personal histories of the marginalised. The risk is one of impossible and inevitable positionality. The visual theatre maker is at once an anthropologist and a storyteller, a scientist and an alchemist, an archivist and an activist fighting for the freedoms of metaphor, whilst operating in complicity with their own master discourses.

The inappropriate other accepts profanity and the sacred as s/he manifests it in surface, presence and meaning. Trinh T. Minh-Ha writes specifically around complicated questions of the insider and outsider in cultural and artistic practice (Minh-ha, 1987). She expresses the dominant notion that the insider's view is considered 'the magic word that bears within itself a seal of approval' in cultural, political and social practice (Minh-ha, 1987:2). Here she is referring

specifically to authorship and the dominant expectation, that in order to produce correct cultural practice, the insider must speak about the insider, the outsider about the outsider, i.e. Africans show Africa, Asians show Asia, Westerners show the West, etc. (Minh-ha, 1989:2). She looks specifically at her field of documentary filmmaking, and considers what she calls the territorial boundaries of the insider, who can speak with authority about her own culture (Minh-ha, 1987). 'She's referred to as the source of authority in this matter – not as a filmmaker necessarily, but as an insider, merely' (Minh-ha, 1987:3).

Minh-ha declares this process as a paradoxical twist of the colonial mind (Minh-ha, 1987:3). The insider may be granted the power of legitimacy, as long as it informs the standardizing of difference between insider/out, as long as it informs the all-knowing subject of colonial discourse (Minh-ha, 1987). The other in this dynamic is always the 'shadow of the self' and thus is never concrete, never stable, never subject, never really 'all knowing' (Minh-ha, 1987:3).

At many points in devising the narrative of Nonthetha for *Plot 99* the issue of ethics arose, especially through field research into Nonthetha's community. An immediate problematic was models of translation and communication for interpreting Xhosa idioms and language, as an outsider to the culture and traditions. The complex subject positioning of the author to the narrative of women's emergence(y) requires a feminist interpretation of the hierarchies of ideology that would inform an understanding of Nonthetha's difference, as a woman suffering from spiritual and sexual upheaval. The information provided in writing and archive is insufficient in order to contact elements of Nonthetha's spirituality and sexuality that are not expressed through linguistic and epistemological discourse.

In essence, how do we invoke a feminine imaginary as well as the intersections of history, experience and knowing? What was it about Nonthetha that differentiated her to the superstructures of her time? Moreover, how does the author of the artistic work situate themselves within binary as

well as sentience in order to honestly facilitate personal and cultural narrative in *Plot 99*?

The idea of a relationship, between the prophetess and a second character, a woman in the midst of her own emergence(y), began to emerge in the scripting process. This character, imagined as Nonthetha's exhumed, uncovers the body of Nonthetha in order to understand her own experiences with mental illness, sexual trauma and spiritual awakening. In this way, the metaphors for a potentially shared feminine imaginary, between the two characters arose through the mythology of descent and emergence(y).

The alchemical aspects of the Feminine Semiotic facilitate the third as a crucial and unspecified element of the inappropriate other as presented by Minha-ha (Minh-ha 1987). The third element, the inappropriate other, does not exist outside of the duality of male and female, black and white, but rather arises in the moments between the surfaces where these binaries intersect to produce meaning in the present moment. The problem and potential of the inappropriate other, however, is its embodiment of instability in its structure and non-structure. The third is almost impossible to predict. It is the mutability of base elements and attractors that either facilitate or prevent possible manifestations.

The script introduces the character of a woman called Patient Number Three, Inanna (*Plot 99 Script*: 10-12). As a patient in the psychiatric system, her name indicates her personal subjectivity as subsumed by the depersonalisations of the psychiatric system. It problematizes her potential for subjectivity by locating her within the discourses of pathology as a numbered, rather than named patient. Yet, this dehumanising gesture is followed with a reference to Inanna, the Sumerian goddess of the underworld (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). The analogy of descent as an archetype of journey into the underworlds of illness and trauma, began to take on significance through the character of Patient Number Three, Inanna. Her traumas are realised specifically around the realms of oppressed sexuality and embodiment, the very location of her eventual empowerment and return to the world above.

These problematics of positioning the inappropriate other within the *Plot 99* narrative will be addressed through an explanation of an intertextual, poststructuralist and feminist approach to character creation and design, that fed the development of a Feminine Semiotics for the production.

### **The Descent of Inanna: An Abject Strategy for Staging the Feminine Semiotic**

Wolkstein and Kramer describe a structure or pattern of death and rebirth, based on the research of Mircea Eliade and William James, that uncovers a common trajectory in these rites and rituals (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). In this pattern of rite and mythological narrative, I interrogate creative aspects of the previously presented history of Nonthetha Nkwenkwe, which formed the cornerstone of my creative writing. The manifestations of these theories find expression through the patterning of traditional rituals of descent, death and rebirth as explicated by Eliade as

- (1) Separation from the family; (2) regression to a pre-natal state, the cosmic night; (3) death, dismemberment, suffering; (4) rebirth; and (5) killing of another (Eliade 1960:197-200).

From the beginning of **Plot 99**, Nonthetha Nkwenkwe's research circled around the events of her life: her emergence from motherhood and marriage to her removal from the patriarchal family setting. This facilitated her next transition to her sacred status as a female Christian prophet, her illumination and separation from her community through her gifts, which surfaced within the context of emergencies of Xhosa liberation and colonial oppression. The traumatic event of her incarceration was a literal descent into the underworld of the colonial African psychiatric system. In the depths of darkness she encountered disease and demise in captivity, which culminated in her unmarked burial, her eventual exhumation and reburial in Khulile, and finally to her rebirth in our production of *Plot 99* in 2011. The title of **Plot 99** is taken from the plot number of the area of ground at the Rebecca Street Cemetery in

Pretoria, where Nonthetha Nkwenkwe was buried in a pauper's grave in 1935 (Edgar & Sapire, 2000).

The process of performing Nonthetha's rites of passage begins at what is an ending, her death and descent. Imagery of burial, funereal rites of passage, exhumation and rebirth dominated my imaginings into a narrative strategy for representation in *Plot 99*. The ritual event of a funeral offered a liminal performance strategy through traditional, intertextual and imagined rites of death and rebirth. The metaphor for our entry into Nonthetha's experience of the colonial asylum found narrative in the archetypal journey of descent into the underworld.

Mythologies of the sacred feminine are global and ancient and many are characterized by a narrative of descent into the underworld. Greek mythology contains the story of Persephone (also known as Kore), daughter of the gods Zeus and Demeter (Rayor, 2004). Persephone is also known as Proserpina in Roman mythology, whose name in Latin means 'to emerge', and her story is an origin myth for springtime (Rayor, 2004). Here we see how the mythologies of descent connect to emergence(y) as trauma and death as well as rebirth in the context of *ukuthwasa* as elaborated in Chapter One. The god of the underworld, Hades, abducts Persephone. This abduction is referred to in Greek mythology as the Rape of Persephone, and thereby intimately concerned with the sexualised body and rites of passage into womanhood through patriarchy (Rayor, 2004). It also emphasizes the significant role that masculine oppression plays in this dynamic.

The trauma of binaric division, the domination of the masculine at the expense of the feminine, actually prompts the state of feminine emergence(y) that leads to descent. Persephone is eventually allowed to return to the surface after Zeus and Demeter (distracted at the loss of her daughter) demands her return (Rayor, 2004). Every time she emerges, she brings the spring, fruition and abundance with her. However, Persephone is once again tricked by Hades into eating forbidden pomegranate seeds and is thereafter forced to return to the underworld every year, initiating the period of death and winter in the

cycles of life (Rayor, 2004). The mythology of Persephone expresses a universalized narrative for the process of the seasonal changes of the natural world (Rayor, 2004). It also offers, on closer inspection, a metaphor for a more complex feminine rite of passage through the alchemical journey of emergence(y).

Wolkstein elaborates on traditional tribal perceptions of the journey of descent, viewed as a process only affecting certain people (specifically initiates, healers, mystics), who are 'called' to travel to the underworld (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). The path to the underworld is regarded as treacherous, dangerous and unstable, and thus for many there is no return(Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). Those that do return, according to Wolkstein, are heralded as great shamans and magicians who are then endowed with the knowledge and secrets of rebirth (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983).

The processual structure of descent echoes the period of illness and transition experienced by the *ukuthwasa* initiate, the one who is called to be a healer in southern African cultures. The illness of *ukuthwasa* is marked by similar trials and tests, where the one who is called is taken to the boundaries of themselves, to the lands of death and spirit, in order to emerge, to surface as a healed self who can impart that healing to others (Booi, 2004). This knowledge of rebirth is held as sacred wisdom and contains vast potential for communal healing and change (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983).

Descent, however, is also begun in many people who experience great disturbance or upheaval in their lives, where the rules of perception shift and they discover the true fragility and perviousness of the borders of society and themselves (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). Wolkstein remarks that often descent into the underworld is begun in modern society by personal change, trauma, dissatisfaction or dissolution (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983).

The metaphoric experience of dying, pain and ordeal is held as exactly its opposite, as an evolution of the self, a key to life which facilitates a required transition to new ways of living and being, when the old ways no longer serve

or hold fast. It is epitomized in the analogy of the fairytale of the Handless Maiden (Estés, 1992). Jungian psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estés introduces the concept of feminine initiation as an experience of spiritual and sexual emergence(y), which she terms *La Selva Subterranea*: initiation in the underground forest (Estés 1992:387). The journey to the underworld, in the tale of the Handless Maiden, provides a modern and ancient tale of spiritual and sexual initiations, which according to Estés follows a woman's entire life process and the key journeys of a woman's psyche (Estés 1992:388).

Estés investigates the initiation of the handless maiden into the underground forest of her psyche, which she describes primarily as a rite of endurance (Estés 1992:388). Estés explicates her use of the term endurance to characterise more of the qualities of emerging and emergency in transition, rather than a constancy in the face of suffering (Estés, 1992). For Estés, endurance means change, specifically to toughen, to strengthen and to make resilient the fragile aspects of ourselves (Estés, 1992). Much as emergence signifies a shift, a change in states and statuses within the individual, endurance signifies a will to persevere in action for that change (Estés, 1992).

The analogy of descent, in this interpretation also finds links to narratives of mental illness and the descent into mental depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress and loss that, as described in Chapter One, is a more than common experience for many women in South Africa today. As we follow the path of the handless maiden through the underground forest, the imagery of trial, endurance and transition is also a metaphor for psychological, psychic and emotional processes (Estés, 1992). The handless maiden's suffering and endurance allows her to incubate the spiritual and sexual self, by reforming her relationship with the Jungian animus (masculine) into a new configuration for sustainable living (Estés, 1992). Estés names this an alchemical process, using the terminologies of alchemy to describe each level of descent as characterised by '*nigredo*, loss, *rubedo*, sacrifice, and *albedo*, coming of light' (Estés, 1992:389).

The mythical tale of the descent of Inanna is part of a manuscript of poems and hymns recounting the worship of this feminine Mother deity which dates back as far as the fourth millennium B.C (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). It presents a narrative that offered many staging devices that would form a central part of *Plot 99* through the character of Patient Number Three, Inanna. The journey of Inanna into the underworld is as similarly embodied, erudite, and sacrificial as the tales of the Handless Maiden, Proserpina and Persephone, requiring Inanna to surrender all that defined her power and glory on earth in order to facilitate her shift into new awareness. This shift echoes the sacred dimensions of rite, in the shift between statuses that characterises the sacred in liminality (Crosby, 2009).

Before Inanna enters the underworld, she is asked by the gatekeeper why she has come (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). The first reason she gives is to see her older sister, Ereshkigal, Queen of the Underworld (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). The second, as Wolkstein says, is a much more ceremonial reason, that is to witness the funeral of another, Gugulana, the Bull of Heaven (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). The concept of sacrifice is narrativized in Inanna's preparation for the archetypal hero's journey (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983).

Afraid that she may not be able to return from the underworld, Inanna gathers to herself seven *mes*, or powers, 'talismanic weapons... transformed into such feminine allure as a crown, jewellery, and a gown, to serve as her protections' (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983:157). Inanna must pass through seven gates before she can reach her sister (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). At each gate is the same ritual of words and sacrifice (*Plot 99 Script*: 11-12). At each of the seven gates, Inanna is confronted by a guardian who requires her to surrender one of her *mes*, her items of clothing and decoration in order to progress to the next gate (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). Eventually, naked, she arrives at the throne of her sister, stripped of all her garments of protection and construction (*Plot 99 Script*: 38-44).

In many ways, Inanna's ritual costuming of the corporeal mimics the performativity of gender and sexuality on the feminine body. Judith Butler

suggests that the very boundaries of the body are established through codes that seek to contain form within the regulations of cultural coherence and selfhood (Butler, 1989). Yet in the poem of Inanna, these boundaries are destroyed through the death of Inanna through the abjection of her body.

Wolkstein translates the scene of Inanna's death as follows:

Naked and bowed low, Inanna entered the throne room.  
 Ereshkigal rose from her throne.  
 Inanna started toward the throne.  
 The Annuna, the judges of the underworld, surrounded her.  
 They passed judgement against her.  
 Then Ereshkigal fastened on Inanna the eye of death.  
 She spoke against her the word of wrath.  
 She uttered against her the cry of guilt.

She struck her.

Inanna was turned into a corpse,  
 A piece of rotting meat,  
 And was hung from a hook on the wall.  
 (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983:60).

The image of Inanna's rotting corpse presents the threat of abjection to the coherence of her previously ordered, if not masculinized, sartorial codes and conventions for identity. Ramsay suggests that it is the looming of the abject and the destruction of the body instigates the threat of the unknown to disrupt and disturb fallacies of masculine understanding (Ramsay, 1996).

Ereshkigal is considered by Wolkstein to be the abject side of Inanna. Inanna begins the tale as the queen of heaven, but she does not know the underworld, she does not know the secrets of the monstrous feminine, abjection and death (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). When Ereshkigal hears of Inanna's arrival at the gates of the underworld, her jealousy and hatred for the costumed, enlightened queen of heaven brings her to destruction (Wolkstein &

Kramer, 1983). Ereshkigal demands that Inanna be stripped of all her 'accomplishments', specifically her roles as queen, holy priestess and woman, 'her royal power, her priestly office, her sexual powers', so that she too may experience pain and rejection (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983:158). All the things that served Inanna's coherent identity and abilities are of no avail in the underworld, and become dismembered aspects of herself as she goes deeper towards her dark sister (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983).

The death of Inanna is intertwined with the suffering of her dark sister, Ereshkigal, who is later in the poem shown to be in the process of a traumatic birth (*Plot 99 Script: 40-42*).

No linen is spread over her body.  
 Her breasts are uncovered. Her hair swirls about her head like  
 leeks.  
 When she cries 'Oh! Oh! My inside!'  
 Cry also 'oh! Oh! Your inside!'  
 When she cries 'Oh! Oh! My outside!'  
 Cry also 'oh! Oh! Your outside!'  
 The queen will be pleased.  
 She will offer you a gift...  
 Inanna will arise  
 (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983:64)

Wolkstein describes this interplay between Ereshkigal giving birth and Inanna's death as indicative of their dynamic and complex relationship (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). Ereshkigal cries out in pain, as the death of Inanna, the other part of herself is associated with new birth, the birth of a new self. Inanna descends to attend to the call of Ereshkigal, the call to her own funeral and birth of herself. As Wolkstein says, Inanna descends to face the neglected aspects of her dark self, her fears, her wounds, her sexuality, and her instincts (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). She and Ereshkigal are posited as twins, as two sides of the same self (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). If we continue with the reading of descent as a journey into the psychic netherworld, then Inanna's

descent is a journey to her dark self, the dark goddess, as embodied by Ereshkigal.

Patient no. 3:

People will believe anything, except it seems the truth.

Sister I have made it, I have come for your funeral

Nonhetha:

I am not dead yet! Besides, it is you who has died, see there where you hang.

(*Plot 99 Script: 43*).

In *Plot 99*, the experience of Emergence(y) guides the journey of Patient Number Three, Inanna and Nonhetha, into the underworld of the asylum. As in the myth of Inanna, Patient Number Three, Inanna wishes to enter the underworld to attend a funeral, her sister's funeral. Nonhetha finds this comparison, in the *Plot 99* text, to be prophetic, as, in her wisdom, she sees that Patient Number Three, Inanna is in fact coming to her own funeral in the underworld.

*Plot 99* becomes a ceremonial funeral, a re-burial, of the prophet Nonhetha, and as is revealed by the end of the production, the funeral and rebirth of Patient Number Three, Inanna (*Plot 99 Script: 44-45*). The Xhosa prophet becomes the dark goddess of Inanna's psyche, just as Inanna becomes the shadow self of Nonhetha. Both represent an intersection with the other, a shadow self lost in the underworld of the asylum, just as at times the two women emerge as those contrasting aspects of feminine sexuality, procreation and creativity that are a part of their individual trajectories. Emergence(y) for both women is a lived phenomenon that heralds their individual and shared arrival at the evolutionary crossroads of sexuality and identity.

Their interweaving journeys move through narratives of illness, *ukuthwasa*, patriarchal oppression, rebellion and descent, through the death of the old self

and old ways of being and finally through the possibility and impossibility of rebirth and return to the world above. Nonhetha predicted that she would one day return to her people, but not in the same way or form as when she left (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). In the production, neither woman returns to the world above in the form that she entered the asylum, nor as she or any body could have anticipated.

The research into the potential relationship between Nonhetha and Patient Number Three, Inanna in the script would be developed and extended in collaboration with the performers themselves. It was the intersections of difference and shared experience that I wanted to investigate as inspiration and information on how to approach the experiences of Nonhetha and Patient Number Three, Inanna respectively.

In the script of *Plot 99*, both Nonhetha and Patient Number Three, Inanna are caught in a narrative of descent and change. Even though their narratives span different spaces, times and cultures, in their positions as women experiencing emergence(y), they willingly and unwillingly intersect each other's stories. Nonhetha is forced into a narrative of descent and change by the circumstances of her culture, colonialism and patriarchy, just as she embodies the sacred transitions of a woman changing through her own spiritual and sexual emergence. Patient Number Three, Inanna is also forced into a narrative of descent, she is the goddess Inanna and descent is inevitable, it is her ancient story. She is also brought to descent through the sexual and spiritual traumas of oppression in her own culture, mythology and stereotyping, and the need to create a new sexuality, spirituality and self in the world.

### **The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Prophecy Show!**

If we consider the problematics of psychology and understanding women's psycho-sexual-spiritual conditions of anxiety, depression and posttraumatic stress, what approach to psychology could offer an alternative to Patient Number Three, Inanna's afflictions? Risking the romantic idealism of such a question, could a space of true healing for women be found through the

institution of psychiatry today? If so, what form, shape, theorization, elements would it employ to these ends? In addition, what is healing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? How is the need for healing capitalized upon by the urban shamans of global culture? Is the need for healing not just another need commodity springing from our dislocation from culture, spirituality and community?

Booi (2004) proposed the terrain of transpersonal psychology as a possible intermediary to the separate worlds of African traditional healing and traditional western psychology (*Plot 99 Script*: 18-19). If western psychiatry and traditional belief are themselves locked in a timeless battle between science and superstition, the transpersonal seems to offer a rather amicable theoretical go-between (Booi, 2004).

Leading transpersonal theorist and psychoanalyst, John Rowan, elaborates on the critical issues regarding contemporary psychology and the need for psychology to address the spiritual in its analysis and methodologies (Rowan, 1993). Psychotherapy, he elaborates, had held as its tenet for healing the courage of a person to open up to what is happening inside of themselves, and the methods of spirituality, he found, were concerned with the same processes (Rowan, 1993). Transpersonalism dares to connect psychotherapy as a bridge between psychology and the spiritual (Rowan, 1993).

The aims are the same, he says, actualizing a whole, integrated and full functioning individual within society (Rowan, 1993). This realization is the 'breakthrough' to the divine, Rowan suggests, 'in other words, to reach the end of the bridge means facing and exploring the numinous, the holy, the divine' (Rowan, 1993:3). The dogmatism of formal religion and the myriad forms of contemporary spiritual practice raise, again, complex problematics around control and essentialism of a single selfhood and subjectivity (Rowan, 1993). But for Rowan, what the spiritual aspect of transpersonalism reveals are breakthroughs in therapy that are 'liberating, not confining... more about discovering what I was really about than discovering new demands or commandments' (Rowan, 1993:4).

The central narrative of *Plot 99* is the story of a prophet who lived almost one hundred years ago, yet, who are the prophets of our time, of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and would not Patient Number Three, Inanna, in her quest for spiritual and psychological answers, seek out one of these soothsayers? Anthony Kubiak writes on the spiritual urgencies of contemporary popular culture, which developed through the alchemical quests (both figuratively and literally) of 'burned out cultural materialists' who sought out their souls 'in the mystical frontiers of the tantric mind, the ether-space of cybermagick, the great apothecary... and finally, in the Rave-space of shamanic Techno Ecstasy' (Kubiak, 2009:113). Kubiak looks at the development of cyber-chemistries that were occurring in pop culture while cultural criticism was developing its various discourses within the academy (Kubiak, 2009).

The common ground between the psychoanalytic, cultural and political critique shared with 'techno capitalism an enduring belief in the ultimate materiality of culture, mind and power' (Kubiak, 2009:114). In Kubiak's description, the cyber culture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not only involved with capitalism and the gross materiality of consumerism, but also what he calls the

Raving, crumping ecstatic practices of emergent urban shamanism – a problematic term whose slippery, rhizomatic indeterminacy underscores a larger issue of academia's refusal to understand the import and impact of new urban spiritualism (Kubiak, 2009:114).

The basic premise for a 21<sup>st</sup> century Guru/Psychiatrist, Dr Pascharama Pukmidas Stardreamer, was a character who could facilitate a representational link between contemporary urban shamanism, late- capitalist spiritual trends and criticism of (if not absorption in) the faddism of cyber spirituality (Kubiak, 2009). Kubiak proposes the need for shared communal identity, not unlike the liminoid *communitas*, that popular culture expresses through its mass events and happenings such as large-scale rave and trance-dance events (Kubiak, 2009). He even goes so far as to propose that in this communal event is an element of vast 'specifically shamanic healing energy, best understood by realigning it along anthrospirital lines rather than simply seeing it as an urban

music phenomena' (Kubiak, 2009:114). These events of *communitas* reveal at the heart of contemporary mass culture 'the vitality of desire for experiential spirituality, for ecstasy' (Kubiak, 2009:115).

In *Plot 99*, the concept of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Guru/Psychiatrist, presents a narrative solution and problematic for representing the demand for healing within contemporary consumerist culture (*Plot 99 Script*: 6-10). The performativity of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Guru/Psychiatrist is encapsulated in the idea of *Plot 99* as a 21<sup>st</sup> century prophecy show as a strategy for creating an intertextual play within a play.

As discussed in Chapter One, the advent of millenarian prophets is given specific context within the particular traumas and requirements of the eras in which they arise. The needs of the populace facilitate their power and prominence as guides and voices for the deepest imaginings, superstitions and beliefs of their communities. Dr Pascharama therefore offers not only a foil for the character of Patient Number Three, Inanna and her spiritual seeking, but also a link to contemporary culture.

Dr Pascharama performs a consumerist preoccupation with the global bricolage of holistic wellbeing, profit-orientated healing trends and 21<sup>st</sup> century organic faddism and eco-consciousness that pervades the Internet. The persona of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Guru extends to the role of healer and therapist, but only in so much as it expresses the fallacy of rationality contained in the discourses of healing. Dr Pascharama performs less as an accepted part of the contemporary institution, and more as a marginalised lunatic on the borders of contemporary psychological practice as will be discussed in the final chapter (*Plot 99 Script*: 45). As an alternative voice to the institution of psychiatry, his is a novelty voice, a marginal and suspiciously un-theoretical, new age perspective on illness informed by the popular imaginings of contemporary culture.

The journey to the underworld of the Feminine Semiotic is one fraught with danger, instability and destruction of logic, where the perceived pathology of

the sexual feminine interior threatens the language of traditional psychiatry with confusion and destruction. It is thus through the intertextuality of the three central character constructs of *Plot 99*, that we enter the underworld of the asylum. Using a process of interstructural semiotics created through the sentient kinetics of puppetry and visual performance, these themes and meanings explored in the creation of character, begin to find complex representation through a strategy of the Feminine Semiotic. This representation serves to both problematize as well as reveal the layers of meaning found in the intersections of text, time and space through ritual, puppetry and surfacing.



Fig. 9. Rouxnet Brown performs the 21<sup>st</sup> century Guru/Psychiatrist Dr Pascharama Pukmidas Stardreamer.



Fig. 10. Julia Raynham rehearses for Patient Number Three, Inanna in the gardens at the Oude Molen Eco Village, which stands on the historical grounds of the Valkenberg East Psychiatric Hospital, Pinelands, Cape Town.

## Chapter Five

### Into the Heart of the Feminine Semiotic: Plot 99 Live



University of Cape Town

## Writing the Feminine Semiotic in Visual Performance

This final chapter of the thesis analyses the practical application of puppetry, mask, site-specific installation, language, somatics and sound, lighting and costume, architecture and site, video scape and performance as an interpretation of the previously explored theoretical underpinnings of the thesis. It explores the practical strategies employed to effect a Feminine Semiotic through puppetry and visual performance, as researched theoretically in the previous chapters. It also analyses the inherent potential as well as risk and problematics of engaging binary, difference and stereotype as pathways towards complex representation.

Here I use language and video to demonstrate how **Plot 99** is created as the theoretical and practical embodiment of response to the challenges and opportunities for representation that emerged in previous chapters. I explore and dissect the resurgence of binaric distinctions in performance and interrogate the risks involved in using puppetry and visual performance to perform narratives of South African women's mental illness.

Analysing the creative process is perhaps the most erudite and complex task of performative analysis for the artist scholar. American art theorist and historian James Elkins, whose interest lies predominantly in the fine art realm, elucidates some of these concerns, stating his arguments as polemic rather than uncontested (Elkins, 2009). Elkins (2009) raises concerns around the academization of art, the presumptions that artists cannot theorize their work and the anxiety around what may be lost in the intellectualisation of the artistic process. A key problematic is the difficulty in the hybridisation of theory and practice (Elkins, 2009). He warns against the solipsism of a student's extended involvement with their own creative work and its theorization (Elkins, 2009). The problematics of extensive self-reflexivity involved in enquiries into our own artistic work raise issues of weakened critique and even weaker practice (Elkins, 2009). It also raises the inherent risk involved in an artist's complicity in their own master narratives of paradigm and discourse informed by their positionalities within class, culture, politics, social and economic structures.

The materiality and immateriality of the experience also constantly impinges on the level of theoretical enquiry that informs the choices of output into the realm of practice. The task of writing the practice requires a reconsideration of output in the aftermath of the live event and would seem to require both the self-reflexivity and alienation of relating as a creator-spectator to the archival video of the performance. This is a hugely complex task, especially in light of the arguments surrounding the writing and evaluation of practice in contemporary performance theory today (Fuschini, Jones, Kershaw & Piccini, 2009). It also poses theoretical problematics for feminist cultural scholars in light of the implications of language on representation.

This chapter addresses the overshadowing dilemmas of memory, disappearance and reincarnation through video archive and text that I have had to face in order to provide an analysis of the Feminine Semiotics of **Plot 99**. Using the technology of video I offer the reappearance of performance residue that led to the live event of **Plot 99** over four years of scripting, devising, researching, designing, investigating, writing, poeticising, improvising, rehearsing and performing. In Chapter Four, I offer a textual analysis of the central themes and characters of *Plot 99* and their implication on an identity of sexual and spiritual emergence(y) and its representation. In Chapter Five, I am attempting to analyse the presence and absence of the Feminine Semiotics within the live performance event as I reinterpret this semiotic through archive and theorizing, with a full awareness of the treachery and deception involved in this part of the academy's process.

***Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:***

***Dvd Appendix:***

*Plot 99 full show live*

***Online Visual Performance Research Archive:***

*www.plot99par.wordpress.com*

***Explanation of Correspondence:***

*The online archive follows the structural progression of the staging of Plot 99 through the asylum. It moves chronologically from the Entrance to the Asylum,*

*through the Waiting Room, The Holding Cells, Ward 33 and finally the Dream Space/Deathscape. Various gathered residue, materials and imagery provide a view into the depth of layers that formed the pre-production processes leading to the public performances of Plot 99. It includes photographic essays from field research, poetry, director's treatments, a journal, photographs of rehearsals, explanations of explorations, documentation of improvisation processes and imagery from the live public performances.*

*The Dvd provides the full screening of the Plot 99 live event. It is filmed by Anthony Strack Van Schyndel. It is compiled from footage gathered over the five-night period of the performance run. Each run of the production offered variations, differences and alterations to the output. This was due to the improvisatory nature of the production, in which selected scenes were given structure, but performers were allowed to improvise the unfolding of the scene by improvising the present moment and interaction with the audience. The range of audience across cultures, age groups, social and political backgrounds were diverse and every night offered new reactions to the material, which affected the performance. I have thus selected the material based on the practicality of 1) the framing of the content of the shot 2) providing the viewer with as detailed an edit of the occurrences, narratives and intersections within each scene 3) capturing the sense of audience as it moved and experienced the production across the five nights.*

I offer the following writing as an attempt to deconstruct and demonstrate an aesthetic and theoretical awareness of the possibility as well as impossibility of the Feminine Semiotic operating in specific moments of the live event. This is done for the purposes of rendering the practice and writing of practice examinable by the academy. I approach the theorizing tentatively, however, with a forewarning of slippage, erudition, evanescence and instability. Therefore, rather than writing from the place of the critic, I attach the mantle of *complementarity* as another system for rendering the practice present in textual memory and analysis (Jones, 2009).

All aspects and agents of this process are overshadowed by a connection to the work of embodiment, animism and the transitioning sacred that characterises women's live puppetry performance. This connection of embodiment defies textuality as a symbolic practice of containment and masculinized encoding of the libidinous feminine (Cixous, 1975 and Irigaray, 1985). It also, however, offers linguistic pathways for writing the innovation and research of women's visual performance. The following analysis therefore offers routes towards the performance possibilities of a Feminine Semiotic as a complex theoretical and politically, culturally and socially engendered undertaking that changes the fabric of the present as it is experienced in live performance.

The process of practically creating the live event of **Plot 99** was one of creative research *intersections*. **Plot 99** can be described as an intersection of semiotic and contextual elements. It is also more than that as it seeks its relationship to a practical, political and highly personal expression of the sacred embodied in the Feminine Semiotic. Here I select moments of the live production of *Plot 99* elucidated by the archive of material in the online blog, that display these intersections. It is in these moments that the Feminine Semiotics of the act of visual performance is revealed in its complex relationship to meaning and theory. It reveals the aesthetic meeting points that drive the theories of the enquiry through the performance. It also reveals the problematics involved in these processes of image and meaning-making, especially as the most vital third element of spectatorship is introduced to the dynamic.

Simon Jones (2009) describes performance as an event that resists commodification as the effective optimisation of specialisation, the containment of practice into systems that conspire to evaluate and legitimate the efficiency of output. To write the practice of a Feminine Semiotics, in order to demonstrate the textual knowing of the performance replicates the very processes of standardisation, law making and oppression of patriarchal disciplinarity and construction.

The colonization of performance has been carefully considered by various academics in recent years, who have unpacked the legitimating structures and hierarchies that have commodified, through terror and power, the parameters of efficacy in performance (Jones, 2009). The multidisciplinary nature of performance, the desire for interdisciplinarity (particularly as is evident in puppetry and visual performance) presents a weakness in the structure of specialisation required by capitalist authority. This weakness is also central to understanding the slippage, liminality and sacred transitions that I consider to be at the heart of the Feminine Semiotic.

Jones expresses a huge dilemma with the performance as research object. It is the process of objectification, especially driven through the notion of the male gaze, operative within the processes of representation against which feminist scholars such as Laura Mulvey have theorized (1975). Jones aligns performance objectification to the current economy of what he calls 'rampant commoditization' that requires textuality from the performer-artist-author-critic-evaluator (2009:29). For a feminist visual performance artist, the textualisation of women's performance embodiment, as discussed in the previous chapters, is fraught with the likelihood of seduction into patriarchal legitimisation and objectification. This problematic incursion in master narratives of oppressive representation also extends to discourses of race and difference on many levels of South African identity and its representation.

Shawn-Marie Garrett (2002) interrogates the resurrection of stereotype in theatre and performance and specifically the representation of the black female body.<sup>11</sup> She asserts that while the return of stereotype in performance is in many ways a platform for parody, satire and catharsis, some representations actually seem to be interested in those stereotypes as icons of history and a means of 'salvaging' difference through the recuperation of historical representational codes. In the 'new art of stereotype' there seems to be a failure on some artists' parts to contextualize the horrors of the images

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<sup>11</sup> Garrett considers her own positionality to contemporary African American Theatre and investigates a popular tradition of the Nineteenth Century in African American Minstrel Shows, using examples of some of the most controversial and contemporary playwrights such as Suzan Lori Parks and George C. Wolfe.

they produce, thereby offering counterproductive and destructive portrayals of otherness with no critical input (Garrett, 2002:41). What for Garrett poses a critical problem in this resurfacing of stereotype, is that artistic intentions often seem unclear. Her concern is centered in the racial dynamics and 'habits', which have perpetuated and established many dominant social ideologies and prejudices (2002:40). Positions of otherness in the dynamics of separation are always reinforced in reference to the non-other, the insider, the privileged subject of discourse (Spivak, 1988).

In the resurfacing of binary the risk of recalling and re-objectifying through the positionalities of authorship, of performance and of audience's gaze through essentialism remains. As Garrett points out, the levels of complexity haunting the use of stereotype in theatrical tradition offer many political layers and paradoxes for contemporary performances of the female body (Garrett, 2002). The dangers of trapping Nonthetha's story in a referential relationship to my positionality (and all of the political, social and historical layers involved in this) and my own master narratives, as the author of **Plot 99** thus poses a complicated trajectory for representing the body and experiences of Nonthetha. The voice of the playwright, in his/her struggles to find a resistant voice, parodies stereotype, but at the same time performs a voice that is intricately involved in its own relationships to binary and a racialised, engendered dynamic.

It is at this point in the problematics of risk involved in the positionalities of my authorship to the Feminine Semiotic representation of Nonthetha, that Minh-ha's inappropriate other provides insight to a more complex dynamic (Minh-ha, 1987). In Chapter Two this is specifically explored through the cultural semiotic term theatrical syncretism (Carlson, 2008). Minh-ha declares that the artist's job is to bring forward and open the realms of the visible and invisible (Minh-ha, 1987). It is both the visibility and invisibility of what she terms the inappropriate other that could pose a transformative strategy for representation (Minh-ha, 1987). Here 'one would have to break with such a system of dualities and show... what constitutes invisibility itself as well as what exceeds mere visibility' (Grzanic, 1998:3). Minh-ha also uses the terms 'elsewhere' and

'within here', aligning identity representation with the destabilisation of time and space (Grzanic, 1998:3). This destabilisation operates to question, to celebrate and to corrode the fixedness of the subject through the here and the past, the real and the fantasy, as Minh-ha declares, exceeding the limits while one works within them (Grzanic, 1998). Experience is thus never linear, but simultaneous and always inexhaustive (Grzanic, 1998).

The experience of the inappropriate other becomes syncretic and not merely a decorative derision of essentializing political correctness or multicultural sameness. Just as an inappropriate other cannot be exhaustive enough, she says, we cannot cover all areas, but in speaking specifically we can provide tools for explorations in the struggles of the marginalised, of gender or sexuality or race, while not needing to name all experiences (Grzanic, 1998). Minh-ha declares that 'one always has to walk this precarious line of difference and of inappropriate (d) ness if one is to avoid merely retrieving or rejecting the past' (Grzanic, 1998:2). Thus, the gesture of the Feminine Semiotic in its appropriations of binaries, explores the meanings that occur in the surfaces of representation, using the present moment to both subvert and celebrate the complexities of identity as it is re-imagined in the present.

### **Finding the Feminine Semiotic**

If knowing is haunted by unpredictability, both science and the arts share the possibility of uncertainty as the foreground to innovative knowledge production (Jones, 2009). Often the intentions of elements of the performance are neither unique, nor premeditated yet the outcome as well as the process may facilitate new *knowings* (Kershaw, 2009). The manifestations of presence or performative output as it were, cannot by their very nature be completely predicted. Completion of theorizing, creation or receptivity is a fallacy and impossibility that should be used to the advantage of the Feminine Semiotic project. The production then is not a final product, so much as a settling or distillation of moments that create knowledge through intersections with the unpredictable surfacings of audience and the third. These intersections inhabit the complex meeting points in the Feminine Semiotic, between the

ephemerality and immediacy of live experience, its reception, perception and once-offness, memory and forgetting, micro- and macrocosms, presence and absence, object and body, space and audience. A static attractor, such as the video lens, may represent a state in which these complex systems finally settle on a particular night of performance or in a particular frame in the edit. Strange attractors, such as audience interactions or live improvisations, however, represent unpredictable trajectories in which the systems of semiotics and meaning run from situation to situation without ever settling down.

These processes of transition define my reinterpretation, through Crosby's theorizing (2009), of the sacred in performance. They also insist on the complex interplay of possibility and impossibility of the Feminine Semiotic in performance. The Feminine Semiotic expresses the unpredictable intersecting revelations as well as silences in the surfaces of the present and the spaces of history. It invokes the fluid; the libidinous body only in so much as it engages the containers of meaning, and binary in language, space, time and meaning in order to subvert them.

Site and architecture are significant containers for the work of the Feminine Semiotics of *Plot 99*, which was finally performed in the historically black women only hospital Ward F of the Valkenberg East Mental Asylum in Pinelands Cape Town (Appendix 5).

***Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:***

***Online Visual Performance Research Archive:***

*<http://plot99par.wordpress.com/2011/12/13/valkenberg/>*

*Valkenberg: A Photographic Essay by Anthony Strack*

*<http://plot99par.wordpress.com/2011/12/01/an-exercise-in...nd-photography/>*

*Finding a Site for Plot 99: Exploring the Asylum*

*<https://plot99par.wordpress.com/2011/12/07/production-ideas/>*

Production Ideas

***Explanation of Correspondence:*** Appendix 5 and the online archive show the Provincial Government of the Western Cape's (PGWC) site plans of the

Valkenberg East Hospital Ward F where *Plot 99* was staged. The areas that we utilised for rehearsal and performance are highlighted in pink. The plans show how we are able to enter from the front stoep two, travel upstairs, move through the wards and exit at the back through foyer one's stairwell. Anthony Strack's photographic essay of the Hospital Ward F at Valkenberg captures the entropy and decay of the space in its found state in a visual exploration of the site before our artistic residency.

Even before the decision to work site specifically, I had decided to locate the production within an asylum based on field research, which revealed a common layout of early 20<sup>th</sup> century asylums in the Cape. In the *Plot 99* script in 2009, I had already begun writing within this structure of negotiation and intersection between the natural external world and the internal world of the asylum:

*The following scenes take place in a lunatic asylum. There is an old large blue door, in the centre of the stage. The performers play all the parts, some of which are performed as puppets. As the stories begin, the asylum walls expand until the room opens out and the space is filled with land and sky. (Script November 2009: 5)*

Engaging the sites of the asylum as an entry point to the staging of the Feminine Semiotic brings feminist theories of space, place and displacement to the fore. The site-specific journey into the asylum in *Plot 99* mirrors the risks involved in the undertaking of the representation of history, legacy, positionality and binary in performance. Nancy Duncan states that masculinist patriarchal knowledges are engendered through material place and space. The space of the abandoned psychiatric hospital where we performed *Plot 99*, could not be engaged outside of the historical legacy and stigma that it contains and is contained within (Swartz, 1999). Feminist writers such as Kathleen Kirby and Lynette Jackson explore how cartography and the mapping of space extends to the containment and mapping of subject hood and the body into historical, cultural and gendered positions of power.

In a sense, the colonial asylum can be seen to emulate the ideals of cartography, of control over bodily and libidinous excess

A dominating, self-contained, masculine ego who maps out the world around himself and, in the process of charting paths and drawing boundaries, tends to exclude or marginalize non-dominant others (Duncan, 1996: 6)

The container of the Colonial asylum was created to hide the dangerous abjections of the embodied immersions of the other. Yet embodiment was the very *modus operandi* for exploitation as the apparatuses of oppression were upheld through the physical labour of the black other to maintain material growth. Kirby explores how women (and racialised others) 'who are less able to control their environment, but are more responsible for its production and reproduction, have long been used to the feeling of overwhelming immersion' (Duncan, 1996:6).

Fiona Wilkie in her study on site-specific performance draws distinctions between levels of site-specificity in performance and the issue of 'purity' in the engagement of space that some practitioners have raised. She states that the label *site specific* refers only to performances in which a profound engagement with one site 'is absolutely central to both the creation and execution of the work' (2002:150). Thus the work of practitioners creating performance outside of the traditional theatre building can be categorized on a line of purity that moves from simply being outside of the theatre, to site-generic (performance created for various like -sites) or site sympathetic (an existing performance and text that is placed inside of a chosen site).

*Plot 99* developed initially as a textual response to research and the explorations of various abandoned Colonial asylums through photography, writing and field research. Thus in Wilkie's barometer of site specificity, it could be labeled site sympathetic rather than specific. Yet, the interwoven immersions into the detailed site specificity of Valkenberg guided the actual practice of the Feminine Semiotics of the production *Plot 99*. The material of the performance was created out of the inspiration of artistic residency in the

buildings themselves. Large sections of the work were created by performer's direct response to the site and the improvisations between the performers and the space, residue, structure and quality of this specific asylum environment.

In creating site-sympo-specific feminist performance and in light of the tension of opposites involved in a Feminine Semiotic enquiry, the political engendering of spatialised performance cannot be overlooked. In fact, it is key to the site of *Plot 99*'s explorations. If feminist performance can destabilize gender, then the Feminist Semiotic destabilizes spaces. Whilst working within the specificity of the historical asylum site, *Plot 99* engaged the dislocation of the site in the present through installation and embodiment. Duncan terms this challenging of space as 'spatial revolution or a deterritorialization that would undermine boundaries between public and private spaces, thus (re) politicizing both public and private spheres' (1996:7). The asylum, itself such a contradictory environment of private surveillance, hiding and erasure was also a space of public containment and supposed protection from the insane. Yet, the public/private spaces of Nonhetha's experience within the site of the asylum are brought into light once again.

*Plot 99* uses the spaces of the asylum to bring public audiences into the highly guarded and inaccessible mental hospital buildings. This unstable penetration of the unknown is then brought into stark witnessing of the extreme private moments of trauma and revelation within the asylum of *Plot 99*. Working with the multiple layers of existing form (site specific), imposed form (site sympathetic) and receptivity of performance in the Valkenberg buildings, the space itself transitions into multiple creative installations of intersecting histories, bodies, psyches and rituals. These layers of engagement with the site thus destabilize both the patriarchal encodings of bodies and spaces within the asylum as well as the spectrum of categorization of site specific performance itself.

In *Plot 99*, the problematic of the risks of engaging stereotype is addressed through the dilemmas of semiotic excess and meaning in site-sympo-specific performance. The movement into the legacies of the asylum is complicated by

the mythologies of the journey of descent to the underworld, which is given literal and figurative meaning through the design and construction of *Plot 99* in the Valkenberg Ward. *Plot 99* is realized as a moving site-sympo-specific experience in which the audience is physically involved in transition through the specific spaces of the building. Through the unfolding events of each scene, the audience moves from room to room in the asylum, in order to witness the full event. Part exhibition, part ritual, part theatre, part communitas, *Plot 99* attempts eventuality within eventuality. Once in the asylum, the journey through the rooms and the performances within each space take the audience into the psychic terrain of the characters and their respective physical, cultural, historical, psychological and emotional landscapes within the non-linear narrative.

This journey, now re-interpreted through the video archive and explored in its creative depths through the online archive, offers the audience and performers a creative immersion into pathways for the expression of Feminine Semiotics. This Feminine Semiotics, guided by the theory and textuality of the research, seeks strategies for the insurmountable expansion and transformation of experience inside and outside of patriarchy. In this chapter, I articulate not only the attempts to destabilize and fracture hegemony and the symbolic through the Feminine Semiotic. I also analyse its potential to invigorate, transform, acknowledge and celebrate women's experiences and representations of sexual and spiritual emergence(y). I consider the problematics of the imperviousness of binary in this re-imagining of narrative.

Here video and archive are used as a primary tool for rendering visible these processes as they occurred in the *Plot 99* asylum. We see meaning not only as that which informs the content of the process of **Plot 99**, but as that which is revealed through the framing of the performance. The video, taken from five nights of footage, created by photographer Anthony Strack, and the online archive gathered through the residue of the creative process leading to performance, provide technological devices that offer other windows on to the process of reception of the material.

My intention is to demonstrate how, as we enter deeper and deeper into the underworld of the production (as well as the building of the asylum), the rationality of a patriarchal environment is slowly subsumed by the innovative as well as often unattainable Feminine Semiotics of puppetry and visual performance. The video and online archive reveal new frames of intelligibility and information as to the intersections of knowledge and aesthetic, reception and emotion, politics and image-making. The third element, the audience-viewer, is a vital layer of the semiotic and meaning processes while the camera and archive become the fourth witness to the event. It is thus from the next level of engagement, through camera and archive, that I engage an analysis of the Feminine Semiotics of **Plot 99** in an attempt to explicate its contributions to innovation and knowledge in representation.

It facilitates the emergence of the third in representation as that which arises not only in resistance to binary but through the complex signifiatory practices of power dynamics and meaning involved in dichotomy. Thus the binaries of stereotype and stigma are complicated, reinterpreted and disrupted through the alchemical layering of aesthetic, ritual, sound, object, image, puppet, body, mask, architecture, installation, audience, performer, movement and music. The relationship of the audience to the moment of performance creates an essential dynamic that promulgates the engagement with a Feminine Semiotic, especially as it engages the concept of puppetry. It is the process of receptivity in the performance of puppetry, which offers an entry point to the simultaneous dialogics of construct and sentience involved in the exchange between audience and bodies.

Multimodal performance, to lesser and greater degrees of effect, creates an intellectual and sensorial distancing from the subject matter. It is often desensitising of the narrative through its excess and alienating in its multiplicity. While I was conscious of this ability to alienate inherent to the practice of visual performance, I was also aware of the need to balance this with the intimate spaces of the story, where I believed Nonhetha's experience of spiritual and sexual emergence(y) lay. The Feminine Semiotic, however, is involved in much more than expression through puppetry and visual

performance. It asks for an awareness and approach to understanding the subtleties of animism involved in every process of the production, the embodied and the invisible, the presence and absence of life. In the puppet production, all elements have the ability to transform through performance. It expresses the multiplicitous languages operating in representation, which in turn express the complex South African identities that inform the positionalities at work in the production. The approach to visual performance as an expression of the Feminine Semiotic as that which captures the energy of transition, considers every element of theatre to contain a potential for living multimedia, animism and puppetry.

As described in chapter three, the Paper Body Collective's developing approach to visual performance in the Feminine Semiotic considers every element of theatre to contain a potential for living multimedia, animism and puppetry. This approach, researched through several productions and collaborations between 2003 and 2011, has provided platforms for experimenting with form and meaning. In light of my central interest of performing a Feminine Semiotic, I believe it is important to explore the body itself as the site of the feminine imaginary, and its disruption. The central problem in defining women's sexuality (and I extend this to the performance of the sacred feminine) is finding ways for expression that challenge creating her within traditional language constructs or the masculine symbolic. Phallogocentric language exerts a violent and suppressive control over the potentially expressive and multiplicitous sexuality and spirituality of women's creativity.

Based on the intersections of research, body, ritual, ceremony, languages, voice and object, our company developed the term *Magic'Umlingo*. This describes an alchemical, liminoid approach to creating visual performance. *Umlingo* in Xhosa connotes the creation of magic, which has a sacred and liminal function that is to facilitate the inexplicable and to manifest transition, the strange or impossible. The term *Magic'Umlingo* mixes language to create a hybrid term that straddles contemporary performance and South African puppetry, the transpersonal and animism, ritual and improvisation, the visible and invisible. These elements also express the Paper Body Collective's

approach to puppetry as it is involved with what could best be described as performative alchemy. As articulated in chapter three, alchemy is a metaphor that describes the combination of two separate base elements in order to facilitate a third unpredictable or unknowable factor. Performative alchemy, I believe, offers routes to creating a practice of Feminine Semiotics, that is the innovative expression of meaning and matter, research and practice, binary and unity. As a creative method for generating material around a Feminine Semiotics, it offered a dynamic way into the puppetry rehearsal process.

The approach I propose to locating Magic'Umlingo practice, has developed over a period of seven years of performance research as initiated by the improvisation techniques of French performance Compagnie Au Cul Du Loop, lead by female singer and performer Dominique Montain. The company who are based in France, use sound, language, object, rhythm and movement to contact the poetic and representational landscapes of the performer and the performance object itself. Au Cul Du Loop's unique approach requires great skill, focus, technique and fitness, in order to facilitate corresponding levels of play, innovation and non-technique in improvisation. The effect is to encourage the performers to access the alchemical, that is a performed intersection of technique and improvisation that is not pre-determined by script, narrative or presumption of outcomes. Au Cul Du Loop's technique involves the meeting point of skill and training with intuition, improvisation, ritual, articulation, surfaces (of the body, of the object, of the space) and reaction-response, in the form of movement, utilization of space, architecture, sound, languages, bodily articulation and object manipulation in order to find performative expression. In essence, it is a technique of improvisation that utilizes relationship between various surfaces, expressions and emergences to create its magic, or alchemy.

*Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:*

*Online Visual Performance Research Archive: Category:*

*<https://plot99par.wordpress.com/2011/11/27/the-waiting-room-rehearsal-pictures/>*

*The Waiting room Rehearsals*

<https://plot99par.wordpress.com/2011/12/27/the-entrance-rehearsal-pictures/>

### *The Entrance Rehearsals*

**Explanation of Correspondence:** *The videos of rehearsals show early improvisations using Magic' Umlingo techniques. The Plot 99 rehearsals were divided into two phases, the first was the studio phase and the second was the Valkenberg phase.*

*Puppetry is most often taught through three basic levels of technique. The most common is an improvisatory performance method called Object Manipulation. Through my performance research, I term the three levels of object manipulation improvisation the literal, the anthropomorphic and the abstract Magic'Umlingo. The literal and anthropomorphic improvisations most often present themselves as interplay of indicators and expectations. Many of the characteristics offered either stereotype or over characterise certain features of emotion or personality, using large indicators to show sex, age or intention. Puppeteers usually employ specific characteristics, stereotypes and traditional/cultural signifiers to represent a particular person or creature.*

*Through our workshops, we explored all three levels of improvisation, in order to expand our awareness of the types of manipulation implemented in puppetry performance. The series of videos from the Studio Rehearsal sessions, document our progressions in workshops and then rehearsals to explore Magic'Umlingo techniques and material generation. In rehearsal, it was important to establish the moments and awareness of the difference between the levels, so that as our explorations continued we could identify our own responses, conditioning and languages when performing with puppets and objects.*

It is the union of abstract puppetry performance; metaphor and symbolism that I believe lent the most potential to developing puppetry for the Plot 99 performances. It required a consistent immersion in this approach in rehearsals in order to build the performers confidence in their own instincts and to open their embodiment to the endless possibilities of abstract improvisation. It is a very difficult and advanced approach to puppetry in the

beginning, but once the performer understands the primary objective of removing all barriers and boundaries of expression, the scope of play expands. By consciously releasing, the relationship into the conceptual, new movements and improvisations arose in rehearsal that revealed a more unpredictable and subconscious response to the material of Plot 99. In many ways, this technique is similar to the Japanese contemporary performance Butoh style in dance, which uses the internal, unpredictable landscapes of the body and its responses as a political and social form of protest, a vehicle for creation and destruction. In the abstract, there arises a complex interplay between content, meaning, emotion and representation. In the abstract, the puppet and puppeteer come to represent selves in creation.

In light of my central interest of performing a Feminine Semiotic, I believe it is important to explore the body itself as a site of the endless body of the feminine imaginary (Cixous, 1975) and its disruption. The central problem in defining women's sexuality (and I extend this to the performance of the sacred feminine) is finding ways for expression that challenge her realization within traditional language constructs or the masculine symbolic (Kristeva, 1982). As discussed in Chapter One as well as Chapter Two, phallogocentric language exerts a control over the multiplicitous sexuality and spirituality of women's creativity (Cixous, 1975 and Irigaray, 1985).

This potentially expressive sexuality of women's... experience suffers violence under phallic law – casting her outside of the symbolic, representation and language (Elliot, 1992:214).

It is thus through the inversion and subversion of phallogocentric meanings that we are able to re-imagine spaces for feminine representation.

Yet, in accessing a Feminine Semiotics in visual performance, women's representation is involved in a more complex interplay between the multiple signifiers at play in creating performative meaning. As Nuttall (2010) urges, we need to read the surfaces of the present across from the inside of the moment, where meaning is received and interpreted at the same time rather than hidden. Representation as well as cultural knowledge production needs to

address the complex interplay of surface and intersection involved in South African identities today. In **Plot 99**, this process of engaging surface reveals the risk of impossibility and inevitable insider/outsider, subject/object positionalities as well as syncretic potential in representing complex identity in South African women's visual performance and puppetry.

### **The Problematics of Construct: Stereotype, Language and Spatial Resistance in the Feminine Semiotics of Plot 99**

A key area of the performance that gave rise to the expression of the Feminine Semiotics of **Plot 99** began in the area of the asylum that I term the 'Waiting Room of the Post Colony'. The historical contexts primarily explored in this part of **Plot 99** are the environments of the Eastern Cape during Nonhetha's political and social era at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). The Waiting Room of the Post colony, in the *Plot 99* script, which developed as explored in the online archive into the live performance, explores the hybridising as well as opposing iconographies of the Xhosa frontier war era, the 1918 *Isibeto*, the rise of syncretic millenarian movements, Nonhetha's rural background, and the burgeoning psychiatric institutions that followed the spread of colonial rule.

*Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:*

*Plot 99 Written Script: p 13-18 The Waiting Room of the Post Colony*

*Plot 99 Dvd: 29:00-37:00 mins*

*Online Visual Performance Research Archive:*

*<https://plot99par.wordpress.com/category/the-waiting-room-of-the-postcolony/>*

*The Waiting Room of the Post Colony*

*Explanation of Correspondence: The appendices demonstrate the development of The Waiting Room as a space of historical intersections that collide and transform with the present day abandoned buildings. The Waiting Room is an in-between space, neither part of the outside world nor fully part of the asylum. It is a space of transition and an entry point, a space of decisions, declarations of information and histories, admissions to enter the underworld, preparing for what is to come next within the new environment and deciding*

*whether one should really be there in the first place. From the early stages of conceptualising the Waiting Room as the first stop in the asylum, I had imagined the design for the space to be one in which the audience would be integrated into the scene as possible patients in the system.*

*The admissions nursing officer of the Waiting Room, is called Charon in the script, and was based on the mythical character of Charon, the Greek ferryman of death who ferries souls across the river Styx to the passages of the underworld. This also echoed in the entrance to the underworld as a transitional space between life and death, between the upper and lower worlds. In the underworld of the asylum, I designed Charon as a doctor in medical uniform, the style of which is located in the present. In the costume designs, we see how this aesthetic is repeated with specific reference to historical costumes from Nonthetha's era. We see traditional Xhosa clothing as well as the influence of western styling on traditional dress. In the rehearsal pictures in the archive, we see how a chance encounter with a traditional Xhosa chiefs gathering next door to the building on the Oude Molen premises, gave inspiration for some of the traditional and neo-traditional adapted costume elements in the scene.*

Finding a performative strategy for a Feminine Semiotic required a creative investigation of history, languages, cultural icons and adaptations of these symbols with space, bodies and visual performance. Many of these layers were unpacked by the process of rehearsing with a culturally and racially diverse team of local and international performers and collaborators, who constantly questioned the layers of exploration through their presence and engagement with each other, with myself and with the material. In full awareness of this process, I investigate how the density of material is then presented and received through the live performances of *Plot 99*.

The uncanny sensibility of the Waiting Room as a coherent hospital environment emerges through a destabilization of time and space. This is done through a slowing down of movement and sound, to enact and manipulate the pace of the first room of the underworld. In the live event, the Waiting Room is

our first engagement with the underworld of the psychiatric asylum. The manipulation of time and space through performance alters the audience's awareness of place and sets the tone for their journey through the production.

Upon entering the Waiting Room, the audience encounter a seating area where performers are sitting and waiting. The audience are not placed in front of a stage or specified separate performance area but are integrated into whatever free space is available in the Waiting Room. The moment presents the possibility that the audience could be potential patients waiting to be administered into the psychiatric system. It places the audience's own bodies and safety structures at risk. The audience stands throughout the space, observing from different points and angles the unfolding experience.

As one performer enters the space through a performative gesture, another exits. In this performative way, the Waiting Room becomes an intersection of exits and entrances. It marks the audience's own entrance into the post colony of Nonthetha's history. This representation of Nonthetha's 'world' is deeply embedded in the intersections of the legacy of the building, the diverse creative voices arising through the performers' politically- and culturally-informed bodies, as well as my own design and authorship of the room, viewed through the gaze of the audience's positionalities within these frameworks.

One performer awaiting admission to the hospital is a masked woman who is later revealed as Nonthetha Nkwenkwe. The utilization of mask in the performance of Nonthetha creates an intricate connection as well as disconnection between performer and character. This interplay of construct and integration is informed by the sacred and liminoid performative possibilities of the mask (Du Preez, 2006 and Joubert, 2006). The liminality of the mask in relation to animism and puppetry in African ritual practice is explored in the theories of Du Preez (2006) in Chapter Three. In *Plot 99*, the use of mask is interpreted through liminoid performance that uses ritual and mask to signal the presence of character, as well as to facilitate the

inhabitation of the sacred qualities of personal transition in rites of passage as explored in Chapter Two (Crosby, 2009).

*Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:*

*Plot 99 Dvd: 35:35-37:00 mins and 1:04:00- 1:10:00*

*Online Visual Performance Research Archive:*

<https://plot99par.wordpress.com/2011/11/28/characters-nonthetha/>

Character Imagery: Nonthetha

The performer is masked throughout the entire performance, except for two significant monologues, in which she addresses her complicity with construct and confronts Nonthetha's legacy from her own political and engendered positionality. The mask serves to emphasize and destabilize the construction of the character onto the performer's body, but it also brings the presence of Nonthetha's sentience and uncanny kinesiology into play for both the performer and the audience. The effect is an unsettling interplay between embodiment and construct through the liminal spaces where the mask meets the live body. The use of mask creates a construct of the dead prophetess that is at once sacred in its homage and profane in its unapologetic reconstruction of her presence through the plasticity of the mask and the positionality of the performer in performance.

Bhabha considers the problems of 'origin' in racist stereotyping and looks to Fanon for interpretations of the colonised subject as a construct of stereotypical discourse: 'the subject primordially fixed and yet triply split between the incongruent knowledges of body, race, ancestors' (Bhabha, 1992:136). The use of puppetry and mask gives metaphoric and semiotic presence to the concept of the split subject, engaging the discourses of race and gender in the complex materialities of the multiple body.

Visibility, effected through the use of puppetry, is a key tool in identifying the fallacies of difference and of the 'other' in the essentializing paradigms of positionalities of binary in performance. Judith Butler says that embodied identification is fantasy (Butler, 1989). So too is the uncanny mimetic

coherence between the performer's body and the puppet body. This is complicated by the audience's gaze as the third element in the dynamic. The audience engage with difference or similarity rendered visible on the surface of the body, yet there is a constant reminder through the puppet that

such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence of identity that they otherwise purport to express becomes a fabrication manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs (Butler, 1989: 336).

The mask thus alludes to that which is rendered invisible, the face of the woman beneath the construct. Butler's theory of the gendered body as performative is given metaphoric presence through puppetry. The concept of the reality of an interior essence is rendered as a fabrication of acts that derive from social and political discourse, as expressed through the body of the puppet.

The space of the Waiting Room looks onto two other rooms – offices of custodianship where the performers exist as nurses, doctors and patients as they move in and out of these adjoining spaces through the Waiting Room. Intersections of live and recorded sound destabilise these intersections as unexpected sounds and movements spill out from performers who emerge from the mass of bodies in the room. As the performers emerge their presence is informed by visible and invisible indicators of difference through positionality, reacting to moments of choreographed and improvised meeting points between bodies, space and time. The walls of the asylum intersect with these movements and sounds as well as the histories at play.

In the Waiting Room, semiotic indicators of difference that emerge are intersected by their inculcation within the constructs of character and representation of history. One figure emerges as Enoch Mgijima, his historical dress belied by his anachronistic clutching of black plastic high-heeled shoes. He transforms Feminine Semiotics that simultaneously engage the embodied positionalities of the performers, audience, building and the present time.

These positionalities are complicated these synthetic objects of fashion into a rifle and metaphor of conflict through movement. This moment expresses the sometimes bizarre intersections of the past with the materiality of the present. It presents a complex point of distillation and dilemma between the performer's engagement with his own positionality to his body and objects of the present, the legacy of violence of the Bulhoek massacre, and the traumas of colonial domination on Xhosa identity. The video of this moment expresses various viewpoints, in close up and expansion, that recreate the meeting points of speed, duration, repetition, clarity, confusion, exhaustion and inexhaustibility, light and dark, peace and violence, dichotomy and unity, contradiction and presence that marks the performance of the Waiting Room.

The colonial stereotype is a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive, and demands not only that we extend our critical and political objectives but that we change the object of analysis itself (Bhabha, 1992:133).

As Enoch Mjijima is admitted to the hospital, the figurative and performative expression of the Bulhoek massacre intersects with a kinetic moment in which stereotypes and fantasies of rural South African women are engaged through the positionalities of race and gender as explored in the writing of Lynette Jackson in Chapter One (Jackson, 2005). The stereotype embraces simultaneous and contradictory beliefs (Bhabha, 1992). It is the 'infinitely complex unconscious and occasionally conscious multiple beliefs of fetishism' in stereotyping through which Bhabha declares that 'it is easier to see the bind of knowledge and fantasy, power and pleasure that informs the regime of visibility... the visibility of the racial/colonial other' (Bhabha, 1992:138).

A young Xhosa female performer pushes a constructed toy cart through the space. Her presence and the images contained in miniature on the cart invoke a pastoral, colonial fantasy of impossible rural feminine identity. It essentializes an imagined role for Xhosa women, in an inferred reference to a nostalgic rural milieu. On the cart are miniature constructs of women created from straw and cloth chopping wood, grinding corn with babies on their backs, thatching huts.

It is a one-dimensional, generalised representation that undermines the complex systems of age group, lineage, clan, perceptions of fertility and labour involved in its referencing. On one level, it would seem to reproduce an unmediated, stigmatised perception of African women as the primary producers of food in an agricultural rural community (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). The performer's sound and movement responses, however, complicate this as she distorts and interrupts time and space, her own positionality in the present time of performance meeting with the events surrounding her and intersecting with the play in scale between her giant body and the tiny construct.

*Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:*

*Plot 99 Dvd: 31:05-35:35 mins*

Zimbabwean activist/academic Patricia McFadden takes the passionate standpoint that national and familial demands for women to 'support, nurture and protect our threatened communities' contains women's identity within the very 'relationships and laws that have systematically excluded, silenced and disempowered women' (McFadden, 2003:58). African feminist theorists argue that it is these representations that produce the greatest capacity for stereotyping and limitation of the female subject and, by extension, her capacity for desire (McFadden, 2003).<sup>12</sup> She asserts that while African women have fought patriarchal oppression on many levels, it has been mostly contained within the discourses of reproduction and domestic rights around abuse, leaving strategies of transformative sexuality mostly silent (McFadden, 2003). The repetition of reproductive and domestic roles on the representation of women delineates the potentially transformative and empowering terrain of individual sexuality to 'safe zones' which, for McFadden, exclude the more complex terrains of choice and pleasure (McFadden, 2003:58).

Yet, it is the portrayal of rural women's roles in the play of scale between the young woman and the microcosm of the toy trolley, which intersects with the macrocosm of the Waiting Room. This interplay presents its own uncanny

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<sup>12</sup> I refer to the articles by Amina Mama and Patricia McFadden in *Feminist Africa* volumes 4 (2005) and 2 (2003).

stereotypical emanations with history, audience, time and place that open the doorway to a Feminine Semiotic disruption of the female body.

Patient Number Three, Inanna also provides a performative disruption to the pacing and semiotic continuity of the Waiting Room. Before this point in the performance, she and her psychiatrist, Dr Pascharama, the 21<sup>st</sup> century Guru, have been located very much in the present. Her presence in this historical melting pot problematizes the relationship between time, space and the performance. The costumes of the performers also bring a discontinuity to the historical narrative as they integrate highly contemporary elements with historical ones.

*Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:*

*Plot 99 Dvd: 36:43-39:00 mins*

Patient Number Three, Inanna imposes her voice on the space, declaring herself and her own identity as a goddess within this fracturing historical and medical environment, shattering the epistemological meaning of the Waiting Room as she ritualistically embodies her own distress at being admitted to the hospital. Dressed in her costume of protective *mes* as referred to in Chapter Four (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983), Patient Number Three, Inanna prepares to journey deeper into the building of the underworld. Dr Pascharama reappears, but he completely subverts the first image of himself established as the 21<sup>st</sup> century Guru in his earlier entrance.

Within the asylum continuum, Dr Pascharama transforms into a psychiatrist, but his costume problematises his relationship to this new role. He is dressed as a modern-day cave explorer, a contemporary adventurer who abseils into the depths of the hidden psyche. He is dressed in protective climbing gear, a hard climbing hat with a torch, ropes and hooks, booties and a wetsuit, suggesting his preparation for swimming deep waters and climbing high rocks. Dr Pascharama is attached to the walls of the asylum by a continuous rope, the source of which is invisible as he climbs along the walls and ceiling. In this

protective gear he comes to collect Patient Number Three, Inanna, now revealed as his own psychiatric patient.

His appearance creates a thematic and character-driven dislocation of his identity, through the imposed construct of a new identity and function, that of a doctor within the institution of the asylum. His position to his initial character, offered as a new age shamanic Guru who directly interacted with the audience, is now rendered obscure by his reinterpretation as a medical practitioner whose primary engagement is with Patient Number Three. His transition is further disrupted by his costume and actions of rock climbing which in turn dislocate the asylum spaces. His actions would seem absurd in relation to his new function as a doctor and in relation to the material reality of the building. His relationship to Patient Number Three, Inanna is also destabilizing as the audience seems to readjust and reconfigure their positionalities in the Waiting Room. This creates a temporal and spatial imposition of dislocation through their presences in the asylum.

Through a bridge of recorded sound that enters into the Waiting Room as breath and wind, Dr Pascharama collects not only Patient Number Three, Inanna, but the audience as well and leads them into the next space. The Waiting Room, with its slow, open space of intersections and history now suddenly projects into the libidinous, violent and womb-like passageway of Patient Number Three, Inanna's psyche. Here the audience move from the distanced spaces of colliding history, into the embodied and intimate spaces of the feminine body, her experiences of perceived psychosis and her struggles with the patriarchal oppressions of the symbolic.

*Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:*

*Plot 99 Dvd: 39:00-41:00 mins*

For feminist psychoanalysts, Lacanian and Freudian re-readings offer a route into how the fragile structures of human sexuality and subjective stability are constructed as a political project of the patriarchal unconscious and symbolic order rather than essential states of being (Elliott, 1992). Anthony Elliot

retraces Freud's account of female sexuality concerning the castration complex and childhood Oedipalisation in psychoanalytic theory (Elliott, 1992). While Freud is highly criticized in feminist circles for the misogyny of his theories, they provide fodder for many debates on the complexity of female sexuality in western feminism (Elliott, 1992). Freud sets up the problematic concept of primary masculine sexuality in the polymorphous desire of the pre-division child (the separation between boys and girls, masculine and feminine) (Mitchell, 1974). The assumption of a masculine state of pre-division suggests that in this system, being is always already a masculine occurrence, and it is the presence or absence of the penis in the phallic phase that determines sexual division (Mitchell, 1974). Libidinous desire in the castrated female child and her identification with her castrated mother, guides the 'monumental reconfiguration' of her desire and the subsequent development of her own sexuality and identity within the masculine (Elliott, 1992). In short, Elliott observes that in Freud's estimation, feminine sexuality becomes a failed masculinity rather than its own potential for transformative identity (Elliott, 1992:206).

This dynamic assumes a fundamental separation anxiety that renders both men and women in psychosexual terms as stuck in a permanent bind of potentially violent and disordering fragmentation (Cixous, 1975).

Human subjects of both sexes are equally split and fractured; the sexual relation thus being understood as a doomed, frantic search for the power conferred by the phallus (Elliott, 1992:209).

This fragmentation of sexuality in binary echoes Bhabha's descriptions of the fragmentation of the racial stereotype (Bhabha, 1992). In feminist theory, the *transcendental signifier of the phallus* (Elliott, 1992) becomes patriarchal identity's imagined point of unity, coherence, fulfilment, just as an imagined and enforced otherness becomes the fixed point of racialized essentialist gestures. The stereotype is a point of impossible fulfilment and constant division (Bhabha, 1992). It precludes the capacity for expansive multiplicitous desire, experience and sustainability (Irigaray, 1985). The fear of the libidinous state of borderlessness is that of psychosis, the severe disordering of reality

and mental and physical impairment of meaning (Kristeva, 1982). Elliott points out that while unconscious sexuality could be the potential site of explosive and radical sexual potential for women, in Lacanian theory, it remains in the realms of the pre symbolic (Elliott, 1992). To enter the Lacanian pre symbolic, cannot be done without losing all coherence, without losing the subject in the indeterminate space of psychosis (Kristeva, 1982).

It is the critical disjuncture of stereotypical psychosis, which connects us to the spaces of the Feminine Semiotic and the uncontrolled thresholds of desire, sexual and spiritual emergence in **Plot 99**. The Feminine Semiotic does not operate merely within the limits of symbolic order, substantiating the subject within rather than destroying the dysfunctionality of its relationship with phallogocentric discourse. The Feminine Semiotic inhabits both the potential and impossible spaces of disruption of historical, political and social coherence in order to invigorate spaces of alchemy in the present. It attempts to reinterpret the stagnating political constructs of women's sexuality and madness within semiotic intersections that provide alchemical catalysts for change.

As we enter Patient Number Three, Inanna's passageway, the production takes the audience deeper and deeper into the Feminine Semiotic of the underworld. The audience are led into a confined, claustrophobic passageway, packed together into the dark, dank shadows. The walls are close together in this narrow space, exposing the scaffolding, iron sheeting, wood, nails, and broken doors that could pose a threat to the audience's safety and security. They are trapped amongst the other audience bodies, while Patient Number Three, Inanna marches up and down the passageway, speaking the words of her own descent into mental illness. A sense of density of bodies and presences in the darkness is layered with the threatening elements of voice and movement surrounding them. Patient Number Three, Inanna performs her own stereotype of hysteria; her melodramatic, aggressive repression brings us into the tight confines of our own stigma and fear of violent madwomen (McClintock, 2001).

She erupts in an overwhelming performance of mental distress, of pain, loss, fear, violence and anger, spoken through jumbled prosaic utterances and agitated walking. Anne McClintock has referenced the archive of writing on stereotypes of femininity and hysteria (McClintock, 2001). She draws correlations between the complex intersections of mental illness with race and sexuality in South Africa. She references specifically the stereotypical representations used to depict the character of Bertha, the mad hysterical wife of Rochester famously portrayed in Charlotte Bronte's romantic novel *Jane Eyre* (McClintock, 2001).

What this correlation reveals is the extensive literary and archival association of women's sexual and racial difference with mental illness in representation. Bertha's madness is specifically depicted through her corporeal deviancy:

She is bestial and bereft; she shambles backwards and forwards, grovelling on all fours, infantilised as well as bestialised... she is linguistically bereft...letting out a "fierce cry", "the maniac bellowed" (McClintock, 2001:13).

McClintock considers Foucault's writing on the historical development of coherent language in psychiatry as an indicator of difference between the 'babbling' of the insane and the monologues of medical discourse (McClintock, 2001). Mental illness is perceived as a disordering of hegemonic language (McClintock, 2001). Yet it is this battle of feminism with language that defines resistance to the patriarchal. For both Cixous and Irigaray the feminine imaginary exists in the body before language and patriarchal symbolic and thus is a site of radical subversion (Cixous, 1975 and Irigaray, 1985). They urge women to develop 'a specific *feminine language*, which evades patriarchal regulation' (Elliott, 1992:216). The female body forms an alternative symbolic order that Irigaray terms 'woman speak' – writing from the feminine body in which embodiment becomes the locus of epistemological emancipation from phallogentrism (Elliott, 1992:217). Kristeva also engages the semiotic with the problematics of language and the subject in process (Kristeva, 1982). For her the semiotic potential of subjectivity as explored in

Chapter Two is expressed in the pre-oedipal drives of the child, both energetic and psychic (Kristeva, 1982)

Intimately connected to the somatic aspects of language which are outside representation, such as the rhythmic and breathing patterns of speech, tones of expression, and silences (Elliott, 1992:221).

This somatic expression of a semiotic language emerges from Patient Number Three, Inanna as breath collides with indistinct vocalisations, spoken word and recorded layers of breath and sound. The patriarchal social boundaries of women's language would have rendered Patient Number Three, Inanna's vocalisations as an indicator and a stereotype of women's confessional psychosis. However, in the Feminine Semiotic it expresses a theoretical and conceptual engagement with somatic and multilayered sound as a device for complex feminine language.

This connection between language, sound and madness is further complicated by the layering of representation achieved through the positioning of Dr Pascharama on the walls, Inanna's ritualistic movements and the destabilizing darkness of the passageway. Dr Pascharama and Patient Number Three, Inanna explore the passageway on spatial levels relating to each other as they move. Patient Number Three, Inanna is grounded on the floors of the passage, picking up bricks, threatening to smash the walls with her embodied psychosis so closely linked to the floor. This contrasts to Dr Pascharama's supposed psychological stability as a doctor, negated by his continuous floating suspension above the ground. He never touches the floor of Patient Number Three, Inanna's passageway, illuminating the fear, stigma and patriarchal disease within the dark continent of the feminine psyche.

This layering of the moment of potential stereotype provides a key entry to a Feminine Semiotic approach, especially in the representation of the troubled feminine psyche. Here the Feminine Semiotics of the passageway present a complex archetypal, aesthetic, somatic and political journey into a psyche of perceived psychosis.

The positioning of Dr Pascharama to Patient Number Three, Inanna, and then the unpredictable placements of the audience gathering down the passageway collapse the hospital-like patriarchal, colonial ordering of the Waiting Room space. This positionality reflects on the instability of Patient Number Three, Inanna's psychic space, specifically as it is positioned within the patriarchal structures of the asylum and then within our own stigmatised positions towards women with mental illness. The claustrophobic tightness of the narrow tunnel is disrupted by the opening of a door in the passage by Patient Number Three, Inanna, revealing another area of performance.

***Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:***

***Plot 99 Written Script: p 20-25***

***Plot 99 Dvd: 41:00-45:05 mins***

***Online Visual Performance Research Archive:***

*<https://plot99par.wordpress.com/category/the-holding-cells/>*

*The Holding Cells*

***Explanation of Correspondence:*** *The script describes my first imaginings of the full installations for the Holding Cells, entitled **Ward Installations, the Gorgons**. These later developed into *The Holding Cells: in the Psyche of Emergence* (y).*

*The script extracts are metaphoric monologues and imagery of the initial explorations for the Gorgons. The character imagery shows a visual archive in the creation and inspiration for the design of the puppets and the rehearsal pictures show the puppets in their first rehearsal. The design boards present my aesthetic ideas and designs for the Gorgon's installations, detailing elements, colours, symbols and costume ideas. The installations thus grew as an organic combination of these earlier designs, the constructed puppets and the spatial improvisations combined with video, lighting, costume and sound elements. The Dvd shows the live performances of Patient Number Three, Inanna in the tunnel of her psyche as she encounters the Gorgons Medusa and Zipporah in each room. The soundscape created for the tunnel combines poetry written and adapted by performer Julia Raynham with sound generated*

*through improvisations during rehearsals in the building, which are documented in the Dvd material. Thus the archives show the creative exploration and development of the installations from metaphor, research and conceptualisation in writing to visual manifestation and experimentations in performance and puppetry.*

Behind the door is a tiny room. Inside three bodies inhabit an installation of a miniature universe. We see a young girl, in the form of a life-size latex puppet, manipulated by two nurses in white uniforms. The child, Medusa, sits in the dark playing with matches until she lights a candle to reveal that she is in fact surrounded by sand, representative of an overwhelming desert landscape (*Plot 99 Script: 21-22*). Inside Medusa, in Victorian dress, is surrounded by the sounds of snakes, her burgeoning sexual self, and her expanding creative sexuality. She appears as a giant puppet, in a room of miniature antique furniture and a dolls house submerged in sand.

***Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:***

***Plot 99 Written Script: p 21-22 Ward Three: A Gorgon, Medusa***

***Plot 99 Dvd: 41:00-43:00 mins***

***Online Visual Performance Research Archive:***

***<https://plot99par.wordpress.com/2011/10/29/character-imagery-the-gorgons/>***

***Character Imagery: The Gorgons***

The *Plot 99* script, takes up a feminist psychoanalytic position in developing the psychological and archetypal representation of the complex inappropriate other as a strategy for character. It explores the stereotype of psychosis as a multiple personality disorder, in light of the fragmentation inherent to stereotype as well as complex identity representation. Inspiration is taken from Jeanette Winterson's post-modern feminist novella *Sexing the Cherry*, in which she re-interprets various folklore and mythologies into subversive testimonials of various women (Winterson, 1996). In *Plot 99* these monologues are re-interpreted as many identities within a single mind fragmenting in the face of hegemonic, monotheistic ideology that has suffocated the development of her heterogenous subjectivity (*Plot 99 Script: 21-22*).

Clarissa Pinkola Estés declares

In a single human being there are many other beings, all with their own values, motives, and devices. Some psychological technologies suggest we arrest these beings, count them, name them, force them into harness till they shuffle along like vanquished slaves. But to do this would halt the dance of wildish lights in a woman's eyes, it would halt her heat lightning and arrest all throwing of sparks. But what shall we do with those inner beings who are quite mad and those who carry out destruction without thought? Even these must be given a place, though one in which they can be contained (Estés, 1992:35).

The Feminine Semiotics of Patient Number Three, Inanna explore the concept of her multiplicitous subjectivity through mythologies of the Greek *Gorgons* (Glaveanu, 2005). Social and cultural psychologist Vlad Petre Glaveanu draws on the links between modern psychology and ancient mythology considering not only the antiquity of mythological tradition, but also its application in contemporary scientific and philosophical research (Glaveanu 2005). In ancient Greek mythology, Glaveanu researches the many representations of mental disease and insanity that find expression through mythological figures (Glaveanu, 2005). There are numerous divinities associated with madness, and these often directly relate to the expression of complex emotions (Glaveanu, 2005). The Gorgons in Greek mythology reflect a narrative of monstrous femininity, three sisters whose imagery warns of psychic and spiritual descent:

The Gorgons, three monstrous sisters that inspired fear; they were synonymous with the ugliness of the soul, symbol of degradation. Euryale represents sexual perversity, Stheno – social perversity, Medusa symbolizes the spiritual need to evolve turned into arrogant stagnation (Chevalier & Cheerbrant, 1994:105).

The Gorgons facilitate a mythological narrative entry point to the exploration of fragmenting multiple personalities in the psychological process of Patient Number Three, Inanna's unraveling and tormented psyche.

In the psyche of Patient Number Three, Inanna, the personalities of sexual and gender oppression became the three Gorgons of the monstrous feminine, the aspects of the dark goddess that lie repressed under the surface of her social, political and cultural exterior. In the script they are named Medusa, Zipporah and Queen Victoria, each aspect drawn from intertextual links, historical connections and metaphoric images from the significant feminine archetypes and mythologies that arise in the narrative of Nonhetha's experiences.

In the Medusa installation, anthropomorphism is utilized to create life-like movements, sounds and characteristics of the puppet child. The construct of the puppet is uncanny, as we imagine that we see a living girl, but behind her are two other bodies bringing her to life. In fact, three bodies create Medusa, three layers of the self of the young Patient Number Three, Inanna. The nurse's bodies interact with the child, creating instability in the appearance of a homogenous reality and body. If feminine psychosis is characterised by a descent into the multiplicitous abjection of the body, then the puppet child performs this disruption of our sense of coherence through her multiplicity. Her body interrogates scale as the puppeteer nurses effortlessly float her body high above their heads, counterbalancing her sense of weight.

In traditional puppetry performance, this manipulation of scale through the body of the puppet is often used to express status or power relations to other elements or characters of the performance. In Medusa's reality, her size problematizes the construction of her sense of identity, femininity and desire in patriarchal society. Medusa's size is an unconscious overflow of creative thought, her childlike attempt to hold presence in her community as a female, to be acknowledged by the structures of oppression that render her difference, her experience and her creative desire invisible in society.

Out of this fantastical memory of her childhood, Patient Number Three, Inanna and the audience are brought face to face with the eruption of the suppressed creative, sexual and spiritual identity of the girl child. The construction of the puppet emphasizes the construction of early identity formation, or how a girl child comes into being (Mitchell, 1984) as the uncanny lifelikeness of the form draws us into the fantasy of coherence.

Medusa's burgeoning sexual identity is represented not only by the giant body of the girl but by the space itself. The window frame behind her has no outlook; a barricade blacks it out. The walls expose the piping, broken tiles and toilet cisterns, a dark architecture of containment and structures, as the patriarchal presence that tries to prevent young feminine identity from expansion and growth on its own terms. In this small room, the child is prevented from seeing out of the window. She is prevented from experiencing her own sexual expansion by containing her in the stereotypical lack of the girl child (Mitchell, 1984).

McClintock addresses the metaphoric connection between psychic space and physical space as referenced in literature (McClintock, 2001). She describes how Bronte's character Bertha is kept in the attic, a darkened room with no windows (McClintock, 2001). The dark room becomes symbolic of the fear of encountering the perceived darkness of the feminine psyche. It also reveals the phallogocentric perception of the window as 'the architectural icon of reason as penetration and enlightenment' (McClintock, 2001:13). The room and the darkened window with no outlook is a problematic reference to stereotypes of madness and reason. Spatial compositions thus become material metaphors for political and social agendas.

In the dark room, however, Medusa is playing with matches. This gesture presents a defiance to the ignorance of stereotype that positions her within the darkness of patriarchal construction. As she lights the match her body and size are revealed, expanding to disrupt the confinement of the patriarchal body represented by the room. Through her multiplicitous body, her distorted scale

and her fragmentation, Medusa challenges the borders of the symbolic through an interrogation of space, architecture and the female form.

The audience is forced to view Medusa's multiplicity through the frame of the doorway, another indicator of architectural reason. This imposes a voyeurism on the spectator who can never enter the room, but only observe it unfolding. The distance this opening creates in the claustrophobia of the passageway disrupts and fractures the already fraying edges of sanity, meaning and the audience's passage through Patient Number Three, Inanna's mind.

The next room along the passage suddenly lights up with sound and motion. Patient Number Three, Inanna enters another architectural space. The hospital transforms into semiotic universes contained in the confines of the holding cells of the asylum. The interplay between space and aesthetic is given meaning through metaphor and critical engagement with the symbolism of architecture in patriarchal discourse.

Multiple stereotypes are brought into representation in this new room, but they function to exhibit the fantasy space of dichotomy that informs the panicking, repressed feminine psyche. Inside the room is a domestic kitchen, styled on an imaginary middle class home in the 1930's. Zipporah, the housewife inside, is a beheaded life-size latex puppet, whose head and body are in a tussle for space as they move in physical dialogue around the tiny kitchen.

In the *Plot 99* script, this aspect of the wife is called Zipporah, after the Ethiopian wife of Moses (Goldenberg, 1997). In the first drafts of the text, Nonhetha saw herself as a female Moses, a feminised version of the wandering prophet, which corresponds to many of the Christian elements of her actual story of pilgrimage and faith. The character of Zipporah, however, offers a problematising voice to the patriarchal iconography of Moses. In the text, adapted from Winterson's prose, Zipporah laments the oppression of the many priestesses and prophets who walk unnamed behind patriarchy's domestication of the feminine (*Plot 99 Script: 21*).

**Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:**

**Plot 99 Written Script:** p 20-21 Zipporah

**Plot 99 Dvd:** 43:40-44:45 mins

**Online Visual Performance Research Archive: Category:**

<https://plot99par.wordpress.com/2011/10/29/character-imagery-the-gorgons/>

*Character Imagery: The Gorgons*

The feminine Zipporah is portrayed in *Plot 99* through the lens of the western nuclear family, which stereotypes femininity in patriarchal discourse (Wood, 2010). The external recorded sounds of psychosis from the passageway keep the audience linked to the unravelling of Patient Number Three, Inanna. Inside the room, canned laughter arises from a 1930's dishwasher advertisement.

We are again voyeurs into a tight architectural space, almost immersed in the semantically-sound recreated kitchen, imagining the extended spaces of Zipporah's home. The coherence of this space of feminine domesticity is effected through styling, floral tablecloths, crockery and cutlery, pot plants, a woman in a bright summer dress and apron – the containers of appropriation for safe feminine identification. The room seems to embody what is expected of coherent white feminine identity, goodness, beauty, cleanliness and domestication (Wood, 2010). Here, resistance to the stereotype is offered by the space itself.

The clean containment of the kitchen is fractured by the decaying of the actual building; there is a broken sink, blacked out windows boarded up from the outside, mould and broken cupboards. The cupboards, sink, window, floors, walls and ceiling are falling apart. This decay seems to resonate with the decay and dismemberment of the puppet herself, who fragments as she inhabits the kitchen. Zipporah, portrayed as a puppet, embodies a performance of appropriate femininity through the construct of the puppet body, as revealed through the multiplicitous presence of the two puppeteers who each engage multiple positionalities within the space. The semiotic density of this installation offers resistance to hegemonic narratives of stereotype.

The language of the American television voice-over intersects with the sound of the outside passage which foregrounds and haunts the decapitated puppet inside. Zipporah is trapped within her room and this repression manifests in violent undertones. She expresses these in the dismantling of her embodiment, which echoes the dismantling space.

The housewife herself in the masculine architectural logics of the kitchen is a constructed plastic body. Traditional puppetry conventions situate the audience in specific positions to recreate the illusion of life through a single viewpoint. Puppeteers are expected to adhere to the skilled techniques of illusion, in which they do not overshadow the puppet body, allow the puppet to enter the foreground and operate as visible yet invisible manipulators who give over the power to the puppet (Francis, 2007). In Zipporah's room, the puppeteers subvert and manipulate these power relations, defying the conventions of placement and spacing on the techniques of illusion. The performers climb all over the broken cupboards and sinks, disrupting the use of space and the appropriate placement of their bodies in the kitchen.

In this dynamic, a fundamental separation anxiety arises, which renders both the men and the puppet woman in psychosexual terms as stuck in a permanent bind of potentially violent and disordering fragmentation. Zipporah is complicated by the fact that she is performed and manipulated by two black male puppeteers. This racial and gender juxtaposition brings multiple political and cultural meanings into play. The dangerous stranger (Kristeva, 1991) then is literally in and around Zipporah, the unknown others who manipulate her are the essence of her being. Zipporah's presence challenges the subject's identity. This brings the location of her sexuality and race into question, by positioning the constructed feminine body against the bodies of the puppeteers.

The connection between the puppeteer's black maleness and Zipporah's white feminine middle class construct brings ignorant stereotypes of racism into play. Sander Gilman investigates stereotypes of blackness and sexuality that have

dominated western colonial perceptions for hundreds of years (Gilman, 1985). He expounds on the stigmatised relationship between white femininity and black masculinity as captured in paintings from the Victorian era:

The black, both male and female, becomes by the eighteenth century an icon for deviant sexuality in general, usually, however, paired with a white figure of the opposite sex (Gilman, 1985:81).

This pairing of the stereotyped sexually deviant, dangerous black man as potentially violent rapist of the stereotype of the passive and corruptible white woman, is a grotesque image that informed racist fears around interracial sexuality during the colonial and apartheid eras. In the deteriorating psyche of the homemaker Zipporah, her manipulators represent not only her fear of the dark man, but her own marginality and connection to the liminal (Estés, 1992). The boundaries of self are a fragile negotiation with dominant discourses, which establish historically conclusive norms by delineating the categories of difference and representation into clear-cut categories of self and other that define social, cultural and political realities.

The borders of division and sexuality seem to operate constantly through fear, stereotype, myth, and by extension, separations. These myths are as adaptable to circumstance and situation as necessary. However, the very fragility of the 'border' as imaginary brings its stability into question (Kristeva, 1991). Kristeva considers this anxiety of identity that inhabits the dynamics between the self and other, as the fear of the foreigner, the outsider:

The foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder... The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities (Kristeva, 1991:1).

Here Kristeva draws our attention to the fallacy of distance and separation at the heart of binaric fear. This fallacy is also challenged by the spatial and performative closeness between Zipporah and her puppeteers. Zipporah does

not see her manipulators but their performance is connected to hers through the shadow of stereotype. This malignant relationship evidences the political disease at the heart of their representation.

The high-pitched voice of a woman on the radio laughs superficially:

When he was gone, I was practically a prisoner in my own home!

The recorded voice tries to reconfirm the stereotype of the housewife, requiring her husband's presence and assistance in order to be effective, needing to find her own independence and being offered that by consumerism. It expresses Zipporah's physical and sexual containment in the asylum of her home under white consumerist patriarchal culture. Consumerist culture, however, only offers her another room of containment in the efficiencies of the kitchen and its appliances. It implies that her empowerment lies in her housework, maintaining her world within the confines of the domestic space. This then brings another reference, through American consumer culture, to the Biblical references to Zipporah as the wife of Moses (Goldenberg, 1997). It reflects on the invisible role of the wife in the historically male public sphere of politics, religion and economy.

The problematic that the puppet Zipporah brings forth is the separation anxiety of positionalities of sexual and racial division, represented through the disjunction between her feminine form and her manipulators, surfacing in her body as impending violence and psychosis. Here the racialised meanings of the presence of the puppeteers takes significance in the Feminine Semiotics at play in the room. Just as the female imaginary of the Semiotic becomes marginalised by thethetic/symbolic (Kristeva, 1982), so too are the bodies of both Zipporah and the puppeteers marginalised by white male patriarchal fear, stigma and structures of domestication containing them in the kitchen of capitalism.

In the Zipporah installation, the effect of fear and repression heralds an underlying violence, which surfaces in small outbursts of aggressive behaviour. Her dismemberment, a violent image in itself, complicates not only

her femininity but her puppeteer's masculinity. The engendered positionality of the two performers enters the installation through traumatic somatic and kinetic expressions of containment. Zipporah's dismembered head becomes for a moment either masculine or feminine, gazing out through the doorway as the self and other, longing to leave the room of homogenous decay. Their mutual enslavement (Minh-ha, 1987) is so deeply embedded in cultural, racial and sexual binaries. It is only through the radical destruction of the body, mind and spirit, that a multiplex Zipporah can imagine leaving the architectural and epistemological confines of her conditioning.

The libidinous feminine overflow of the semiotic, aural, kinetic and visual levels of the passage effects a creation and then dismemberment of feminine stereotypes. In this transitional environment of transforming semiotics, psychosis extends into the terrain of emergence(y) for all its complex meanings of crisis and creativity. Garrett's warning (2002) against the risk of engaging stereotype which may operate within hegemonic discourse to the detriment of progressive subjective representation returns. The voyeuristic acts of the audience engaging with stereotype, could verge on a re-substantiation of the image of woman as the hysterical madwoman in the attic, the lacking girl child, the good housewife or the rampaging goddess. These are disrupted, however, by the intersections of the dismantling space, the dismantling bodies and the multiple bodies in the spaces, locked in rituals of disorder by the discourses of racism and sexism.

The Feminine Semiotic, which rejects language and the symbolic, also in these positionalities utilizes the intersections of chaos and structure, multiplicity and homogeneity, resistance and stereotype to create a ritual of feminine psychosis as an act of emergence(y). Here, the feminine imaginary presents both prejudice as it intersects with the innovative layering of the semiotic, the audience and artist positionalities, and the constructs of performance, which create a defiant and complicit Feminine Semiotic.

The ritual of emergence(y) as a revelation of crisis and empowerment is heightened, developed and disrupted by the confluences of the passageway

and its adjoining spaces, the performing bodies in the spaces and the audience. These installations of feminine emergence(y) expressed through fracture, stereotype and multiplicity lead us to a simultaneous engagement with the analytic world of the hospital. Another adjoining room to the passageway leads into the office of Dr Pascharama.

***Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:***

***Plot 99 Written Script:*** p 18-20 *Nuthouse Rituals: the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Psychiatrist*

***Plot 99 Dvd:*** 45:15-46:40 mins

***Explanation of Correspondence:*** *It is important to note that Dr Pascharama's psychology 101 monologue in the written script was then translated into a designed installation room. Thus, his doctor's room in the asylum became an aesthetic rendition and expression of the monologue text. The Dvd and blog show images of how the monologue was abstracted and represented through Dr Pascharama's costume and spatial dynamics.*

Inside his room, we are brought face to face with a web of ropes installed above head level across the brightly lit room. Dr Pascharama writes on the walls (in an almost childlike gesture defiant of the governing parental body and its clean architectural walls), covering the walls with his scribbling of analysis, psychiatric terminologies, diagrams of the transpersonal and psychological, erudite and mysterious medical and religious symbols. The walls express Dr Pascharama's use of the patriarchal symbolic to try to analyse his Patient, Patient Number Three, Inanna, and to provide a linguistic understanding for what we have witnessed in the passageway. This writing, however, is scattered across the walls in scribbles, illegible in many parts, more stereotypical of dis-order than epistemology.

The audience try to make sense, to understand the signs of language and psychiatry, but they are removed from their original signification, the signs separated in degrees from their original meanings. The web of ropes suggests Dr Pascharama's logic of connection that he tries to impose on his subject of analysis. It also shows his use of divergent languages to express his own

attempts to provide a difference of approach within the academy. Patriarchal language, it would seem, is as ineffectual for masculine identity and creative understanding, which itself requires a different mode of language (*Plot 99 Script*: 18-19).

Dr Pascharama attempts to make synthesis and meaning out of his own battle between his rational doctor self and his dangerous encounters with the libidinous feminine psyche of Patient Number Three, Inanna. Dr Pascharama's room reveals the threat of Feminine Semiosis that is erupting, spilling and emerging through his own body on to the walls. He is costumed in protective gear, he never comes down from the walls of his vantage point, and he uses language to try to write his analyses. Again, the spatial dynamics of architecture are in dialogue with the containers of discourse and the internal landscapes of difference. The open window that shows the world outside of this dynamic reveals the promise of masculine enlightenment and penetration of the outside world (McClintock, 2001), yet Dr Pascharama is caught in the discourses of the internal world of the hospital and his own suffering under patriarchy.

Dr Pascharama's room expresses the battle of the binaric in meaning and identity. Here the binaries of the masculine and feminine, western psychiatric discourse and cultural stereotype, healing and illness, erupt with the presence of the third, the audience. It is here in his room that masculinity is offered a resistance to binary and recourse to containment through the Feminine Semiotic. Masculine identity, while permitted the privileges of power, also experiences its own containment, coercion and surveillance in binaric separation. Dr Pascharama's masculinity is complicated by his racial difference to colonial hegemony, his inappropriately coloured skin presents another political dynamic in the positionalities of race and gender at play in the Semiotic.

Positing the feminine as a new symbolic order and language creates another safe paradigm for representation and knowledge, privileging another group of adherents (Elliott, 1992). Paradigms are predicated on the basis of

competition, of positioning one mode of thought as more legitimate than another (Jones, 2009). Creating a paradigm for feminine representation that excludes the creativity of the masculine binary holds intrinsic problems. The fundamentalism of separation in binaric signification haunts the processes of knowledge and representation in patriarchal systems. Separation as the stabilizing promise of life, self, experience and subjectivity (protected by the masculine and desired/lacking in the feminine) inserts itself into the processes of lived experience (Irigaray, 1985).

The layering and intersections of Dr Pascharama's room, body and self provide their own resistance through the sentient and semiotic in the masculine. The frame reveals the audience who are invited to Dr Pascharama's process of masculine meaning-making. The complex web of language and symbolism in his room provides a performance device for the investigation and corrosion of established processes of knowing, an intensive creative autopsy of both men and women's most basic paradigms of meaning. The crisis of his own coherent self must test masculinity's most basic fears and urges for self-preservation in the face of the unknown. The mind of conditioning, paradigms and comprehension seeks visibility, repetition, boundary and cohesion. The condition of the body and lived experience, however, brings even the most devout value systems of the mind into constant entropy.

Dr Pascharama's struggle with language reveals the threat of instability on the coherence of the self, which as Foucault argues, is prized and aspired to in the paradigms of western psychiatry as the marker of difference between the sane and the insane (McClintock, 2001). Nevertheless, the doctor's own crises of knowing, of lived experience and complex identifications test the paradigms of his own identity.

The crisis of binaries expressed through stereotype and its resistance through language and embodiment comes to the fore in *Plot 99*. Identity is never singular, but in the constantly changing positionalities of performers, puppets and audience the surfaces of the present reveal multiple discourses that create

and destroy engendered and racialised realities in the asylum. In the live experience the alchemical processes of the Feminine Semiotic in the performance are embedded in the intersecting problematics of binary and stereotype, which threaten experience with the impossibility of identity outside of these pathological relationships with racist phallogentrism.

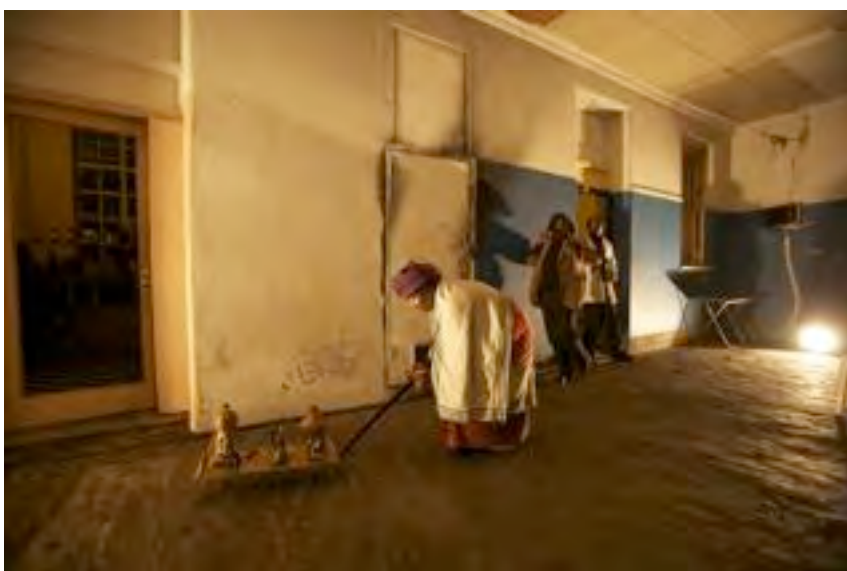


Fig. 11. Intersections in The Waiting Room of the Post Colony. Photograph by Anthony Strack.



Fig. 12. Intersections in The Waiting Room of the Post Colony. Dr Pascharama collects Patient Number Three, Inanna. Photograph by Anthony Strack.

## **Exploring the Sacred in the Feminine Semiotic: Of Transitions, Thresholds and Rites of Passage in Plot 99**

The following moments demonstrate how the Feminine Semiotic addresses the crises of emergence(y) in **Plot 99** as explored through the reinterpretation of the sacred and ritual. From the claustrophobic containments of the passage, the audience spill back into the open area of the Waiting Room, uncontrolled and free to roam and settle where they wish. This freedom of viewership lends disquiet to the traditional spectator/performance relationship. It also allows the audience a degree of immersion in the performance *on their own terms*. It positions the space itself as a performer. Back in the Waiting Room, the audience have a moment of recourse, a return to a more ordered reality of the hospital, with which they have become familiar from earlier engagements with the space. After the passageway, the audience emerge into the Waiting Room with the possibility of their perceptions slightly altered through their experience in the previous spaces. Now the Waiting Room itself has shifted slightly, the chairs have been cleared away and in the centre of the space on the floor is a Xhosa ceremonial ancestral circle created with large river pebbles. A wildebeest skull is placed in the centre and a performer, dressed in traditional preacher's robes, ceremonial skins and *ifutha* clay, prays.

*Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:*

*Plot 99 Dvd: 46:40-50:50 mins*

*Online Visual Performance Research Archive:*

*<https://plot99par.wordpress.com/2011/10/31/plot-99-live-the-holding-cells-in-the-psyche-of-emergency/>*

*Plot 99 Live: The Holding Cells: in the Psyche of Emergence(y)*

The threshold of the clinical hospital space is put at risk again by the actions of ritual and ceremony. The thresholds between the hospital, the sacred ritual, the past and the present conflate. The performer, established earlier as the historical representation of the Xhosa prophet Ntsikana, performs his own ancestral ritual based on ceremonies that his own family conduct to honour their specific clan. This brings Xhosa history as well as the sacred meaning of

his personal contemporary Xhosa identity and positionality to the specifics of ritual, into the performance space. This intersects with the history of the prophet Ntsikana and his legacy as a chief component of contemporary Xhosa Christian worship (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). The act of performance of ritual provides another entry point for intervention with the perception of space and architecture for the audience. The sense of time and space is distorted, extended through the sound and movement that the performer uses to slow the pace of the communal movement from the passageway. As explored in Chapter Three, the sacred is that which results in 'a disruption of the social order caused by the movement or change in state of an individual, group or even the natural world' (Crosby, 2009:8). The effect is a transition of realities between architectural spaces, expanded through the performer's vocalisations and movements in a ritual microcosm of aspects of Xhosa ceremonial worship. The audience are invited to experience in this manner a communal ritual into the next semiotic terrain of the Xhosa *Abantu bomlambo*, the ancestors or people of the river (Booi, 2004). The site is no longer simply a hospital Waiting Room. It is a catalyst for a Feminine Semiotics of the psyche.

As explored in Chapter Three, the potential of re-reading the sacred in performance analysis is, as Crosby elucidates, to express the transitional liminality of the encounter between individual, community and the performative eruption (or disruption) of the sacred in rites of passage. The audience is now incorporated unexpectedly into a ceremonial performance conducted by the preacher, whose actions create a transition not only *through* the space but also *of* the space.

In a theatrical environment, this ritual performance could easily become problematized by its cultural specificity and appearance in a staged setting. Arguments of cross-cultural performance as culturally exploitative of a colonial, even postcolonial gaze, in western theatre traditions, create dilemmas for postcolonial and feminist semioticians (Carlson, 2008). The trend towards interculturalism in performance has created a large amount of debate around the concept and theory of intercultural analysis, artistic creation and meaning-making (Carlson, 2008). Postcolonial critics are sceptical of western semiotic

discourse and consider its analysis of intercultural performance as one of a 'translation model' in which privileged and targeted culture replaces source cultural signs (Carlson, 2008). In the translation model, Marvin Carlson (2008) explores, the reproduction of cultural signifiers merely repeats dominant perceptions of othered cultures to the norms of the Western mainstream. Similarly, in gender representation, issues around privileged interpretation and the masculine, western gaze provides political problematics for interpretive semiotic discourses (Mulvey, 1975).

The translation model of semiotic analysis is problematized by what Gunter Grimm calls *productive reception* (Carlson, 2008:133). This questions the presence of an essentially passive audience (Carlson, 2008). The role of the spectator is central in meaning-making and the creation of the signification process (Carlson, 2008). Semiotic theory is not void of the role of the spectator, but heavily inculcated in its dynamics (Carlson, 2008). America's leading pioneer in semiotic studies, Charles Peirce,<sup>13</sup> has been very careful to distinguish in his research, not only sign itself, but 'what it stimulates in the mind of the viewer' (Carlson, 2008:134).

Peirce considers three aspects of this signification reception, which Carlson relates as immediate, dynamic and final interpretants (Carlson, 2008:134). This movement from the mode of production-orientated work to reception-orientated processes has been heavily influential on contemporary performance theory (Carlson, 2008). The interpretive focus of performance studies has brought to the fore a necessity for more critical social and cultural analysis to deal with the crises of representation involved in both postcolonial and gender studies. This movement into more critical social theory brings attention to a more self-reflective form of knowledge involving both understanding and theoretical explanation, to 'reduce entrapment in systems of domination or dependence, obeying the emancipatory interest in expanding

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<sup>13</sup> Peirce is widely heralded for his research in semiotics and his division of signs into icons, indexes and symbols, 'circulated widely among theatre semioticians' (Carlson, 2008:134).

the scope of autonomy and reducing the scope of domination' (Outhwaite, 1988:6).

The use of ritual in its traditional cultural setting contains its own rules and regulations for insider-only participations, facilitating powerful and exclusionary significance for those involved. Crosby (2009) considers Victor Turner's interpretation of the sacred rite as a pedagogical function of liminality, the *sacra* serves as 'a symbolic template of the whole system of beliefs and values in a given culture, its archetypal paradigm and ultimate measure' (Turner, 1967:108). The momentary liberty of the transformative is followed by a peaceful return to society, custom and law. For Turner the sacred is rather an unexamined structural nucleus, which unfolds possibility and paradox whilst preventing it from causing any real disruption in the world at large (Crosby, 2009:10). Here, in the terrain of **Plot 99**, however, Ntsikana's liminoid gesture expresses the sacred in the present moment as that which is comprised of not only the ritual action prescribed by Turner, but the surfaces of history, embodiment, sound, reception, object and performance that create an environment for syncretism (Carlson, 2008).

The ritual expresses an unclear relationship to both the profane and the sublime. It collides with the oppression and exploitation of the colonial asylum, colonisation, exoticism and the fracturing of traditional identity. It indicates the sacred in the moment of exchange and intersection facilitating a shift towards new statuses of being. The placement of the audience in relation to these gestures is insecure. Are they participants or merely observers of the rite of passage? Their position in this ritual is never specified and their bodies are located around the Waiting Room, uncomfortably negotiating their own participation in the production.

This complicated relationship between the audience, the sacred rite and the act of liminality is one of the primary dynamics set up in the shifting Feminine Semiotic of *Plot 99*. The 21<sup>st</sup> century prophecy show of Dr Pascharama Pukmidas Stardreamer is posited as the audience's first involvement in a rite of passage in the production. The audience arrive expecting a site-specific

theatre production, only to become involved in an unexpected, improvised ceremony, presented as a sacred public rite rather than a performance. This event is anachronistic to the outside architectural aesthetics of the abandoned hospital building, creating the first disturbance of space. This scene offers the intersections of the inappropriate other in the production through the meeting points of character, positionality, architecture and narrative. Dr Pascharama inhabits a space of paradox, androgyny and fantasy (Crosby, 2009:10). Dr Pascharama and his assistant appear to be absorbed in an alternate reality that combines the hospital building, the doctor as a Guru in his field, and the aesthetics of an esoteric shrine and cult-like religious behaviour. These elements are used in effect to destabilize and complicate the anticipation and reception of representation.

***Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:***

***Plot 99 Written Script:*** p 6-10 *Outside the Asylum: The 21<sup>st</sup> century Prophecy Show*

***Plot 99 Dvd:*** 00:40-20:25 mins

***Online Visual Performance Research Archive: Category:***

*<https://plot99par.wordpress.com/category/the-entrance-to-the-plot-99-asylum-the-21st-century-prophecy-show/>*

*<https://plot99par.wordpress.com/2011/12/30/site-specific-installation-and-design-boards/>*

*<https://plot99par.wordpress.com/2011/12/29/character-dr-pascharama-pukmidas-stardreamer/>*

***Explanation of Correspondence:*** *The online archive documents the full imagery and design boards that created the visual representation of Dr Pascharama Pukmidas Stardreamer. They show the rehearsals for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Prophecy Show that took place on the outdoor grounds of the Oude Molen Eco Village in front of the asylum.*

*In rehearsals, we experimented with the 21<sup>st</sup> century prophecy show as a prologue of inappropriate otherness to the main event of a site-specific production. This scene offers the first intersections of the inappropriate other in the production. Dr Pascharama inhabits a space of paradox, androgyny,*

*anonymity, a 'placeless ness, malleability and fantasy' (2009:10). Thus, in rehearsals, we experimented with Dr Pascharama and his assistant as completely absorbed in a reality that combines the hospital building, the doctor as a Guru in his field, and the aesthetics of an esoteric shrine and cult –like religious behaviour, that destabilizes and complicates the anticipation of representation.*

*This event within an event was improvised daily for live members of the public and Oude Molen community, who would come to watch and participate in Dr Pascharama's sermons. This system of public improvisation would characterise the eventual live performance of Dr Pascharama's 21<sup>st</sup> century prophecy show, in which Dr Pascharama would call on the spirits of prophets and mediums long dead and past, who could impart, knowledge and wisdom, through him to those seeking answers to predicaments of the present. Aunt Caline Dye (a Voodoo Prophetess referenced in the script), in the pastiche form of a miniature puppet prophesies death and rebirth for a woman character in the script, echoing the impending events that are about to befall both the audience and the characters of Plot 99. This we rehearsed by improvising the small puppet characters around these themes of death and rebirth, as a miniature play within a play.*

The intentions of the character of Dr Pascharama are curiously commodified and capitalised upon by the pastiche of his sexual innuendos and mimicry, his bad puppetry technique, exaggerated showmanship and evangelical distortions. His costume mimics the eastern Guru in turban, white Punjabi styled pants, mixed with western-style gold jewellery, the allure of western abundance and religious austerity, and the contradiction of spirituality and capitalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century prophecy show, the audience are encouraged and compelled to participate in Dr Pascharama's prophetic new age rituals. The environment of the sacred ritual is problematized by commodification and the anachronisms of the real and the synthetic in his character and language.

Out of this attempt at evangelical communitas, Patient Number Three, Inanna arrives from the outside of the building, as a nurse arrives from a passageway inside. Dr Pascharama and the audience are suddenly pummelled into the world of the hospital, questioning every identification or positionality they have placed on his persona or on themselves in that dynamic, up until now. Patient Number Three, Inanna forces her way inside the asylum, past doctors and nurses, dressed in full black funeral wear, carrying a shotgun and a suitcase. Slippages in meaning and subjectivities explored throughout *Plot 99* translate onto the surfaces of objects ascribed as symbols within the production. Certain objects take on various roles in creating anachronistic interplays between their functions as icon, index or sign (Peirce, 1997). Often the sense of meaning in the object as object, object as a prop, object as puppet and object as symbol becomes a complex layering of the Feminine Semiotic in Plot 99.

Patient Number Three, Inanna's shotgun inhabits aspects of these sometimes obscure designations of the object, as it simultaneously represents her protective accoutrements, her sartorial preservation and the aggressive defenses of the feminine body that is facing death and crisis. Her actions capture her character in the stereotype of feminine hysteria as she enters confused and distressed, mumbling incoherently and irrationally.

The doctors react in patronizing gestures that confirm the stereotypical diagnosis that she is delusional. Her submission to the asylum, presumably to treat the perceived pathology of her dis-eased and mentally ill femininity, however, is then disrupted by her own entry into a rite of passage that shifts the expectation of her appearance. She performs a ritual adornment of the body, through the invocation of the sexual and protective archetypes of the goddess Inanna as presented in Chapter Four (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983).

***Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:***

***Plot 99 Written Script: p 11-13 The Arrival of Inanna***

***Plot 99 Dvd: 21:24-28:35 mins***

***Online Visual Performance Research Archive: Category:***

<https://plot99par.wordpress.com/2011/12/27/the-entrance-rehearsal-pictures/>  
<https://plot99par.wordpress.com/2011/12/28/character-patient-number-3-inanna/>

**Explanation of Correspondence:** *These creative appendices describe the visceral, aesthetic and poetic journey to creating Patient Number Three, Inanna for Plot 99. It follows performer Julia Raynham through her rehearsals for Patient Number Three, Inanna's entrance to the asylum. Raynham's poetry and prose created a poetic map for her ritual walk in to the asylum as well as her physical movements and exploration of the outside of the building through sound, spoken word and movement.*

Interpreting the original narrative of the myth of Inanna's descent as re-interpreted by historian Diane Wolkstein (1983), Patient Number Three, Inanna engages the audience in a ritual preparation to enter the underworld. Working with an intertextual reference to the original Inanna Hymns (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983), she begins a ritual dressing of her body into the protective *mes* or powers as described in the Sumerian archives. As in the myth (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983), Inanna requires these ritual *mes* in order to protect herself as she prepares for descent to the unknown. This ritual proposes the tools for embodiment, necessary for a descent into the Feminine Semiotic.

The performed liminoid ritual is intersected by the contemporary stylisation of Inanna's characteristics through popular fashion aesthetics, as well as the incorporation of Xhosa language into her spoken text. The intersections of these elements propose her position as a multiplex identity read through various divergent signifiers of culture, mythology and stereotype.

*Plot 99* engages rites of passage as a performative action that leads the audience through the underworld. The liminoid rituals and ceremonies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century prophecy show perform and encourage *communitas* with the audience (Crosby, 2009). Participation in the liminoid, unlike in participation in a religious ceremony, is optional to the participants, who are not bound to the ritual but rather chose to participate in it (Turner, 1977). This element of choice in the liminoid, as expressed by theorist Victor Turner (1977), is not merely

reversive of the sacred ritual (Crosby, 2009), but subversive, deconstructing its central structures of ceremonial engagement and ritual while transgressing them. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century prophecy show the audience is a group of active participants in a cult of urban shamanism.

The spectres of tradition, culture and history, however, problematise the relationship between the audience and Ntsikana. The problematics for the audience become their position as outsiders to the act of ritual, their distance from its specific meaning. This is complicated once again by the use of language in the production.

The problematics of language arise in relation to the privileging projects of master discourses. As already explored through Foucauldian analysis (McClintock, 2001), language is a perceived primary indicator of the difference between the western rationality of medical discourse and the irrationality of mental illness. *Plot 99* is delivered in a variety of spoken languages, incorporating Xhosa, English and Afrikaans. In some sections the production privileges English, in others Xhosa. In this way the use of languages draws our attention to the multiplicity of meanings specific to culture and insider knowledges through the privilege of translation.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century prophecy show, Dr Pascharama's rituals are presented in English (with brief interruptions of Xhosa praise poetry), and these are easily interpreted by those audience members who understand English and who have access to the discourses he engages in. Ntsikana's liminoid ritual incorporates aspects of the performer's understanding of traditional ritual. Some of these aspects are similarly familiar and recognisable to those who have participated in such ceremonies before, those on the inside of Xhosa language and cultural traditions. For those on the outside, however, it requires the imposition of translation models specific to the identifications of each participant. The ritual becomes an act of the inappropriate other, both outsider and insider in the dynamic, where the ritual performer intersects with the act of worship and the meaning of the surfaces of the surrounding asylum, semiotics and performances.

The audience members momentarily become inappropriate others, as they are all outsiders to the liminal performance gesture of *Plot 99* as well as insiders, through their present access to these internal worlds of the asylum, their own translation models and positionalities within the rite of passage.

The smoke of *impepo*, a traditional medicine and herb burnt in sacred ritual practice as an offering to the ancestors (Booi, 2004), fills the next space. Ntsikana uses praise poetry and prayer to instigate our journey into the next passageway on the opposite side of the Waiting Room. Here we enter the bathroom area of the wards. The architecture of the bathrooms differs to the previous passageway, significantly in the presence of a window onto the outside, with a number of small bathrooms and toilets leading off the main area. The imagery of the bathrooms aesthetically and metaphorically invokes the ancestral underworld of the river (Booi, 2004). The significance of the bathrooms as an installation space also brings in aspects of Shula Mark's research into the differences between the racially segregated women's asylums, as discussed in Chapter One.

It also semiotically investigates the writing of Anne McClintock on soap, sanitation and the colonial project of cleansing in the colonies (2001). Rituals of cleansing, rather than healing, dominated the historical psychiatric as well as the colonial worldview of mentally ill women (McClintock, 2001). The colonial emphasis on sanitation as a key difference between civilised and uncivilised emerged in much of the product advertising of the pre-war 1900's (McClintock 2001). The missionary position was further abdicated by the sale and use of soap to wash away the colonial Christianised propaganda that preached of the filth of tribalism (McClintock, 2001). If cleanliness was near to godliness, soap was the vessel of bodily purgation and exorcism.

The abject female, and specifically black female body was perceived through medical and scientific discourse as an indicator of deviant filth and potential seepage (Gilman, 1985). This stereotype was then offered containment within a perverse cult of domestic sanitation and ecclesiastical cleansing (McClintock,

2001). Sanitation rituals in the early South African asylum, according to Marks' (2007) analysis of the archives, were points of great controversy and power mongering between patient and management. They were often exercises in abuse between nurse and patient (Marks, 2007). If mental deviance was displayed in bodily deviance, then it was through the domestication of the body that mental order might be restored. In white women, a return to normality was most often signified through an attention to physical grooming and cleaning of the body (McClintock, 2001). In black patients, however, the perception of rationality was displayed through subservience and a return to manual labour echoing the stereotype of black women as agricultural and domestic labour explored earlier (Jackson, 2005).

We follow Ntsikana into the bathrooms and yet again the audience are cramped into the space, pushing up against each other. This sense of cramping was deliberately intended for the audience, in order to experience the claustrophobia and overcrowding of the black female asylum as patients housed there would have felt it. This extreme overcrowding of the colonial asylum is attested to in the research of Edgar and Sapire (2000), Jackson (2005) and Swartz (1999) as explored in Chapter One's interpretation of Nonhetha's experiences in the asylum.

Simultaneously to the traumatic experience of overcrowding bodies, the bathrooms become a spatial metaphor through the recorded sound of water and vocalisations of the Xhosa ancestral world of the river beneath the river. Here, in the Xhosa Underworld, the ancestral presence created by the burning of *impepo* and the utilization of sound and blue light engulfs the audience and disrupts the sense of place. Ntsikana opens a broom closet and it lights up to reveal an ancestral shrine of skulls, bones, stones and ritual objects. The performer completes the ritual act by placing his wildebeest skull in the closet. It suggests a gesture of feminine subversion through the semiotic transformation of a functionary storage area, creating an entire universe of Xhosa cosmological symbolism inside the colonial closet. It also references the propensity within the colonial project for locking up the potential disruptions of the other as explored in Chapter One. This disrupts the ever present historical

narrative of colonial cleansing and the sanitation of the embodied and exotic in the black women's asylum. This subversion of functional spaces through the layering of the semiotic is further emphasized by the sounds of a woman singing amidst the splashing of water.

*Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:*

*Plot 99 written script: p. 26-27 Nonhetha's monologue*

*Plot 99 Dvd: 50:10-51:50 mins*

Clarissa Pinkola Estés describes the river beneath the river as the feminine underworld of La Selva Subterranea,

The underworld of female knowing. It is a wild world that lives under this one, under the world perceived by ego. While there we are infused with instinctive language and knowledge (Estés, 1992:389).

In one sense Estés seems to echo the idealistic call of Cixous (1975) and Irigaray (1985), as well as Kristeva (1984), for a feminine language outside of phallogentrism. Estés' (1992) description of the feminine underworld as a space for instinctive feminized language is a Jungian psychoanalytic analogy for what Cixous (1975) and Irigaray (1985) term the feminine imaginary, and which Kristeva (1982) interprets through the somatic applications of sound.

This is a complex task, simply because its risk is impossibility as well as potential. The imbalances of power and privilege inherent in gender and racial distinction often exist on the surface of the present as well as in the cryptic languages of the past. But it is a process of resistance as well as slippage between the inevitability and possibility of binary that comprises the actions of alchemy in the meaning contained in the now, the present, that characterises the Feminine Semiotic. The alchemical does not privilege one paradigm over another, one mode of meaning-making or experience over another. Instead it attempts to facilitate the rhizomatic intersections of binary to produce a third, unknowable, unpredictable element that may or may not arise from the surfaces of the present. The present moment itself is always already mediated

by the languages and politics of positionality that accompany the immediacy of live performance.

Cixous (1975), as a strategy for subversion and resistance, presents the feminine imaginary as a language outside or before patriarchy. Yet, it is the trauma and the crisis of patriarchal ordering that facilitates the necessity for change and transition. The phallogocentric effects the violent disruption of discourse and that begins the descent of Inanna into the underworld, the dark river of the feminine psyche where change is a precursor to transformative experience. The descent to the underworld is ancient (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983) and as applicable to the crises of identity and patriarchy in the present. The underworld casts the body both inside and outside of discourse, as a threshold space which addresses the binaries at play in structures, mythologies and processes of change.

There is a sense of anxiety in the bathrooms as the audience push and squeeze through a now opened doorway to see into the next room. Here the performer who plays Nonhetha Nkwenkwe is naked, wearing white and blue *igqira* beads known as *intsimbi emhlophe* (Booi, 2004) and performing a personal divinatory ritual in a tank of water. The installation creates a visual immersion in an interpretation of the myriad symbols at play in Nonhetha's cosmological universe. This could be interpreted as another set of interplays between stereotype, positionality and receptivity.

The scene engages the exoticisation of the black female body as the antithesis of western culture, as sexual and linked to the uncontrollable irrationality of untamed nature (Gilman, 1985). The performer is lit from inside the tank while *impepo* burns strongly, filling the air with smoke, creating the room as an intersection between these elements and the supposed rational western framework of the architecture. This is then further complicated by the performance of an altered state of trance that Nonhetha enters into through movement in the water. The effect is a highly charged and intimate encounter between the audience and the libidinous landscapes of a potential sacred

feminine on multiple levels, which has various problematics and potentials for meaning.

*Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:*

*Plot 99 written script: p. 23 Ward Four: A Gorgon, Queen Victoria*

*Plot 99 Dvd: 51:00-52:35 mins*

Ketelo's nakedness positions her within the colonial gaze as the sexual other, an object of colonial fear, derision and desire. Rosemary Wiss says that the body of woman perceived as a protuberant, excessive, deviant body, is constructed as external to the western masculinist classical body of 'symmetry', 'rationality' and 'closure' (Wiss, 1994:12). The classical, rational body operates within the cultural signifiers of the ideal, complete, individual bourgeois self, even serving as a marker of nobility itself (Wiss, 1994). The perception of black femininity as pre-rational, pre-enlightenment and aligned to mental deviance, as explored by McClintock (2001), reinforces an unashamed erotic exoticisation of Nonhetha's body in this moment within the asylum.

A rectangular constructed platform invites the audience for the first time to enter the installation, penetrating the established convention of gazing from outside. In this way they infiltrate and surround Nonhetha's body, removing an appropriate distance between self and other and placing them in a position of direct observation. The political connotations of this positionality is a reference to the objectifying gaze of colonialism and its exoticisation of the black female body.

Rory Bester (2003) considers the narratives of fantasy contained in the representation of gender and race through the naked body in the work of South African artists. He says the racialised body often intersects with the gendered body, and exploring the naked body or nudity in gendered representation takes on another set of paradigms when considering it in relation to processes of othering. Engaging the nakedness of Nonhetha highlights the risks involved, and the contradictions at play, between self-representation and the representation of others.

Different kinds of representation are interwoven with questions of power and vulnerability. The debates initiated by early feminist criticism about the relationship between nakedness, nudity and consumption have motivated many artists' choices... But as much as such gazing has 'disarmed' women, so too have women used their nakedness to disarming effect, to claim or reclaim a power that is threatened or lost (Bester, 2003:9).

Nakedness as a reclamation of power for women is addressed for all its complex implications in *Plot 99*. The use of Nonthetha's nakedness in ritual in *Plot 99* confronts the architecture of the space by creating a sense of threshold both in the space of oppression and in the body of stereotype. Nonthetha's nakedness expresses the embodiment of her threshold identity through the somatic surfaces of skin, flux, fluidity and sound.

A theoretical distancing also occurs through the use of mask, already posited as a tool for liminal characterisation which invokes both the constructions of artifice in identity and engagement with dynamic liminoid states of being. It invokes the external and internal psychic spaces at play, which contradict the expected interactions of the hospital. Her naked femininity is expressed through a reinterpretation of ritual performed in the most obscure and unexpectedly intimate of settings, the bathroom. Her performance and the use of liminal elements bring the audience into the potential disruptions between space, individual and transitional status explored by Crosby in the notion of the sacred (2009).

Yet the liminal aspects of this moment are also intersected and destabilized by a political presence of colonial history. In many ways, the potentially liberating positionality of the performer in the moment of nakedness is shown to be metaphorically overshadowed by the presence of history, gender and race. Suspended in the air above Nonthetha is a huge Victorian gown which hangs like a dark lampshade above the dancing *Igqira*. A headless puppet body fills the dress, creating an uncanny presence within it. The dress haunts and frames Nonthetha's naked body, situating as it were a comparative

representation between white and black femininity and the sartorial containers of cultural appropriation. This casts Nonthetha within a difficult dynamic between racial and feminine oppression in colonialism and history as expressed through the metaphors of the dressed and undressed. The colonial presence, so starkly felt in Nonthetha's world through violence, conflict and suppression, here hovers as a sartorial spectre of her political and historical lack in her nakedness.

Yet the lighting in the room reveals a further level of meaning to the complex power play. The water in the tank reveals Nonthetha's body through an incandescent glow that directly illuminates Nonthetha. The skirt of the dead queen hangs black, shadowed and heavy above her. This inversion of the colonial racism of white cleanliness and black impurity (Gilman, 1985) is rejected by the image. The sexualised body of the black female diviner, rather than symptomatic of perceived racial deviance, is revealed through the Feminine Semiotics of the space as an illuminated conduit for embodiment and meaning.

The presence of Queen Victoria complicates the representation of the archives of Nonthetha's activities whilst in the asylum. One of the highlighted observations of Nonthetha's behaviour in the asylum was her insistence that she spoke with Queen Victoria and was expecting correspondence to arrive from the queen demanding her freedom (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). The relationship and differences between these two icons of feminine empowerment is explored through the mechanism of the installation. The contradictions of Victoria as a purveyor of oppressive colonialism and as an icon of feminine power, liberty and expansion, is expressed in the heavy sculptural form of the hanging dress. It also contrasts with Nonthetha's highly vulnerable body beneath it. Whereas Nonthetha is able to move freely in the water, the body of the Queen hangs lifeless and immobile, suffocated as it were by her cultural indicators of dress and bodily appropriation.

While Nonthetha's naked body has been shown to perform the exotic fantasies of stereotype, she also inhabits a space of intersection that places her body in

the realms of the liminal. A Feminine Semiotics then arises in the hyper surface of the present wherein the two bodies of the women intersect in construct and kinetics in the bathroom of the asylum. The audience are a third level of intersection as they witness their own complicity in gazing not only at Nonhetha but at the historical and semiotic meeting points of black and white femininity.

In the background, we hear shouts coming from one of the bathrooms. Ntsikana sits inside an old peeling ceramic bathtub, while a video plays on a fold-up projection screen above the basin. The video depicts images of Xhosa-Boer armed conflicts and historical events of the Colonial era in South Africa. It projects a highly problematic and stereotyped depiction of the battle between historical black and white identity in South Africa. The video is overtly racist, over-dramatic and imbued with colonial master narratives in which white identity is shown to be at risk to the potential intrusions of the black other.

In this room, however, the presence of Ntsikana and the use of shadow puppetry satirizes these historical prejudices and fears.

*Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:*

*Plot 99 Dvd: 52:35- 53:18 mins*

Stereotype is expressed in multiple performative and symbolic languages. The first is spoken language, as Ntsikana screams and shouts in a mock battle of Xhosa and British voices, imitating sounds of fear and disgust on both sides of the conflict. The next layer is shadow puppetry, which creates stereotypical projections of each side of the armed war. The third level of semiotics is the celluloid projection of the racist video. The scene is contained and framed by the bathroom itself, and the narrow doorway that frames the audience's view of the scene. Here the rituals of war and racism are satirized through the meeting points of the celluloid, shadow puppetry, performance and voice.

The intersections of all these semiotic elements disturb the space of the bathrooms and building yet again. They create an uneasy ambiguity between

artifice and reality, highlighting historical prejudices and reiterating them in a number of disruptive elements. Power is neither easily presented nor reclaimed, as the intersections of binary and the feminine imaginary involve the historical master narratives at play in positionalities of race and gender, place and time. The audience are once again situated on the thresholds of liminoid ritual, placed in an ambiguous relation to the images offered. Here in the bathrooms nothing is sacred, everything transitional, and rites of passage reveal and conceal the myriad racial and engendered discourses and silences at play in the post colony of the asylum.



Fig.13. Nonthetha dances beneath the dress of Queen Victoria. Photograph by Anthony Strack.

## Layering and Intersection in the Surfaces of the Sacred

The movement between spaces in *Plot 99* manipulates the audience physically and emotionally into the transitional qualities of the sacred as expressed by Crosby (2009) in Chapter Two. By destabilizing the audience's sense of space through movement at particular moments, attention is placed on the transitional aspects of the Feminine Semiotic. In *Plot 99*, transition is not only effected through strategies of action, but through an engagement with the liminal. Transition in the Feminine Semiotic is achieved through movement from space to space, as well as the constant layering and transformation of the performance and its objects through an interrogation of their relationship to the sacred.

The meaning and appearance of the sacred is reconfigured in *Plot 99* through the complex political and aesthetic meanings of intersection, layering and surface. Moments of exchange and crossover characterise the broadest performative strategies of *Plot 99*. These moments provide opportunities for binary to express both its liminality as well as its coercion in the processes of meaning. In a significant meeting of Patient Number Three, Inanna and Nonhetha in the Waiting Room, the scene is framed by the observational presence of Dr Pascharama, hanging suspended from a rope that spans the length of the room. The doctor's position engages the masculinity of the discourses and gaze of the hospital system, as an observer rather than participant in women's emotional and spiritual encounters. Nonhetha erupts in a prophecy of doom and forewarning of death. This gesture of defiance is juxtaposed by the arrival of the nurse to return Nonhetha to the safeholds of containment, while the destabilized Patient Number Three, Inanna, attached to Dr Pascharama by one of his ropes, drags his body with her own, after Nonhetha into the next space.

***Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:***

***Plot 99 Dvd: 54:50-56:55 mins***

It is this double bind of inevitable impossibility as well as potential for transformation that characterises the ambiguities and vulnerabilities of the Feminine Semiotic (De Lauretis, 1984:4). Binary oppositions which maintain the dominance of masculine ideological systems in gender relations are not made invisible, but rather engaged within the complexity of the empowering difference of female desire and subjectivity within its own models, as well as the layers of meaning in the live moment of performance and receptivity. Here structure is invoked in order to deconstruct itself.

The specific configurations of the four characters described above, address the political positionalities of each construct of body through the semiotic and epistemological intersections of each identity with the other, the space and the audience. In each juxtaposition is an unstable interplay of power dynamics, gazes and racial and gender discourses. What the intersections reveal is on one level the impossible project of imagining the body and identity outside of these power dynamics. It also, however, provides a possibility for radical reconfiguration of how we view the creative potential of binary in the moment of live performance. It is the meeting point, the moment of intersection with its myriad positionalities and discourses, that facilitates the slippages of identity, sexuality, meaning and experience in temporal and spatial realities. The surface does not deny the depths of conditioning and critique in the images, but holds them in its presence and its gaps.

The Waiting Room leads into a larger ward that is presided over by the character of a nurse. She dominates the space through movement and mechanics as she pushes a screeching, rusted medicine trolley up and down the ward. The mechanics of the trolley intersect with the rigidity of the architecture and the conservative elements of her character. Here the audience, in the world of the hospital, become witness to the negligence and difficulties of the nursing process, as Nonhetha, locked behind a door in an adjoining room, shouts desperately for water. The nurse unlocks the door and closes it behind her as she orders Nonhetha to take her medication.

The door is engaged as a threshold for the visible and invisible spaces of personal trauma which become apparent for both the observer and the people involved in the act of oppression. The effects of the moment of trauma on Nonthetha can only be heard while the audience wait in the ward for the next part of the dramatic action. The expectations of theatrical convention, that is, the separation between audience and performance, supplies distance as a measure of safety between observer and observed. Yet it is the immediacy of the act that highlights the vulnerability of these spatial dynamics in Ward 33. A gaping hole in the ceiling is a reminder of the decay of the system, not only in the state's neglect of the building in the present, but the history of neglect, voicelessness and invisibility of patients passed through the psychiatric systems of the past (Marks, 2007).

*Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:*

*Plot 99 written script: 24-26 Ward 33*

*Plot 99 Dvd: 56:56-1:04:39 mins*

At this moment, when Nonthetha can be neither subdued nor forced to take her medicine, the nurse emerges from the room with a miniature puppet construct of Nonthetha. The nurse's performance engages the historical legacies of nursing as explored by Shula Marks in her study on the 'microphysics of power' involved in mental nursing in South Africa in the first half of the twentieth century (Marks, 2007). She writes,

With little education and drawn from the least advantaged of the white workforce, the nurses were at the bottom of an often vicious and dehumanising pecking order in the hospitals. It is thus perhaps not entirely surprising that they took their frustrations out on their vulnerable patients (Marks, 2007:91).

Although Marks acknowledges the many self-sacrificing and compassionate nurses who may have passed through the psychiatric system, violence, neglect and conflict was an inevitable reality (2007). The resultant racism and aggression shown to the patients was not merely indicative of a culture of oppression, but of the broader social and political dynamics at play in women's

identity at the time of Nonhetha's incarceration. It speaks alarmingly to women's complicity in each other's oppression and the power of patriarchal and colonial conditions and conditioning to distort and influence our deepest senses of community and compassion.

Puppetry is introduced in this scene as a play with scale between the life-size nurse and the miniature Nonhetha. This semiotic positioning references an obvious interrogation of historical racial and gender status between the women, the manipulation of power and control, and the involvement of femininity in its own oppression. Nonhetha's power, however, comes through her tiny defiance. In puppet theatre the manipulation of scale and status is often used to deploy allegory around the corruption of power (Francis, 2007). Penny Francis remarks on the historical Czech protest theatre production of Josef Krofta's *Drak 9* based on the dragon story by Yevgeny Schwartz (Francis, 2007). The production uses scale and size, manipulated through puppetry, to present an allegorical fantasy of tyrannical oppression. In *Drak 9*, a black-coated human figure uses a spotlight to represent a machine gun, with which he oppresses a village of small marionette puppet peasants (Francis, 2007). Here the human figure metaphorically towers as a monstrous oppressor over the villagers. Performed in Czechoslovakia under communist rule, the fact that *Drak 9* was a puppetry production allowed its subversive content to run undetected by the ruling party (Francis, 2007).

In Ward 33, the Feminine Semiotic expresses the power struggle between state and individuals through intersection. The semiotic is interrupted by the alkalest qualities of time and space on the moment. We are conscious that the performance is in fact a construct in a moment of ephemerality, a recreated window on the past existing in the abandoned asylum in the present. Out of these moments where we are simultaneously engaged in the live action and distanced from it, the audience are washed into the internal landscapes of Nonhetha's memory.

The bright lights of the ward disappear and the ritual now becomes the buzzing of street lights outside that create shadows and urbane distortions of burglar

bars on the walls. The almost pedestrian activities of the nurse, overshadowed by the constructions of her character in both history and the present, are engulfed in the dream world of the night. A skeletal ghost hound emerges from the shadows, operated by three puppeteers with lights streaming from their foreheads. This puppet construction of a hound of the otherworld signals our descent into fantasy as Nonhetha lies dreaming on the floor of the ward. It layers the traumatic moments of the nurse-patient interaction with the anachronistic elements of dream and surrealism.

**Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:**

**Plot 99 written script:** p. 26-27 Ward 33

**Plot 99 Dvd:** 1:04:45-1:05:40 mins and 1:07:55-1:08:35 mins

**Online Visual Performance Research Archive: Category:**

<https://plot99par.wordpress.com/2011/09/28/costume-design/>

*Character Imagery Ward 33*

**Explanation of Correspondence:** *Puppetry can provide solutions to providing representation for elements that would be difficult to stage in reality, such as animals or super human actions, such as flying. I wanted to design an animal companion from Nonhetha's childhood, inspired by the testimony of an ukuthwasa initiate in Ntombi Booï's psychological analysis (Booi: 2005). In the initiate's recollections of her life story, she insists that one of the signs of her difference and abilities was her unusual familiarity and relationships with dogs. Creating a puppet to represent a familiar or animal spirit, who belongs to Nonhetha, could signify her connection throughout her life to Xhosa natural mysticism and magic. Through research and discussions with the cast, the domestic dog was mentioned again as a significant icon in Xhosa traditions that often heralds the message or presence of ancestral spirits. It is of interest to state that the present day Bishop of the Church of Nonhetha in Khulile breeds the Africanus species and has a pack of over six hounds living on his plot of land in the Eastern Cape location. A photograph of one of these dogs is exhibited in the online archive photographic essay on the church (<http://plot99par.wordpress.com/2011/11/21/present-day-me...anthony-strack/>).*

Patient Number Three, Inanna, who has hovered on the outskirts of the historical action, now enters the dream space. Her presence intersects with the moment to shift time and place into a threshold between the past and the present. Patient Number Three, Inanna finds routes into Nonhetha's memory and dream world through the myth of the goddess Inanna (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983).

A blue plastic hospital curtain becomes complicit in the dislocation of time and space, bringing the contemporary hospital into the site of the historic black female asylum as well as the fantasy spaces of mythology. It transforms into a shadow screen, as shadow puppets are projected behind it. The shadow puppets depict the mythical story of the descent of Inanna as a puppet play within the play. As Patient Number Three, Inanna speaks, her own shadow is projected by the buzzing streetlights on to the wall. The use of shadow puppetry, as in the bathrooms, layers the semiotic landscape of the scene.

*Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:*

*Plot 99 Dvd: 1:05:40-1:07:05 mins*

Puppetry draws attention to the use of narrative in performance, the presence of artifice and story in the dramatic action of the scene. Artifice is alluded to not only in the use of shadow puppetry itself, but in the mechanics of the shadows that are also exposed, as audience members are allowed to watch from either behind or in front of the curtain. This disrupts the tradition of European puppetry which seeks to hide the mechanics of the puppet in service of total illusion. It provides a postcolonial interpretation of Javanese shadow puppetry traditions, in which the puppet screen and stage are turned around so that the audience witness the 'back' of the screen and the mechanics of the shadow play (Unima, 1967). Traditionally this is done to display the prowess of skill in the puppeteer. In Ward 33, this inversion operates to expose the mechanisms and beauty of construction. The shadows create iconic images of the goddess in her ritual robes, which descend into a horrific image of Inanna's beheaded

corpse hung from a butcher's hook. The shadows that arise in the darkness of the room become ominously portentous of destruction.

Out of this adaptation of the Indonesian shadow puppetry device, the ceiling of the ward lights up with a projected video image of a young black woman floating in dark waters. In her celluloid subconscious, the cinema of her soul, Nonhetha inhabits the elemental realms, expanding the roof of the asylum into the vast landscapes of the feminine imaginary. The image shifts the audience's sense of spatial stability. The action in the room becomes framed by a body floating upside down above us. Nonhetha, awake on the floor, engages these images of herself, locating her memories of her young self as that which sits uncomfortably within the coherent reality of the hospital, society and performance languages.

*Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:*

*Plot 99 written script: p. 26-27 Ward 33*

*Plot 99 Dvd: 1:07:10-1:09:25 mins*

The entrance of her animal, her hound familiar, could be received by the audience as a traditional puppetry gesture. The use of puppets to portray animals on stage (often as foils or comic interludes) is one of the creative options that puppetry offers to theatrical performance. Yet here in the asylum ward, every detail of performance is layered, fluid and interrogative. The audience receives the images and their layering of space as Nonhetha reaches up and removes her mask from her face. The sense of the whole character of Nonhetha is fractured in this gesture as her construction is revealed in performative action.

Underneath the mask, the performer derails the unity of performance by revealing the construct of character. She transparently addresses her positionality in the fictional reconstruction of Nonhetha's identity and representation in the production. In isolation, these moments could be subsumed in sentimentality or even seamless fantasy. The mechanics of the

mask, as with the shadow puppetry and puppet dog, are not hidden or made into a seamless reality. They are revealed for the constructions they are.

The surfaces of the various performance devices, the building, the performers and the audience, create intersections that defy simplistic gestures or moments. They also, however, allow the audience, in their own receptivity and positionalities, to find their points of identification, to discern their own meaning and objects of interpretation. It is the layering of moments and the revelations of surface through the cracks in meaning that connects to a Feminine Semiotics in Ward 33. Yet in this barrage of layering, devices and semiotic intersections, the surfaces of the present have at some level the capacity to simultaneously disrupt and generate the potential of binary. A third element of unpredictable semiotics is facilitated in the visible and invisible intersections of the personal experiences of emergence(y).

### **Puppetry, Sentience and Construct in Plot 99**

Outside of the symbolic, there is only psychosis (Elliot, 1992:207).

It is in the point of connection and conflict between surfaces that the specificities of the audience's relationship with the live moment occurs. This emphasis on transition also allows us to interrogate alchemical potential of the Feminine Semiotic to address the sacred in representation. In this moment, the audience form a vital part of the dynamic relationship between object, meaning and narrative.

It is possible that tragedy purifies the feelings themselves of fear and pity. These arise in us in crude ways, attached to all sorts of objects... The poet educates our sensibilities, our powers to feel and be moved, by refining them and attaching them to less easily discernible objects... Imagination is limited only by its skill, and can turn any object into a focus for any feeling... this is not a refinement of those feelings but a discovery that they belong to a surprising object (Sachs, 2005).

Puppetry elucidates the unexpected objects of emotional attachment in performance, surprising us in moments with our own ability to read our human condition in the object. Objects of representation in the act of performance inherit the personalized energies of the viewer as well as the manipulator. In essence, it is this suspension of disbelief in order to engage the transference of life to the object that allows the puppet to act as an emotional prosthesis<sup>14</sup> or tool for pathos and meaning for the spectator (Kentridge, 2001). The object is transformed, not only through performance, but by the audience's belief in the object and its capacity for life and emotion, enabled by their own participation.

As discussed earlier, this is neither a simplistic gesture of faith nor an uncomplicated illusion of a unitary reality. Penny Francis states that the potential power of puppetry is contained in its essence, which in her estimation is its traditional application of illusion, a seamless independent movement, speech and action which insists on its own veracity (Francis, 2007). To essentialize the power of puppetry to illusion limits its potential for use in South African visual performance. To cast puppetry's power in illusionist traditions, is as problematic as maintaining empowering femininity in the belief of a cohesive epistemological essence. To minimize the significance of its artifice in the production of meaning in the representation of South African identity, undermines what I believe is the true power of puppetry for the Feminine Semiotic.

The final scenes of **Plot 99** engage the process of ambiguity between the plasticity of the constructed puppet, the constructed performance and the illusionistic capacity for independent life. All three of these elements are made possible through the meeting points of invested energy and emotion as well as critique from both audience and puppeteer. It is this interplay that presents not a stigmatic boxing of puppetry in tradition or symbolic modes of application to

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<sup>14</sup> This term, used in the study of autism to describe the healing methodology of the Emotional Social Intelligence Prosthesis, was proposed by puppeteer Basil Jones as a description for the concept of puppetry in 2011.

performance, but a multifaceted object for semiotic and kinaesthetic meaning and exchange.

Upon entering the final room of the Dream Space/Deathscape of *Plot 99*, the sense of length and depth of the space dislocates the audience from the cramped, smaller spaces of the previous rooms. The audience is seated for the first time in a more traditional theatrical arrangement, in seats on a raked platform in front of the large performance space. It creates a sense of depth of the enormous space, a sense of height from which to view the action and the audience's unity as their own body of outsiders to the events. It is from this more traditional position that the audience is engaged in the act of puppetry and we would expect a more traditional approach to the application of puppetry in a theatrical setting.

The Deathscape emerges from a creative interpretation of Nonhetha's historically documented dream (explored in Chapter Four), using the door as a metaphor for rites of passage, transition and thresholds. Self-standing doorways are used as performative and metaphoric entry and exit points into both the dream and into the realms of the underworld of death. Recorded sound literally transforms the anticipated passivity of a lifeless building, as sub base frequencies cause the floors, windows, ceilings and air to vibrate with sonic movement.

***Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:***

***Plot 99 written script: p. 36-40 R-Evolutions***

***Plot 99 Dvd: 1:22:03-1:22:40 mins***

<http://plot99par.wordpress.com/category/the-dream-spacedeathscape/>

The Dream Space/deathscape

In this room of entrances and exits, the audience meets once again with the characters of Patient Number Three, Inanna and Nonhetha. Their bodies, however, have transformed into an uncanny reconfiguration with the puppet form. The further the audience journey into the underworld of Nonhetha, the

deeper they emerge into the metaphoric and animistic environment of puppetry.

Janet Lee observes that the most fundamental concept that distinguishes the puppet from sculpture is that it *moves* (Lee, 2007). This capacity for movement leads her to investigate puppetry's potential in interdisciplinary performance and the complex shifts in what she calls 'traditional puppeteer/puppet hierarchies' (Lee, 2007:18). She investigates the performance of Philippe Decoufflé's *Tricodex* at Sadler Wells, 2005. She considers that for Decoufflé, that dance *is* puppetry, not simply dancers performing with puppets. In much the same way, *Plot 99* engages every aspect of the visual performance landscape as an act of puppetry. In Decoufflé's work, the boundaries between the performers' bodies and the bodies of the puppets, as well as the traditional stylistic performances of such puppets, is blurred (Lee, 2007). Lee describes this mutability of form as

A tangible deconstruction of subject/object relationships whereby the presence of the dancer/puppeteer as performer produces a new level of complicity. Most directly this occurs through the attached limbs and parts that affect a kinaesthetic symbiosis where the puppet/object reconfigures the puppeteer's corporeal boundaries (Lee, 2007:18).

This potential for performative symbiosis between puppet and performer, expressed by Lee, characterises the use of direct body manipulation puppetry employed in the Dream Space of *Plot 99*. Puppetry is used to evoke a reconfiguration of the feminine imaginary through the uncanny doubling of the body. In one moment, Patient Number Three, Inanna appears between door frames but her face, constructed as a puppet-mask placed on the back of her head, creates an uncanny dislocation of the singular body, threatening its corporeal limitations. Its spatial placement expresses her body's fracturing and complex relationship to the constructions of her feminine identity.

If sexuality is formed upon 'a shifting and uncertain unconscious terrain' (Elliott, 1992:211), how do we contact and represent this terrain in

performance in a rethinking of the representation of sexuality, spirituality and psychosis? The divisions of gender, and by implication the coherent self, hold within it disjunction, the inherent instability, anxiety and danger of separation that lays the foundations of identity, rationality, ontology and body. In the doubling of Patient Number Three, Inanna through the reconfiguration of puppetry and the body into a new symbiosis, the audience's sense of uniformity in the performer as well as their sense of balance is destabilized and inverted. Her double face disturbs the laws of direction expected of the body, turning Patient Number Three, Inanna inside out.

***Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:***

***Plot 99 Dvd: 1:24:22-1:28:00 mins***

***Online Visual Performance Research Archive:***

<http://plot99par.wordpress.com/2011/12/01/puppetry-and-v...e-inspirations/>

*Visual Performance Inspirations*

<http://plot99par.wordpress.com/2011/12/28/character-patient-number-3-inanna/>

*Character Imagery: Patient Number Three, Inanna*

She explores the abjection of her puppet body through inversions of movement, performatively entering the psychic experience of self-destruction. This references the earlier scenes of her psychosis as perceived through binary and stereotype. The double body here in the Dream Space challenges the essentialism of the body, playing with our fear of fragmentation as much as it challenges such perceptions through the layers of puppetry, construct and identity subversion at play.

This act does more than represent a descent into psychosis through the use of puppetry, it creates semiotic pathways for creative expression through a symbiosis of form and movement that can potentially alter the patriarchal symbolic (Elliot, 1992:230). Elliott insists that 'patriarchal social relations and the symbolic oppression of the semiotic generate many destructive and pathological consequences for the semiotic' (Elliott, 1992:223). Yet the semiotic destabilization of Patient Number Three, Inanna's body reminds us of

the complex, dual meanings of emergence(y) as both crises and innovative potential arising from these threats to identification. It also expresses the complex interplays of puppetry in the sentience of the kinetic and the presence of construct in *Plot 99*.

Very slowly, Nonhetha stands up in an opened doorway, but she is no longer a masked performer. Her form is composed of two simultaneous presences, creating her performance as an act of symbiotic puppetry. Nonhetha Nkwenkwe is created through the meeting points of puppet, costume and performer body, where the intersections of these three elements blur the boundaries of the corporeal limits of both the human and puppet.

Lee poses the difficult question of whether there is scope 'for greater receptivity toward realising how puppetry might evolve through interdisciplinary, physical practice' (Lee, 2007:19). I would further this question to consideration of the possibility of puppetry in performing the complex discourses surrounding feminine identity and experience. The traditional applications of puppet as character, of puppet as a 'vessel for narrative and character driven expression' (Lee, 2007:19) is a further indicator of the legacy of puppetry as a primarily dramatic device that in maintaining illusion preserves the coherent languages of theatrical discourse.

As a full body puppet, Nonhetha appears initially as a coherent body defined as a unitary presence through lighting and deft puppeteer manipulation. Yet, it is the unique plasticity of the puppet that forms a vital device for alchemical transformations of meaning and reality in *Plot 99*. The proximity of form and presence between performer and puppet intimately connects Nonhetha to the visceral quality of the constructed body and its connection to the fragility of life. It is also this intimacy that invites the audience to find unexpected emotional transference to the object of the narrative.

***Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:***

***Plot 99 Dvd: 1:28:00-1:36:50 mins***

***Online Visual Performance Research Archive:***

<http://plot99par.wordpress.com/category/the-dream-spacedeathscape/>

### The Dream Space/Deathscape

In the absurd occurrences of Nonthetha's dream world, elements, characters, images, metaphors explored all through the previous rooms, merge together in the surreal act of representing her prophetic vision. The sense of space is distorted by the opening and closing of doors, which fly around the room falling on their sides or spinning around. This disturbance of form echoes the disintegrating architecture of the masculine symbolic. Shadow puppetry is also used inside of the door frames to manipulate the depth of the opening and the imagined reality inside the doorway. These movements through the Dream Space enact a semiotic ritual that challenges the structures of the threshold, moving across, between, through and around the space. The use of recorded and live sound further contributes to the inversion of space and depth that characterises the experience of the Dream Space/Deathscape.

Van Gennep expresses his understanding of the sacred as a cyclical friction around transition within the realms of the social (Van Gennep, 1960). This can be read as a play of ambiguity and contractions that create new pathways for visibility and invisibility in performance (Crosby, 2009). This interplay, which is an expression of the vulnerability of borders as well as cohesive reality, is evident in the dynamics between puppet and human body. The relationship between the two forms presents a politically charged exchange that addresses the boundaries of what we perceive as feminine identity. Julia Kristeva's theories on feminine sexuality are intimately concerned with understanding the psychoanalytic processes by which normative masculine identification and embodiment is disturbed and disrupted (Chedgzoy, 1997:459). It is through the disruption of the feminine body through the Feminine Semiotics of puppetry, that the final images of *Plot 99* emerge.

Caught in the convulsions of intense pain, Nonthetha lies on the floor of the black asylum. In this moment she inhabits two bodies, both puppeteer and puppet. This gesture of duality challenges any notion of a coherent subjectivity

for Nonhetha. This would seem highly problematic for postcolonial feminist discourse which berates the postmodern project of the death of the subject (Mohanty & Russo, 1991). Yet, it contains a high degree of self reflexivity, of awareness of the impossibility of recreating Nonhetha. In this moment the impossibility of identity is presented for Nonhetha in the present just as the slippages of emergence(y) through the surfaces of construct present gaps for new possibilities and meanings in her story.

Many theorists who interrogate theories of sexuality talk of the abject body as the place where meaning collapses (Creed, 1989:65). Christine Ramsay also talks of the abject as being integrally linked to that which exposes the vulnerability and perviousness of the body and by extension the subject who exists through that vulnerable form (Ramsay, 1996). She insists that the site of abjection

Is where the true fragility and lawlessness of the human body exposes itself... this is the place where... the male self as a secure and integrated thinking subject faints away because rational identity, system and order are disturbed, and borders, positions and rules for daily living are no longer respected (Ramsay, 1996: 86).

Nonhetha and Patient Number Three, Inanna meet on the furthest edges of their corporeality to experience the liberation of abjection in their bodies. This vulnerable corporeality engages Kristeva's (1982) theories of the abject body, not as a stereotype of masculine prejudice and fear, but as an agent for the Feminine Semiotics of puppetry in the final representations of Nonhetha. The encounter is an exchange of puppetry, video and spoken word, taken from Vicki Feaver's confessional poem on the descent of the handless maiden, *The Lily Pond* (1994). The poem evokes images of drowning, duality and submersion.

***Corresponding Creative material: Please refer to the following:***

***Plot99 written script: p. 39-44 R-Evolutions***

***Plot 99 Dvd: 1:36:50- 1:45:00 mins***

*Online Visual Performance Research Archive:*

<http://plot99par.wordpress.com/category/the-dream-spacedeathscape/>

The Dream Space/Deathscape

Christine Ramsay focuses specifically on the implications and threat of abjection to the coherence of embodied identity (Ramsay, 1996). In a gesture of epistemological defiance, the puppet Nonhetha removes the puppet skin of Patient Number Three, Inanna from the performer's body. This potentially violent act, through the intimate movements and attention of the puppet, takes on a purgative significance of liberation and surrender. Ramsay suggests that it is the looming of the monstrous feminine that heralds the threat of violent unconscious forces, always just below the surface of patriarchal understanding and reason, but which is itself most definitely not impenetrable or stable (Ramsay, 1996). The penetrability of the puppet/puppeteer relationship takes on sentient meaning for the performance of Nonhetha and Patient Number Three, Inanna. There is great pathos in the vulnerable relationship between the bodies of the women, allowing them a brief moment of exchange through their specific racial, sexual, temporal and spatial lines. The removal of their constructed puppet selves expresses a semiotic meeting and exchange of meaning that has framed each woman's individual journey through the patriarchal symbolic.

Language erupts but cannot control or suppress the live moment, as Dr Pascharama, on the borders of the room, unravels into a complete psychosis inside of the Feminine Semiotic. His frenetic lunacy is contrasted with the simple, perhaps inevitable gestures of self-destruction in the two women. We are left with a promise and a threat. Inside of the Feminine Semiotic is an impossible heart of chaos, fracture and contradiction. It also contains the possibility of exchange on multiple signifiatory levels that may facilitate new and unpredictable surfacings of identity in the present, emergences of hope for a multiplex future that supports this complexity.

The two performers enter the final ritual of the piece, Nonthetha's rite of passage of a witnessed death and burial, denied to her by colonialism, stigma and fear. Yet, it is a moment of kinaesthetic density, a meeting point of bodies, video and space that once again betrays any gesture towards coherence. Ketelo unstraps the puppet body of Nonthetha, reconfiguring the connection between her body and the construct. The body of Nonthetha is taken to the burial mound, as on the asylum wall behind her a video image of three Nonthetha's appears – a young girl, a mother, and a grandmother, sitting on the beach next to a mound of sand, in front of the lapping waves and setting sun. This is a last gesture towards a seamless fantasy for the ending of Nonthetha's story, of hope for the feminine imaginary or a space for multiple feminine identities to exist in an ideal environment. It is a flat two-dimensional image broken by the door frames in the room and projected onto the peeling walls of the asylum.

Once again, the personal rituals of the performer immerse in the grand narratives of history and culture, as the audience bear witness to this final gesture of homage. As the women leave the puppet corpse, they reach what seems to be the last doorway. They open and enter, but as they walk through, another light shines, and another passageway with another doorway is revealed, leading us out of the asylum, leading us back to the world outside.

## Conclusion



University of Cape Town

## Exit Strategies for Leaving the Asylum

Beginning at an ending and ending at a beginning, **Plot 99** has metamorphosed into a performative and research narrative in progress, that in the submission of this thesis takes on yet again, its next form of meaning and structure.

After considering the manifestations of practice and research that constituted the **Plot 99** event, we are left considering whether a multidisciplinary Feminine Semiotics may find expression through the cross-disciplinary medium of puppetry and visual performance. Can we theorize the potential of puppetry and visual performance to represent a Feminine Semiotics for the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

In my proposal for a PhD by practice, I presented the argument that contemporary women's performance and gender representation in South Africa should address a criterion for content through a vital re-examination of the marriage between practice and research. The question that instigated the enquiry that would become **Plot 99**, was how do female artists bring the complexity of multiple levels of performance and gender theory into the realms of practical innovation, and how can women's practice guide and influence the production of theory? At a most basic level, I wanted my doctorate to consider the extent to which the theoretical complexity of the practice of, specifically puppetry and visual performance by female artists, lends itself to the complex discourses of sexuality in South Africa today.

The methodology of process, performance and documentation in the practice as research thesis raised itself as both a crucial and ill-defined guideline for the creative, theoretical and alchemical processes I was to uncover. This prompted my enquiry into the possibilities of a Feminine Semiotic approach to understanding the complex interplays of theory and creativity that could constitute a re-imagining of the feminine in performance.

One of the problematics the conclusion raises is in the inevitability of ephemerality in live performance and the politics of documentation. For in seeking to leave the performative asylum space, informed by the confluences of theory, memory, experience and residue, how do we draw and present conclusive evidence to the academic worth of this practice as research process?

Throughout the project, I have attempted to investigate what constitutes representational strategy for innovative performance. Specific to this enquiry, based on the life experiences of the Prophetess Nonthetha, what representational strategies are employed to address the historical and contemporary issues of women's sexual and spiritual emergence(y)? Investigating Cixous (1975) and Irigaray's (1985) proposal for a feminine imaginary, the terrain of the primal and multiple sexuality of the feminine body arises as an entry point to a radical rejection of the patriarchal. Julia Kristeva (1982) posits the semiotic in relation to the feminine and drives as the expansive terrain of the body, outside of the constructs of the symbolic.

**Plot 99** expresses the potential of the surface, ritual and threshold as a conduit for meaning and South African cultural identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is through the interplay of binaries through combination and reconfiguration in relation to that which defies and defines epistemologies, which the complex production of the alchemical third in performative representation occurs. The intersections of semiotic surfaces express not only excess, but also the liminal and inappropriate other that provides representation for narratives of complex women's experience. This theorization of the Feminine Semiotic as a route to the complex theoretical terrain of **Plot 99** has presented both possibilities and problematics.

**Plot 99** began by addressing the narrative of Nonthetha Nkwenkwe in relation to the complex political and social history of psychiatry in South Africa. How was I to combine the density of meaning and aesthetic involved in the Feminine Semiotic, the complexities of authorship and positionality, and still pay homage to the lived experiences of the prophetess? How was I to

generate critical distance and subversion, but immersion and possibility for the audience in the very real tragedy of Nonhetha's incarceration, as well as women's experiences of sexual and spiritual emergence(y)?

The research on Nonhetha's life presents an historically informed conceptual terrain that explores Nonhetha's startling experiences firstly as an *Igqira* (or 'seer'), her rebirth as a Christian prophetess and community leader, her diagnosis of schizophrenia and her traumatic journey through state psychiatry and asylums. Initially I wanted to avoid stereotypes of fear and suspicion, I wanted to reclaim the spaces of psychiatric history, to investigate whether they have evolved from the trauma of the past. These painful resonances were a tragic remembrance of the roads that South African psychiatry has travelled (Swartz, 1999).

The site of the asylum in the present, however, became a vital expression of the potential as well as the impossibilities of the Feminine Semiotic in visual performance. It was not only its historical legacy of neglect and abuse that made it such a powerful contributor to the performance, but its re-encoding, transitions and surfacing as an architectural tool inside of a Feminine Semiotic. The crossroads of the inner and outer worlds of **Plot 99's** theoretical and performative landscapes are ultimately addressed by multimodal performance. This is created through three junctions of creative exchange: 1) the engagement of myself as the author of the text and creatrix of the event, 2) the engagement of the creative team of artist-collaborator-performers with the various tools and spaces of performance, and 3) the introduction of the third, unknowable and unpredictable element of the audience to witness and participate in these live performances.

The moment of live performance plays a key role in understanding these intersections. If the key to innovation in performance and representation lies on the surfaces of interchange and the gaps of new meaning, then in the positioning of these three points of perception I hope to locate representational experience and form. Through a number of strange and static attractors, in the form of site, architecture, performing bodies, text, history, poetry, movement,

puppetry, video, sound, witnesses, objects and masks, I developed the live event of *Plot 99*. **Plot 99** thus presents an innovative approach to South African women's puppetry that considers the intersections of these points as a catalyst for women's contemporary performance.

Puppetry presents a strategy for expansive creative distillations that explore sacred trajectories for sexual and spiritual representation. It also reflects on puppetry's relevance to the developing theoretical terrains of postcolonial feminist performance and representation as well as practice as research in performance.

In **Plot 99**, the problematic of the risks of engaging stereotype is addressed through the dilemmas of semiotic excess and meaning. How do we engage stereotype without merely replicating its ideological foundations? Homi K. Bhabha, in his reading of colonial discourse, looks towards the anxiety and ambivalence inherent in representations of difference (Bhabha, 1992). The Feminine Semiotic engages this ambivalence of stereotype, exploring the very constructs of hegemony in order to re-imagine its representation. The use of visual performance to represent stereotype effects a destabilization of political structures through the instabilities of form and performative excess.

Visual performance and puppetry engages multiple discourses simultaneously. The layers of meaning and semiotics at play in every moment of the production create alienation to the narrative in the observer. This articulates feminist and postcolonial discourses by engaging the surfaces of the construct of narrative and character. Thus, puppetry challenges the veracity of the material, generating distance and a Brechtian interrogation within the audience of the events they are witnessing. It creates an awareness of the performativity as well as the mimicry of the moment.

Puppetry addresses the artifice of construction and identity whilst simultaneously endorsing our belief in its existence. This excess of semiotic and sentience, however, can be seen to facilitate a deeper engagement with the work on emotional, physical and psychological levels. This deeper

engagement is not only experienced through the levels of history and meaning, but through the aesthetic and surfaces of the immediate live experience for the audience. It allows audiences to receive moments, objects and elements of narrative that are applicable to them in the present time. Puppetry is an immediate exchange of belief and emotion that operates between the puppeteer and performer, the puppet and audience and the puppet and its environments/framing.

The meeting points of the Feminine Semiotic in spiritual and sexual representation presents 'a partnership of experience that frees opposites from a charged, pathological and hierarchical patriarchal rendering' (Alexandre, 2001:vii). In the wake of these myriad polarities, the point of inspiration for new theory, ideas, representation and performative possibility is the very meeting point and celebration of differences. The convergences of the seemingly disparate then create a more balanced, interrogative and immersive mode of feminine-based being and experience for the audience, space and participants alike.

When dealing with theories of cultural and semiotic enquiry, it is necessary to interrogate the limitations of these discourses in the development of new performative subjectivities. At what point do we leave off critique to facilitate surfacings of presence and creativity, whilst still engaging with the complexities of difference latent in the performing body and its constructs?

Shawn Marie Garrett declares that 'young artists experimenting with forbidden images no longer choose to repress these demons of their unconscious...' (Garrett, 2002:42). In the light of the performance of stereotype in feminist performance strategy, which can both locate and expose representational prejudice, we hope to find other surfaces, to perform feminine experience, as it exists both within and outside of the borders of binaric reference. The production of the alchemical third is created not by a rampant resistance of the dualistic separations of gender, race, culture and individuals, but by the ways that they intersect, combine, defy, emerge in all their transitions and stases.

Through an alchemical exploration of emergence(y) through puppetry, the **Plot 99** project seeks to locate representational strategies that can provide gaps for new subjectivity and to find expression in the ruptures of the present. In this way, the ancient technique of puppetry is reinvigorated through a Feminist Semiotics, to intersect mythology, history and identity in order to begin to re-imagine and rethink the performance of feminine sexual and spiritual emergence(y) otherwise.

The women sit silently. Slowly Nonhetha begins to speak:

Nonhetha:

I always think about it afterwards, whenever I dream of something, I think 'What does it mean?'. I am the past now, and your children are the future. I am a dying woman, preaching salvation.

*Video: From the beach we see an old woman looking out at the setting sun. It is early evening and Nonhetha has reached the sea.*

I see you have brought rocks and stones to cover my body from the eagles. Will you build me a high mound to break the wind?

I have asked myself many times, what it is that has brought me here, to this place? What is it about myself? All I know is that I arrived at the frontiers of common sense and crossed over. Know thyself. Know thyself. Remember *sisi*, there is no safety in this life without risk and what you risk reveals what you value.

(Plot 99 Script: 44)



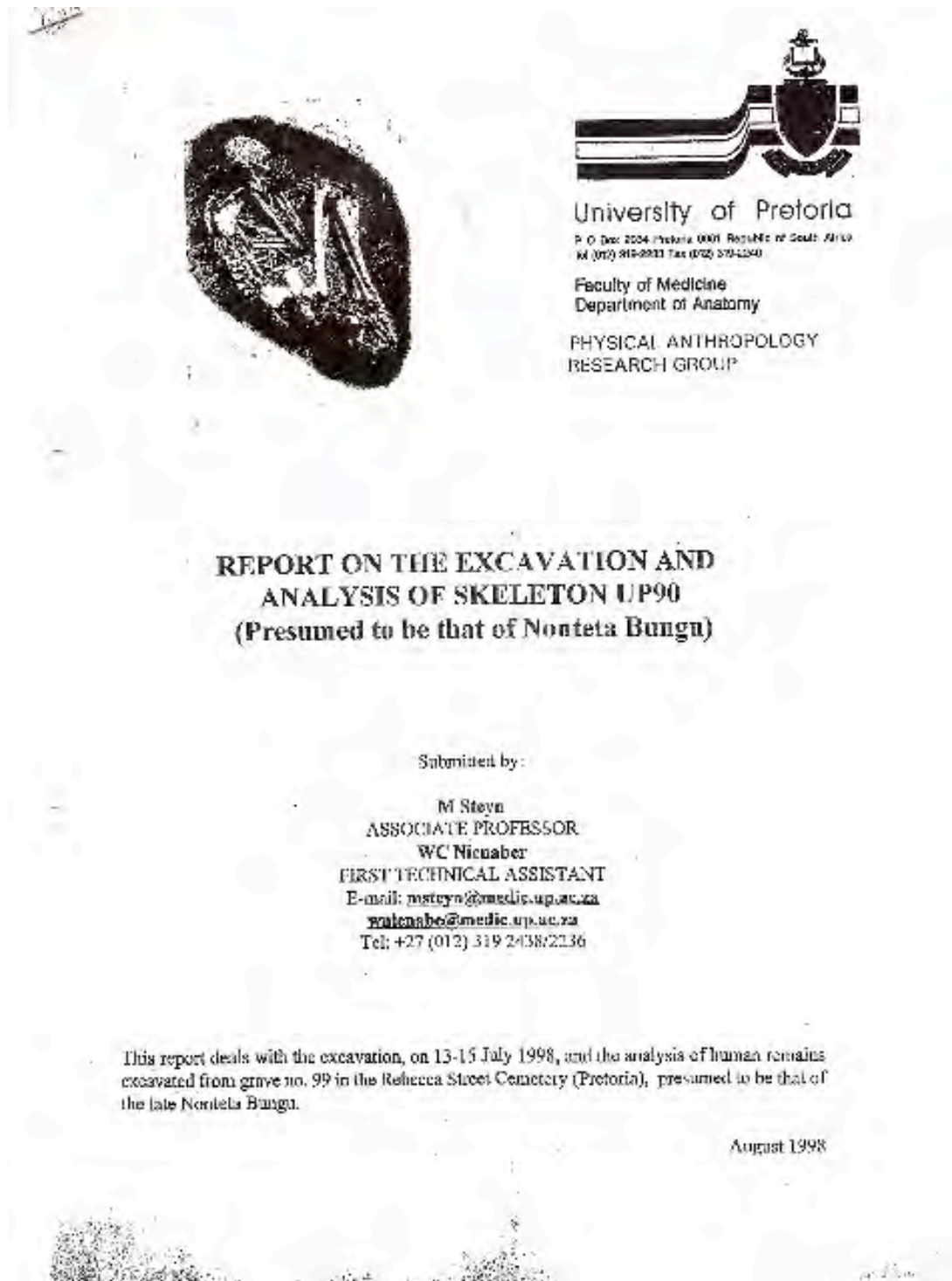
Fig. 16. A Masked Nobuhle Ketelo performs Nonthetha. Photograph by Anthony Strack.

University of Cape

## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 1:**

Report on the Excavation of Nonhetha Nkwenkwe's skeleton, 1998.



## **Appendix 2:**

### **Transcript Excerpts for Playtext:**

#### **Video: Ukuthwasa interviews:**

#### **Interviewee 2, Nobuhle Ketelo, Thursday 8 July 2010:**

Me, I never got sick. I only had dreams and everyone at home, they know that I dream, and whatever I dream I know it is real. It's the truth, you know, everything I dream it becomes really. I only have dream and visions.

When I was still young I can say, cos I remember, I think I was fifteen, I would wake up early in the morning, round about 2 o'clock am, and I would... maybe I would dream of a poem, someone telling me a poem and I would wake up and take a pen and a paper and write and write that poem. And a song, and I would wake up early in the morning singing and my grandmother would say '*wena, ukuthwasa*'- that means: you are becoming a sangoma. But then, some people were telling me, 'you're a poet, *imbongi*,' and it's unusual in my culture, to become *imbongi*, a woman *imbongi*.

But I think everyone knew, Nobuhle is talented, this gift, this *imbongi* praise, this gift in her and this amazing voice.

But as time goes by dreaming and visualizing things.

When I was growing up, I was funny, not quiet, but *belililolo*. I was *olilolo* a loner you know, ja. And just remember, *dikulelu umntwana okulayo*, from an early age I was sick, I had epilepsy. So, everyday, it was everyday thing, I would faint and start doing fits, and people thought, maybe I would be mentally disturbed. My parents put me on medication and it didn't help, they took me to sangoma and it didn't help, they don't know what happened but I am better now.

I don't know how old I was when it stopped, I think maybe seven, nine.... The woman next door, she told me. She is a great sangoma. She told me that.

The first time we met (she didn't know me, I didn't know her) and then I put money, a note, in her bones, and then she throw the bones and she told me that 'you are being called to be a sangoma, but you are lucky cos you are acknowledging them by what you are doing, your work'. And I said to her 'what is my work?'. And she said 'I see you healing people by singing'. And I was, 'you don't know me, it's the first time!' 'You are singing and you think that it is you who are singing, actually it's not you, its them working through you and that is why when you are singing everyone feels like crying and touched its because it is not you' she told me and I'm like 'ja, I am an artist'. She said, 'ja, they are watching you and they are with you all the time you are performing on stage, because it is not you, it is them'.

**Appendix 3:**Transcript Excerpts for Playtext:Video: Ukuthwasa interviews:Interviewee 3, 'Gogo', Saturday 31 July 2010:

They come to train by me. They are also sangomas- this is a sangoma, this is a sangoma, I am the sangoma, I am the big mama. This is what these are, students who are finished, they are sangomas not students anymore.

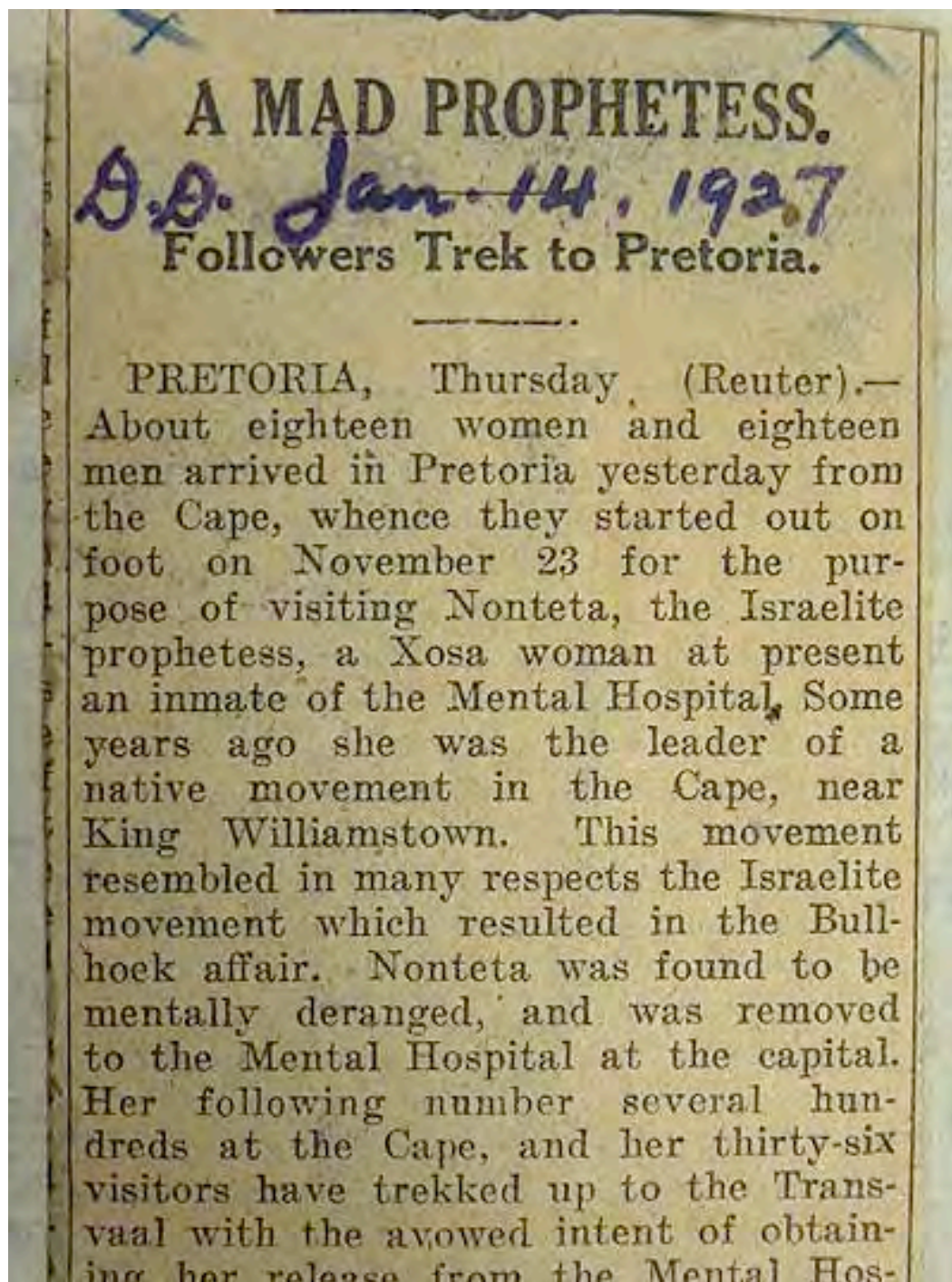
My story's too long, from when I thwassaed. Oh sorry... can I answer the phone?

I thwassaed 1968, I was 13 years, ja 13. 1968 I started to Thwasa. Isizulu. I couldn't walk, I couldn't sit. I was very sick, I never dreamt of anything or ancestors, I was catholic. I was going to church where there's lots of people and I got fits, epilepsy. So I ended up not going to church. They took me to the sangomas but I never dreamt of anything. So after. My parents didn't know what was happening. 1966 my parents took me to the church, and then there they said I had demons and must go and do my traditions. They kept saying it's the demon, the demon, my parents also took me to different sangomas and they did try to heal me but nothing until I dreamt of my grandmother. My grandmother brought to me a big snake. Like that condoms on the wall. No it's not a condom (laughs). She was wearing that thing, an inyongo, a gall bladder! The nyongo, the snake called me by my name, the snake said that I am suffering and must go to the village Qwamhlabiyabingala in Kwazulu Natal, to bring isikwama, the bag for the ancestors. So I told my parents its not going to work. I must go to church and my father must pray for me catholic prayer and chase away the evil spirits. They took me to another sangoma, and when I was there I was sleeping and I had a trance in my sleep, not in Mozambique, I am from Mozambique, but my mom is from SA, so I was in Gauteng. I heard the drums and then I woke up and after two hours in a train, I woke up in a train, in the middle of the night, strangers, those strangers

told me I must stand up and dance. But I am not in the real train; it was not a real train. I was in the river, in the river, but I thought I was in a train. And I started dancing. In a river, I was Thwasa and I went to the river and then the sangomas ancestors told her that she must go and meet them in the river and then the sangoma found me there sleeping. In Gogoto river where Limpopo meets Zambezi. It was 1968- imagine 42 years me sangoma. Thwasa Isindawo.

**Appendix 4:**

*Daily Dispatch, January 14, 1927. Newspaper clipping. National Archives, Pretoria: BAO 6605 11/328.*







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