

Isililo sikaNandi:

Imagining dithyrambic dirge to performatively score the precarity of
blackwomnhood.

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

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree.
It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the
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Signed by candidate

Signature

Date: 01/10/2021

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this MA to Gretta Adelaide Nkonyeni,

My 'Star Red'

"Not the one who'd borne me

but the one who loved me

the one who brought light

and was beaming with pride" _Nakhane

Ngiyabonga, Gogo.

*And to the memory of Zinhle 'Bee' Eudora Nkonyeni - the one who loved me
first. Ngiyakukhumbula, Mah.*

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ABSTRACT

This study is an exploration of an embodied awareness and the plethora of ways in which *what* I am ‘falls short’ - in relation to being “fully human” (Lugónes, 2010:743). It serves as the creative stimulus to actively explore and resist the ontological arrest of my blackwomnhood. This work aspires towards a kind of social and embodied resistance by means of “deserting exceptionality” (Gqola, 2004:61).

As a form of survival, as well as of repairing the ruptured fragments of my being, I want to redefine, for myself, through performance, what it means to be a young, South African, working-class, queer blackwomn. This study therefore necessitates a distinction between ‘who’ I am and ‘what’ I am through exploring what Adriana Cavarero refers to as the ‘*narratable self*’ (2005: x) in conjunction with Barbara Boswell’s ‘*creative re-visioning*’ (2010:1) and what Audre Lorde defines as ‘*autobiomythography*’ (Lorde, 1996).

In order to do this, the study employs a Practice as Research approach to explore alternative ways of staging heterogeneous experiences of blackwomnhood using the plurality of voice as a performance mode/tool. This study further reflects on a series of performance projects (as part of the present MA) to interrogate and reflect critically on the scale and complexity of the work/s. Following Cavarero (2005: x), Boswell (2010:1) and Lorde (1996), I explore the oral historical narratives and timelines of Zulu matriarch, Queen Nandi, to imagine a dithyrambic dirge drawn from blackwomn’s experiences of ruptures, reckonings and refusals.

PROLOGUE:

Notes to Self/Isililo (Wailing/Mourning)

20/08 23:55

So, I stopped shaving

Didn't care for the hair that grew on my head

Wanted to remove the smoothness

Harden the shell

I stopped wanting to be 'beautiful'.

Religiously covered my skin; even got dressed in the shower

(After spending an agonising few minutes eyes screwed shut or inspecting the walls/taps/water droplets/cracks on the tiles/shower door, hands working deftly; soap-lather-rinse-repeat - all to avoid looking at the crime scene I lived in)

I feel like I'm in a too-small waiting-room sitting opposite my body making awkward eye contact and sharing tight-lipped smiles.

We're like friends who ruined the relationship with bad sex.

I'm heartbroken that the body I was born in, grew into and became fond of had become so estranged from me.

I live with it, but I miss it...

Part of me wants to crawl deep into my body and love it from there

Protect it

Nurture it

Heal it

Guard it from there

Where no one else can hurt it

Or even claw my way out and hold it tightly while it sobs

Soothe it

Calm it

Rock it back and forth and

Whisper gently comfort as it sleeps

But

Another part of me wants to let it collect dust on a shelf and then throw it into a fire like the ragdolls I so hated as a child.

I wrote this poem shortly after I was raped. I was wounded and experiencing bewildering anguish. I was barely able to sleep and, while alone in my unisex student residence room at UP¹, up on the fifteenth floor, on Prospect Street in Hatfield, Pretoria - one of the few things that kept me from jumping from my window was writing. I would put my phone on airplane mode and populate my email drafts with all my thoughts until I fell asleep. It was a debilitating time, but it was also transformative.

In retrospect, many things have changed since then. For instance, I am now able to not only read through this piece of writing but also critique my writing whilst simultaneously recognising how much the ordeal impinged on my relationship with myself/my body. A body I referred to as a “crime scene”/ “it”. My voice was also affected when I grew increasingly “tight-lipped” (Nkonyeni, 2017a). Rape shamed me into silence.

American communications scholar, B. Hannah Rockwell (2011: ix) writes the following of her own experiences:

The transformation I took on included redefining preconceptions about certain labels found in the language of my primary socialization - what it meant to be a wife, unemployed student, mother, divorcee, single parent of two female toddlers and “good girl” who always had to get the script right. This experience guided me towards serious questions about gendered identities, basic human suffering, survival, and human experience with regard to what it means to be literally “full” of life.

Similarly, my own experiences of traumas and loss, namely being raped not too long after losing my mother, led me through (yet another) process of evaluation and serious reckoning. It was a rupture and I, now, know that the reckoning came from a deep desire to repair the fragments. To repair, I had to acknowledge the rupture and the fragments. I started reflecting on my lived/life experiences, questioning my primary socialisation, and rejecting some of it. I attempted to forge different ways of being whilst still enclosed in and wounded by some of the labels that construct(ed) my identity.

I offer that for my engagement with the above terms, *rupture(s)* refers to the traumas and loss, traumatic stressors in my lived experience, the violent interruptions, and intrusions on or because of my being. These form part of my experiential repertoire, so to speak, which in turn produces tangible enfolded registers or circulations for embodied knowledge

¹ An abbreviation for the University of Pretoria, also known as ‘Tukkies/Tuks’, where I obtained my undergraduate B.Dram degree

production as well as embodied research (see Spatz 2017: 2). *Reckoning* deals with recognising these enfolded registers and or circulations, as well as actively mourning the losses caused by *ruptures*. This process of recognition provides a way of acknowledging what has happened in/to my body/life. It is a procession of grief and grieving (for my own body/life) in motion. Reckoning, in this instance, demands a recognition that informs a possible *creative re-visioning* of the reality. This is how I arrive at self-narration/autobiomythography. *Refusal* then, deals with the materiality of resistance through bodyvoice².

As a form of survival, as well as of repairing the fragments of my being, I wanted to redefine, for myself, what it meant/s to be a young South African, working-class, queer blackwomn, who is the firstborn child/daughter of a deceased mother and ‘dead’beat father, slash a financially constrained postgraduate student, slash pensioner’s third granddaughter, slash older sister to two male adolescents, slash main generator of household income; all while dealing with collectively shared and personal losses including the traumas of sexual violence. Although many of the above markers of my identity are not immediately obvious - especially because some of the above-mentioned markers mostly encompass more about ‘*what*’ I am and not so much about ‘*who*’ I am - they are interspersed here as they equally influence my identity, existence, as well as my expressivity thereof or ‘narratable self’ (Cavarero, 2000:x).

Italian Philosopher, Adriana Cavarero, writes about the ‘*narratable self*’ which necessitates a distinction between ‘*who*’ one is and ‘*what*’ one is. Cavarero uses social theorist, Hannah Arendt’s thoughts as a foundation for her own seminal work. Cavarero synopsis what Arendt highlights as the ‘limitations of philosophical language’ because of philosophy’s preoccupation with defining, interpreting, or determining *what* an individual is through restrictive or rigid vocabulary and also by quantifying the qualities that “[an individual] can possibly share with other living beings” (Arendt, 1998:349).

Contrastingly, *who* an individual is, is revealed, performed, expressed, and manifested through an individual’s actions and speech because “[w]ho somebody is or was we can know only by knowing the story of which [they are themselves] the hero – [their] biography, in other words” (Arendt, 1998:330). Therefore, *who* someone is recognises the “*uniqueness* of a human being” that philosophical discourse is unable to truly capture in words (Kottman in

² So written to indicate that the separation of the voice from the body and vice versa is arbitrary because the voice exists because of and through the body (Steyn & Munro, 2015: 105-116).

Cavarero, 2000:vii). Philosophical discourse tends to favour *what* an individual is to the detriment of *who* they are. This will later be understood as ‘self versus stereotype’.

There is, thus, a diverse political significance to *who* somebody is because, unlike philosophical discourse, *who* someone is, is not preoccupied with the question of *what* they are (qualities; qualifications; citizenship; collectively or individually, and so forth). This is what offers a route for the uniqueness of a human being to be expressed through their own words and speech, in other words, through self-narration. This narration is what Cavarero posits to be a “verbal response to this ‘*who*’ that can assume the ‘meaning of a political action’” (2000:x).

The self-narration or *narratable self* that Cavarero theorizes, is importantly neither about the traditional or classic ‘subject’ nor about a kind of ‘subject-formation’ (Cavarero, 2000:x). It is, rather, about establishing *who* someone is through their own revelation by means of their actions and words. This revelation simultaneously embraces the delicate uniqueness and unity of the self and exists in relation with and to other people. It is, thus, an example of the political act, significance, and power of self-narration, autobiomythography³, and creative re-visioning. All terms that will be defined and engaged with later.

In my own life, I have been burdened by the ‘*what*’ of my identity. In an embodied sense, an awareness of the plethora of ways in which *what* I am ‘falls short’ - at least, in relation to the ‘ideal’ or “fully human” (Lugónes, 2010:743) – weighs down on my shoulders. This is another reason to actively strive towards a kind of transcendence of ontologies - perhaps, through a “deserting of exceptionality” (Gqola, 2004:61). This acute awareness of my identity’s so-called ‘shortcomings’ fostered my incessant need (in order to survive) to be a ‘good girl’ and to strive towards being exceptional, rising above my peers and the dusty trails of my home village. I thus became a ‘headgirl-slash-palatable-black’ who constantly had to prove to those who inhabit the ‘ideal human’ centre that I was not ‘like the others/blacks’. This was/is exhausting because I was trying to avoid one stereotypical version of black(ness)womnhood but became trapped another stereotype in the process.

Stereotypes, within the scope of this paper and study, are understood to be what South African feminist and scholar, Pumla Dineo Gqola, synthesises as “representations which fix

³ Lorde shares that autobiomythography is simultaneously employing “autobiography... mythology, psychology, all the ways in which I think we can see our environment” to create art which self-narrates. Lorde continues that it is not “a mere retelling of things that happened to me and to other women with whom I shared close ties. I define it as biomythography because I’ve found no other word to really coin what I was trying to do” (Lorde, 1996 cited by Milatovic, 2014: 34).

members of a group into a set series of behaviours and characteristics” (2004: 44). I argue that these representations are often based on ontological markers which emphasise and therefore categorise *what* somebody is without much or considered regard for *who* they are. Thus, I suggest that stereotypes and the stereotypical reading of identity, in particular, of blackwomnhood, are ruptures. They fragment the ‘whole’ spectrum of (one’s) being in favour of a restrictive close reading of *what* a person is or is not. This renders the person transparent and inadequate in relation to ‘ideal humans’. Resultantly, this impinges on a person’s ability to self-narrate making them more prone to subjugation and more likely to uncritically subscribe to stereotypical renderings of their identity.

Gqola also cautions against an uncritical celebration of ‘firsts’ (Gqola, 2021b) because this can play a role in safeguarding the restrictive measures employed to keep marginalised communities on the periphery by making exceptions out of those marginalised individuals who ‘rise above adversity’. This simultaneously limits the opportunities for better inclusion for the communities to which they belong. Rather than open up the scope of inclusion and frame of reference, exceptionality may and can lend itself to further gatekeeping and stereotypical typecasting.

Deserting of exceptionality (an exceptionalism that is learnt over time and with social conditioning) is, for purposes of this study, linked to inherited and or mimicked gestures, signs and actions that over time become accepted as norms (Butler, 2010: 168) and expected behaviour. Exceptionalism is as much a form of survival as is deserting it. Deserting exceptionalism is, for me, both a rupture and a reckoning; with what I have learnt and accepted, inherited, recreated, and even found comfort in, until I began to question it. This, along with my reflections on my performance project installations thus far, will be detailed later in the study.

Having enrolled for a Master’s (MA) by Coursework programme at the University of Cape Town’s (UCT) CTDPS⁴, I was determined to seek out ways of staging and portraying the heterogeneity of blackwomnhood without further perpetuating stereotypes or subjecting myself and or cast members to more violence. The structure of this MA programme requires a submission of a series of performance projects as part of the research process. As such, I made performance projects that were of increasing scale and complexity, starting from in-class developmental projects, moving on to minor and medium scale publicly-presented

⁴ Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies, formerly UCT’s Drama Department where I am currently completing my postgraduate studies.

projects and then leading to the imagining of the final Thesis Production which will be elucidated later. Part of my determination to seek out alternative modes of representing some parts of the broad spectrum of blackwomnhood was to reject stereotypes. This includes the exceptionalism that I have come to know as a form of survival in many spaces that were not designed to be inclusive of people who look, sound, or perform/express themselves like me; put differently, white heteropatriarchal environments.

This study uses Practice as Research or Performance as Research (henceforth referred to as PaR and PAR, respectively) using Lynette Hunter's distinctions (Arlander, 2018:5), as a methodological approach. This will also be unpacked in detail below. The performance projects that will be explained later were developed to form part of the study's iterative cycles of practice and (or into) reflection. Using predominantly voice as a performance mode or tool to engage the chosen subject matter, I would create a project and use the critical reflections to develop my thoughts and research questions further and thereafter formed another project from those developments. Perhaps it is the contrarian nature of this research method/approach that appeals to or aligns with my study's own deviation from the prescribed or stereotypically defined understanding of blackwomn(hood). It may work as another form of rupture to employ this approach, and this will be explored when I later unpack my understanding of PaR and PAR within the scope of this study.

Importantly, through using PaR and PAR methods to explore the subject matter of my research, I acknowledge that there is not just one understanding of voice. Instead, this study employs interchangeably voice that one hears in sonorous utterance/speech; voice as an assertion of my already existing and 'full' self all as a practice in motion and; voice that is apparent in my writing and artistic articulations because "[w]riters [also] talk about voice, meaning their idiosyncratic take on language, or the way their characters arrange word in the verbal universe they inhabit (and inevitably create)" (Thomaidis, 2015:1). I intended to use the plurality of my voice as part of my inquiry and performance project exploration of ruptures, reckonings, and refusal.

To give an overview, the desire to repair the rupture by means of deserting exceptionalism, fed one of the impulses of my projects. The first of two main (recorded) iterations, my Medium project was themed "*angiyona imbokodo*" (translation: I am not a rock). Before that, my Minor project which was a more personally developed project embraced a theme of direct refusal from original writings, "*Angifuni*" (translation: I refuse/I do not want to). This refusal was manifested in the Minor project through the repetition of the

first word uttered and repeated through the opening sequence of the piece: “No” (Nkonyeni, 2020: 0:10). My projects employed a form of resistance and refusal which stemmed from reckoning and exhaustion following rupture/s.

My refusal and resistance came from an intimate awareness that I cannot and must not accept these ruptures, traumas, traumatic stressors, and losses to be the prevalent reality or the truth of my existence. The status quo, its key benefactors, and beneficiaries alike, who would maintain and sustain the effects thereof, will neither diminish my blackwomnhood to precariousness nor reduce me to the traumas and losses I have experienced. This is most definitely not to say that I endorse the colloquial parlance that “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger” because this too can have detrimental effects in favour of unsustainable exceptionalism and or resilience.

The exceptionalism I write about includes the appraisal for ‘defying all odds/adversity’ that is too often paraded as ‘feel good news’. It is also a consequence of the stereotypical engagement or narrative constructed about blackwomnhood. This is habitually unaccompanied by meaningful, if any, attempts by gatekeepers or shareholders of power to alleviate the aforementioned adversity. This, in my opinion, is akin to the increasingly lacklustre South African parlance of “*wathinta abafazi, wathinta imbokodo*⁵” which translates to “you strike women, you strike a rock”. I am not a rock.

⁵ This catchphrase has its origins in a Zulu warriors’ song called ‘wathint’ amadoda’ (you strike men...) (Gray, 2004). It was adapted to ‘wathinta abafazi wathinta imbokodo’ (you strike women, you strike a rock) as a song directed to Apartheid regime Prime Minister, J.G. Strijdom, during the Women’s march on 9th August 1956. This march involved more than 20000 women who were petitioning against the proposed Amendments to the 1952 Urban Areas Act which imposed pass book on ‘black’ South African womn. They all marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria, South Africa to protest the implementation of the amendments.

THE STORIES WITHIN:

Ruptures, Reckoning and Refusal

Embodied Knowledge: Becoming Vs Portraying

As a performer, one is often expected to engage with and replicate the life, intentions, imagination, thoughts, and psychological and physical attributes of a character. Subsequently, an actor/performer⁶ relies on their “body, voice, imagination, experiences ... for the creation of such characters (Steyn, 2014:3, Zarrilli, 2004:653, Benedetti, 2004:5).

The abovementioned psychophysical tools are thus, all that the performer has in real time to portray the character as accurately and or truthfully as possible. This, therefore, directly challenges the notion of ‘blank canvases’ or physical neutrality that was encouraged mainly throughout my secondary-education actor training. This physical neutrality suggested that an actor should and can achieve a state where they resemble an empty page onto which the character can be drawn, painted, transferred, or created. In other words, the actor ought to strive towards a psychophysical⁷ blankness where they are somewhat removed from themselves in order to ‘become’ a character.

The distinction between portraying and becoming a character is the basis of the study’s refusal to employ the blank canvas/physical neutrality terminology. Here, ‘portraying’ the character means using the psychophysical features and attributes one has at one’s disposal to perform those of the character which suggests an acknowledgment of and engagement with the performer’s unique psychophysical features to inform the character’s. Contrastingly, what is meant by ‘becoming’ a character is ignoring, erasing, or substituting the performer’s own psychophysical features in favour of privileging the character’s.

The physical neutrality approach encourages a disembodied engagement and or reading of actors’ bodies, as though actors/performers are mere vessels who ought to be able to transform ‘like chameleons’ when necessary or at will. This strips the actors’ bodies of their fundamental and irrevocable ‘personal uniqueness’⁸. It also encourages a split between

⁶ For purposes of this study, I use my training as an actor as a foundation for performance. Phillip Zarrilli (2004) and Jean Benedetti (2004) write about the distinction between performer and actor, respectively. but the terms may appear here as interchangeable.

⁷ This implies the interrelationship between body and mind where the internal (psycho) influences the external (physical) and vice versa. In this study, it is interchangeable with psycho-somatic.

⁸ This refers to the human qualities that characterise the unique ways of expressing engagement within sociocultural environments (Hackney, 2002:48).

body and mind because it suggests an unrealistic removal of the performer's psychological features which include their personal thoughts, imagination, and experiences from their physical features. This results in a disembodied performance.

It was only through my tertiary-level actor training that I experienced the interconnectedness of my bodymind⁹ including how it interrelates to voice through embodied learning. This embodied learning was where the importance of my voice's physiology and anatomy came to prominence. Kinesensics Master Reacher and researcher, Marth Munro asserts that "the concept of 'embodiment' places the mind and body into one whole - as the 'brain', where most of the 'mind operations' are still perceived to take place, is part of the body" (2017: 6). Munro continues to argue that the "brain *is* because of the body" (2018:2) and in the same way and for similar reasons, the voice can also be understood to be as and *because of* the body. Therefore, "[e]mbodied learning negates and removes the brain/body hierarchy and foregrounds the body's contribution to meaning-making" (Munro, 2018:2, McLachlan, 2004).

Embodied learning is a form of knowledge production. As such, using PaR (Practice as Research) and PAR (Performance as Research) has opened up the scope of my study to better explore (with) different modes of knowledge creation. This privileges the psychosomatic experiences that form an enfolded awareness and or understanding. Following existing scholarship on PaR, I understand PaR to be "charted through a trajectory of knowledges; methods and impact as interrelated yet distinct categories" (Arlander, Barton, Dreyer-Lude & Spatz, 2018). PaR can therefore also be understood as a "landscape of various approaches to knowledge production in the performing arts" and as an "umbrella concept" which "consists of a diversity of more narrowly focussed and defined methodological approaches" (Arlander, 2009:77; Barton, 2018: 4).

Arlander maintains that PaR is a "field comprising multiple more or less methodologically singular and or stable subfields, an intentionally inclusive category that enfolds a diverse set of research activities that employ artistic or creative practice as an integrating aspect of the inquiry process" (Arlander, 2018:334)

Similarly, the notion of an embodied voice is not solely defined or understood as just spoken words or speech. Instead, the notion of the embodied voice refers, but is not limited,

⁹ Bodymind refers to the symbiotic and interconnected, interrelated relationship of one's psychophysical features (Lutterbie 2011:30). In this study I also include 'bodyvoicemind' as part of this synergistic interinvolvement.

to the bodily or physical musicality of the voice. As such, this may include a sonorous quality of vocal utterance, a soundscape or vocal gesture or simply sounding, or just an expression (Cavarero, 2005:8). Thus, the embodied voice is ambiguous and implies a multidimensional approach that involves the full gestalt of the voice producer (Thomaidis, 2015: 1-3).

My experience and capacity as a trained performer and director, as well as my engagement with diverse groups of actors and other performers, has made me astutely aware of the ways in which we have to rigorously interact with the unique lived and life experiences of an actor or performer. That is to say that one's bodymind, identity, sociocultural-political conditioning and subsequent engagement with the environment(s) is equally important to the portrayal of a character because this conditioning is what informs the actor's choices on stage. "Each human being has a unique and non-replicable identity on a multitude of levels due to phenomenological experiences" (Munro, 2018:4). This works in conjunction with a performer's psychophysical features, in order to pool together their resources for the benefit of creating stronger connections with characters, through a level of intracorporeality¹⁰ (Johnson, 2018:93) which aids with character embodiment/portrayal. One thus cannot be a 'blank canvas' because one has a socially inscribed and legible body which is constantly being read, categorised and interpreted based on the perceptive lens(es) of the onlooker(s).

It is pertinent for an actor/performer to gain an acute awareness and understanding of themselves, their own unique psychophysical features, their lived and life experiences which shape their proprioception¹¹, exteroception¹² and interoception¹³ and in turn, a kind of intercorporeality as they navigate and interpret both the world and the stage. By doing this, an actor should be able to identify ways of using the above resources to assist them in portraying the character without eliminating their self. In other words, the embodiment of a character is an integration of the actor's bodyvoicemind used in aid and alignment to that of the character's (McCaw, 2011:241).

¹⁰ This "highlights the role of social interaction in the experience and behaviour of the body as we "try on" [or portray] the experiences of others through our embodied imagination" (Johnson, 2018:94).

¹¹ This is the "[p]erception of the relative position of neighbouring parts of the body and strength of effort being employed in movement ... proprioception informs our overall sense of body position, movement, and acceleration and guides somatic motor activity" (Johnson, 2018:93).

¹² Exteroception is the "[p]erception of stimuli arising from outside the body [through] the classic [but not limited to] five senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch" (Johnson, 2018:93).

¹³ This is defined as the "[p]erception of internal regulation responses, including pain, pressure, temperature, itch, visceral sensations, fatigue, hunger, thirst and "air hunger" [which means needing to step out for fresh air]" (Johnson, 2018:93).

This study is thus concerned with the identity, conditioning, and socialisation of a performer which is what informs their expressivity and performativity. This is to say that because the actor/performer relies so heavily on their own interconnected bodyvoicemind to portray the character, it is pertinent to interrogate the sociocultural-political conditioning and other variables/attributes that contribute to the actor's identity and therefore their expressivity and performativity. One of the aims of this study, therefore, has been to interrogate my own lived/life experiences in conjunction with the way I was socialised and conditioned in order to interrogate how that awareness has influenced my bodymind and voice into performance and expressivity. The argument is that voice is because of the bodymind and is therefore affected, impacted, and changed by whatever happens to the bodymind.

It can, therefore, be argued that as actors we begin predominantly with 'what' a character is (which is why 'what' an actor is becomes equally important onstage) and we use that information to produce or portray 'who' a character is - which is also arguably influenced by who the actor is too. This therefore requires a unique and nuanced blend of the psychophysical features and resources of the actor with the given information about the character to provide a depiction of the character. The actor in their capacity, then uses, to an extent, 'what' and 'who' they themselves are in order to bring across an accurate or 'truthful' portrayal of 'who' the character is using the information the actor has about 'what' and 'who' the character is.

I thus want to acknowledge that one is not simply a character on stage because one does not simply exist as 'just a person' *off stage* - in particular, as a blackwomn. To do this, I interrogate and trouble the understanding of identity-defining¹⁴ variables as well as their impact on expressivity and performance. That is why the performativity and expressivity of my blackwomnhood comes into question in my research.

This study is rooted in the established premise that the voice and body (and implicitly, the mind) are interconnected. This inseparability informs the relationship of the voice, body, and mind. It further informs the notion that what happens to the body, happens to, or impacts on the voice as the voice is because of the body (Steyn & Munro, 2015: 105-116). Konstantinos Thomaidis writes "[v]oice ... is not only a series of physical and acoustic phenomena, but crucially, the assumptions that shape its making and perception" (Thomaidis, 2015:1). Similarly, Christina Shewell posits that:

¹⁴ This is linked to psychophysical features and includes both the 'who' and 'what' of one's identity.

Voice is a psychophysical activity; it is not simply a matter of ‘pumping vocal iron’ and we can never completely separate vocal and speech muscle function, the emotions and personality of the speaker, the nature of the words to be used and the context of communication (2009: 27).

This study, therefore, engages the voice in its plural form: as an instrument, an artistic expression, as a way of writing, a personal agentic expressivity. I am interested in both the carnality as well as the materiality of voice. Particularly, in relation to mapping an alternative landscape through voice in its plurality. Furthermore, this study uses and understands voice in a plurality that conjoins the instrument, the artistic output as well as written mythologies to narrate and create a universe that is not centred in precarity¹⁵. “Who voices, who listens, and how they voice and listen is significant. Of equal concern are why they voice, in which context and circumstance” (Thomaidis, 2015:2).

In my projects, I endeavoured to use the plurality of voice to weave into and through this understanding in the performances to enable the PaR/PAR to come about. This became particularly important as I explored and learned that “[w]ho, how and what voice express[es] become[s] less pertinent than who has agency in voicing, who has agency in listening, who benefits from voicing, and in what ways (Thomaidis, 2015:2) This study is, thus, not a hierarchal engagement with voice as it exists in varied forms because my voice(s) as sonorous instrument, artistic/performative signature and or written text occupy the same space. This is related to what Thomaidis explains as being the “‘in-betweenness’ of voice which offers an interdisciplinary space for plurality wherein multiple renderings [and understandings] of voice work together in a process of transition, passage and transformation” (2015:4). In a similar vein, this is why Karmen MacKendrick maintains that:

[s]ound and meaning, the senses of sense, are entangled, yet we always feel the tension between them, the imperfection of each in grasping or expressing the other (each is insufficient to, and in excess of, the other). We are pulled by a dream of linguistic perfection (2016:9).

¹⁵ Within the scope of this study, I use both precarity and precariousness, sometimes interchangeably, to describe the experience of blackwomn/blackwomnhood. I argue that the state of being unstable or uncertain (precariousness) can be brought about by an affected material and psychological welfare. This is caused by an existence that is without security and life-sustaining predictability (precarity). This argument is also significant to emphasize that it is not blackwomn who are precarious but rather the experiences of blackwomn/blackwomnhood that are examples of precarity caused by and resulting in precariousness and vice versa.

Concurring, musicologist Simon Firth observes that “listeners hear voice all at once as a musical instrument, a body, a person and a character in performance” (2008:68). In further support to this, Thomaidis argues that that “the aural ‘in-between’ is the junction point for the multiple encodings of experience to be negotiated and understood” (2015:4). Lastly, Roland Barthes famously defined the “grain of the voice” as “the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue”(1977:182). “Voice was revealed as performative, transforming and generating the identity of its voicer” (Thomaidis, 2015:1-3)

Springing from quote above, what appears to be the object of the study can become the methodological tool if one engages in an interdisciplinary probing of blackwomnhood’s precariousness *through* (the multiplicity of) voice - not only probing the *role* of voice in blackwomnhood’s precariousness.

Self Vs Stereotype

The self (used as a synonym of personal identity) for Locke is above all a consciousness that persists through time, a conscious entity with a coherent collection of experiences, thoughts, feelings, memories, etc. [Therefore] his theory of identity is also sometimes called the “memory theory”. (Locke, 1690 as cited by Payá Herrero, 2009: 8)

For purposes of this study, I understand the *self* to be synonymous with ‘personal identity’ as explained by scholar Payá Herrero:

[P]ersonal identity has more to do with our mind, with our unextended mental world, our actions, our memories, than with the constantly evolving extended body. The idea of persistence of memories also seems to be a key one accepted by all (2009:8).

Judith Butler asserts that it is impossible to first define the ontology of the body before referring to the social signifiers of the body:

The “being” of the body to which ... ontology refers is one that is always given over to others, to norms, to social and political organisations that have developed historically in order to maximize precariousness for some and minimize precariousness for others (2010:3)

I note specifically that Pumla Dineo Gqola includes ‘series of behaviours’ in her definition of stereotype and this definition puts itself into conversation with American philosopher, Judith Butler’s “actions of norms” (2010: 168) and to, somatic movement therapist, Rae Johnson’s, “gestures that maintain, signify or signal social dominance and submission” (2018: 1-7). This contributes to Johnson’s argument that the body has a significant role in reproducing oppression (think “headgirl-slash-palatable-black” – I was so adamant to defy the negative stereotypes of black girls/womn that I became a stereotype. It’s a sticky web!) That is why the stereotypical, contemporary and “historical representations of [blackwomn] subjects and characters as hypersexualised [and] or long suffering mother figures is unacceptable” (Gqola, 2004:44).

Much research has shown the direct correlation between the stereotyping of Blackwomen and their oppression under changing historical eras. The circulation of stereotypes therefore is neither coincidental nor arbitrary but contributes directly to knowledge production on those groups typecast. It occludes the heterogeneity present in the human clusters concerned replacing it with an imposed homogeneity which makes control and subjugation easier (Gqola, 2004:44).

It is, thus, important to consider the variables impacting on, and affecting, the body when dealing with the voice and voicing (expressivity). This consideration is also an interrogation of the ways in which calcified ontologies as well as subjection permeate through and influence one’s bodyvoicemind and identity. It is a way to better understand the experience of the bodyvoice in order to carve different ways of understanding identity and the performance/expressivity thereof.

Tragedy and Loss; Somatic/Vocal explorations & Performance:

It is, therefore, by way of performance, that I arrive at presenting my central question. As it stands, this question is informed by the projects I have done. As part of reckoning and resisting, the purpose of this inquiry through performance articulates itself as follows: **How can dithyrambic dirge serve as a performative score to map the vocal landscape of a blackwomn’s resistance to precarity?**

Through my engagement with voice in its plurality, in the projects I created, I am able to map the trajectory of both successful and unsuccessful executions and endeavours within this study. The following are reflections and analyses from my performance outputs through

the course of the study. I contextualise each project by offering their respective objectives, inspirations, and intentions. This will be presented alongside a brief synopsis, as well as a critical reflection on each project. My aim thereby is to analyse the use of vocal plurality in each project.

The first developmental project was a class presentation that I created as part of my coursework assessments. The prompt was to 'perform our research interests' in two-minutes. For the piece, I decided to use (1) recorded voice and (2) as little of my own voice as possible. This was because I wanted to emphasise the perceivable distance of my own voice as a blackwomn in relation to the narrative formation of blackwomnhood in general. In other words, following Pumla Dineo Gqola's assertion about "limited representations of Blackwomen subjects and characters" (2004: 44- 45) that occludes the larger spectrum of blackwomnhood's heterogeneity, the developmental project was an indication that there exists a factual gap in that the experiences of blackwomnhood have been erased (Gqola, 2004:45), narrated, and or prescribed by voices that are neither 'black'¹⁶ nor womn.

However, as an immediate counteraction, I chose to use the recorded voice of a blackwomn to highlight that although the gap exists, it is not without strong voices of blackwomn resisting and fighting to bridge the gap. In the piece I performed in a small circle formed from layers of double-sided, white A4 sheets of paper. On one side of the papers were original poems and writings praising blackwomn/hood as well as scholarship affirming blackwomn(hood), as well as advocating against and challenging some of sociocultural issues faced by womn of colour¹⁶ - This was the 'positive' side. On the flipside of the same page, I wrote down many of the stereotypical slurs that have been used to describe blackwomn. This was the 'negative' side.

I sat inside the circle of papers and whilst an audio recording of Maya Angelou reciting her poem *Still I Rise* (1978) live played. I performed trying to find my reflection in the words found on both sides of the papers (so, if I held up the paper, either the 'negative' or 'positive' side faced the audience) . Failing to see myself *in* the papers, I then tried to press

¹⁶ So written to emphasise this ontological category's significance whilst simultaneously indicating that race is a social construct made important by the timelines of oppression and which is arguably maintained through historical and contemporary, sociocultural-political stratifications among other things. ¹⁶ In this study, I specifically engage with blackwomnblackwomnhood. However, it is important for the reader to note that people who are not white suffer very similar but unique and intersectional oppressions because of and despite the complexities of their race, class, sex, and gender - among other ontological categories. This means people of colour are all oppressed but at stratified and intersectional levels.

the words into my body (without success). I did this in an attempt to portray the struggle of trying to find oneself against a backdrop of the stereotypes and prescribed narratives of blackwomnhood. In retrospect, it was this project that conceptually links the most with my research in that it reflected the literal battle between self and stereotype as explained above. I did not speak through the piece save to say a single line at the end : "blackwomn, what if I told you that you are God?" The piece saw a progression of my building frustrations as I could not find my reflection - meant to represent the 'self' - in the papers.

My research interests, namely blackwomnhood; somatic/vocal exploration; tragedy and loss; and performance/expressivity, along with the opening lines of Maya Angelou's poem *Still I Rise*: "You may write me down in history/With your bitter, twisted lies,/You may trod me in the very dirt/But still, like dust, I'll rise" (Angelou, 1978), as well as Harmonia Rosales' art¹⁷, inspired my developmental project which I described in my artist statement as a performative 'search' for identity amongst stereotypes, pre-existing narratives, theories and profanities about blackwomn/hood.

Both Maya Angelou and Harmonia Rosales use their respective art to offer a counternarrative to prevailing notions of blackwomnhood. They are both using their voices to reject the toxic socio-cultural positions ascribed to blackwomn and both refuse to be reduced by stereotypical narratives. In doing this they, therefore, self-narrate alternatives. Where Angelou uses spoken word and written text to make her voice heard among the chorus of blackwomn rejecting precarity, Rosales uses her voice as a visual artist to conjure images of blackwomn/hood and people that empower and represent us outside of hegemonic Western perspectives.

This early project was a performative search to emphasise how living within the confines of ontological categories and narratives about blackwomnhood, arrests one's ability to transcend the prescribed and perceived narratives of blackwomnhood. My aim was to use my vocal silence to signal that the formation of such ontologically arresting narratives is often not a conversation between the makers/ prescribers of narratives and blackwomn.

Retrospectively, this developmental project gave me an impulse to articulate that it is the cyclical condition of resisting stereotypes in order to transcend precarity and to assert one's

¹⁷ Harmonia Rosales is a US-based, self-identified Afro-Cuban artist who paints oil paintings that are either original and or reimaginings of historical Renaissance classics. I was inspired, specifically, by her *Creation of God* (2017) painting which is a reimagining of Italian artist Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel painting, *Creazione di Adamo* (1512). It consists solely of blackwomn and thus implies that God is a blackwomn.

self-narrated identity that describes the tragic existential condition of blackwomnhood. It is tragic because blackwomn have to persistently reject and resist stubbornly recurring forces that are unrelenting, thus requiring blackwomn to reassert our resistance continuously. This is thus a constant experience and an anticipation of a threat.

In terms of using voice as an instrument, the vocal choices I made did not translate well in the performance. My decision to be silent whilst the audio recording played was a cognitive engagement with the poem's inspiration. So, it did not work well as a performative choice. Therefore, as a performance, the piece did not have a particularly strong engagement with my voice as an instrument. In hindsight, I think something that may have made the piece more complex would have been to remove the audio recording of the poem and instead use my own voice and non-verbal utterance as a means of building tension towards the final and only spoken text of the piece. This would have emphasised my silence into muted expressions of increasing frustration and then the single line of text. I imagine the increasing sound emissions of straining, sighing, and struggling with the papers may have created a more nuanced and focussed vocal landscape for the performance.

Following the development project, I used my voice as instrument quite literally. I used it to recite original text for the second development project, but I also used it as an artistic means of self-narration. For the second piece, I used the voice as organic instrument (for speech) and writing tool (text). This piece, by comparison, was longer and had more text. For this second development project, I created an unnamed character who gave a 'light-hearted', posthumous account of her most recent death by addressing the audience directly. While she gave this account, she explained that a man had just moved in next door and as a precaution she was ridding herself of any revealing clothing and of all sharp objects in her home to prevent the man from being tempted and hence to avoid dying again at his hand. The clothes were used to either add layers on my body (as a kind of 'armour' in preparation to go outside) or to be disposed of as too revealing. The character was in essence deeply inconveniencing herself in order to 'prevent violent attacks' to and on her person. I used knives and sharp objects, a suitcase, a pile of clothes and original text. This monologue was punctuated by frightened pauses or vocalised sharp inhalations in anticipation of a threat.

This project was inspired by the onslaught of gender-based violence in South Africa as well as the heteropatriarchal policing of womn's bodies that has come to be an 'ordinary' occurrence in society through unrelenting rape-culture. It was a satirical account to emphasise the ridiculous statements and comments that have been made to survivors of

sexual and gender-based violence. The reason I chose to write in the way I did was to use more of my own voice but also to emphasise the almost nonsensical things that have to happen to protect one from danger. Rape is not a woman's problem; it is squarely a men's problem. The shame and blame should not fall on the survivors. I used the knives and sharp objects to form a semi-circular barrier between myself and the audience. This formed a similar enclosure to the circle I created with layers of paper in the previous project but different because instead of being a trap this barricade of knives functioned as protection from the audience and as objects about to be removed.

Another objective was to try and find ways to stage violence without subjecting myself to harm, hence the choice to use satire. While the second development project did have a more personal engagement with my voice as instrument and voice as text (spoken and written voice), it was removed from me because I created a character. I recognise this to be a form of protecting myself against harm and I think, importantly for this study and whether conscious or not, that too may have influenced my research interests. This is particularly because I am aware of how as a way of protecting myself in performance, I tend to distance myself and this can result in a disembodied performance that in turn does not serve the purpose of the concept. Being aware of this and trying to find ways beyond it may be one of this study's impulses.

Having written the text for the piece, I had to learn the lines and use my instrument to speak the text. In retrospect, the choices I made vocally were not as interesting and as nuanced as they could have been. I simply recited the text after a short warm up and I was riddled with nerves. In the sense of voice as an instrument, an organic and embodied instrument, I had not set out specific objectives at that stage of my study. Therefore, to retrospectively say that I did not achieve the vocal objectives would be unfair. I am, however, aware of how I started a more rigorous interrogation of my voice as instrument beyond spoken and written text because of and beyond that performance piece.

My Minor Project began as another disembodied continuation of the second developmental project. I attempted to expand the posthumous monologue character by adding embellishments, a chalk outline, a glass of red wine and dim lighting. I used the same text but tried to shift the context to a ghost lamenting and shocked by her death. It became another example of how I process difficult or jarring content by distancing myself from it emotionally which then hampers my ability as a performer to relay the emotions. The distance is clearly audible in the monotonous and demonstrable choices made while engaging with the text. My

voice was not relaying the emotion or the nuanced world of the story as much as it was simply conveying the message.

This was evident in my body energy as well which was passive in the performance, and it translated into the expression of the text. In the piece, as the ghost of the murdered woman, I lament my death whilst drinking wine and observing the chalk outline – almost from the outside looking in. As Zamah the performer, I was detached from the emotions of the piece in order to protect myself from the relatability of the character's disposability and the high likelihood of experiencing such crimes as a black woman. I was also protecting myself from the content triggering emotions from similar experiences of trauma. My awareness of how unsafe it is and feels to be a black woman in South Africa and my own experiences of trauma and loss, caused me to try and maintain a distance from the performance. This is why I found myself often producing 'shell' acting where I am simultaneously unforthcoming with the emotional truth required because I am protecting myself, as well as only saying the lines to recite the text without sufficient or believable emotion/meaning. I describe it as a shell, as if I am a vessel rather than a conduit embodying the story I am telling.

Having established that this emotional distancing was a coping mechanism to prevent further pain and retraumatising triggers, my challenge was to move out of my acting comfort zone for the Minor project in a way that benefitted my project whilst keeping me relatively safe. To do this, I realised that I needed to engage the very reason for my distancing/running away: one of my own traumas and losses. My Minor project was therefore inspired by the abovementioned challenge in relation to one of my traumas, as well as the commitment to not retraumatise myself on stage. The project was created at the beginning of South Africa's COVID-19 Lockdown¹⁸ period. This meant that the form of the project had to shift to accommodate the fact that we were all suddenly confined to our home spaces and had no access to campus theatre resources for the creation and realisation of the project. However, inspired by the challenge to engage with and explore the content differently, I set out to reimagine how to stage an experience of trauma without reliving it. It stemmed from the realisation that I must or should account for what has happened first in order to imagine something else as well as re-imagine how that would look (on stage/in performance). This is, in my process, the steppingstone towards the kind of transcending of social injustice (Johnson, 2018) that I long for. Resistance started with reckoning.

¹⁸ South Africa went into a hard/level 5 lockdown on the 26th of March 2020 following an outbreak of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) in the country. At the time of this dissertation's completion (September 2021) the country is still under lockdown at level 2 meaning the most stringent regulations had somewhat eased.

My Minor project, which for me is, admittedly, still quite jarring to watch, came as a form of refusal. It was a reckoning with the rupture but also a way of reaching beyond experiential trauma. I used it as a moment to delve into, and dwell in, the traumas/rupture of sexual violence and loss. I mapped the journey in a nonlinear way which is similar to how dealing with trauma can be mapped out in reality.

I imagined a way of going ‘through’ the pain as a passageway to the other side where I hoped to find a kind of transformation. I was obsessed with witnessing myself and also not hiding my pain (denying it exists), so I set about creating a place where this could be executed. The only location I could immediately think of was apartheid prisoners of war and how violently disposable they were. I had listened in on a discussion about Winnie Madikizela-Mandela’s time in prison/isolation. Now, I realise the profound impact it had on me because the piece showed a take on the wet bag method of torture which is a form of suffocation. I used a wet, white pillowcase over my head.

This project was very personal. I video-recorded the performance as though it was a kind of fever-dream that is both hazy and vivid. It was a metaphoric manifestation of my research interests using a personal experience. I wanted to especially focus on exploring my voice as a sonic and embodied expressive vehicle to interrogate its possible contribution towards an autonomous experience of self. It began in a dreamlike mythical state where a creaking bed and a faint circle of light was shown in the dark. This circle glitched as it grew and the creaking increased in intensity and became interspersed with a building vehemence of pleading, distressed no’s and strained breathing. The glitching circle was a spotlight on my face shown with glasses, my face just looking straight ahead. This was accompanied by a distressed voice, audibly crying and repeating no’s, refusal and ‘*Angifuni*’ which means ‘I don’t want to’ in isiZulu¹⁹.

This vocal distress continued while the image then cut to a frame of feet and broken glass before revealing a merged mirror-image of me audibly sucking the juices out of oranges hungrily and discarding them for different oranges once there was no more juice left. The soundscape then shifted into my vocal imitation of ‘white noise’²⁰, using a sustained ‘ooo’ sound. I used Arthur Lessac’s Vocal Orchestra²¹ as a music-making method to explore

¹⁹ I was using isiZulu and English as my primary languages of engagement because although I speak several South African languages (including Afrikaans, SeSotho, SeTswana, isiXhosa) I am most expressive in isiZulu (my mother tongue) and English (my medium of instruction).

²⁰ This is like the sound of ‘ringing in the ears’.

²¹ This is a Lessac Kinesensics approach to a vocal scating, toning and chanting exploration that uses letters (vowel and consonant sounds) as musical instruments to create vocal soundscapes (Lessac, 1997).

with sounds in a way that was not harmful to my voice. The white noise was then interrupted by a brief transition that sounded like a hospital heartbeat monitoring machine before the words of my original poem were heard as a layer above the soundscape that underscores the project.

So, the first half of the Minor project consisted of a rising intensity of sounds that expressed my grief/grieving in motion. This was paired with visuals of me hungrily and noisily consuming the juice from a number of oranges. This was done as a way of visually indicating the vicious manner in which womn, and in particular to this study, blackwomn and our bodies are both commodified and disposable. The action of sucking the oranges dry then discarding them was a metaphor for this consumable commodification and disposability. “*Amadoda asincela some ‘engathi adla amaorenchi bese asilahle sek’phele i-juice*” (men suck us dry as though eating oranges then later discard us once the juice runs out).

The second half of the project showed me sitting wide-legged, with a cactus-like bouquet of knives stabbed into oranges lodged between my thighs and a wet bag over my head. I was audibly and visibly suffocating and in ‘physical pain’ and I vocalised sound emissions to that effect. In reality, I was quite fine in the safety of my own space and in full control of the situation and I was confident that I would not get hurt, physically. The ‘pain’ – as a representation of the psycho-somatic wounds I experienced as a result of rape, was from both the suffocation and knifed-oranges between my legs. The wet bag and knives were painstakingly removed from my person which I portrayed to be just as agonising as having the pain-inducing objects lodged into my body. Throughout this action, I used my voice to create the sounds of anguish. I made the sounds by employing the vocal orchestra to recreate and record choking, gasping, suffocating sounds alongside crying. I argue that it was mostly vocally safe and healthy because I did not strain or hurt my voice even when I, at moments, strayed away from the approach’s exploration to create more sounds of distress. I was effectively music-making to create a soundscape of distress as a tool of lament and mourning of/for my experiences of trauma and loss.

Retrospectively, this project was successful to an extent in that it moved towards meeting my intentions to both challenge myself to bridge the distance I placed between emotional or triggering material, and to engage more rigorously with my voice as an instrument of utterance. However, it became an aim to present a kind of aural assault on my

viewers²² without a moment of silence (peace). I argued in my project's artist statement that my experience of sexual violence had left me reeling and the rupture was for me a constant 'ringing in the ears', but in retrospect I can appreciate that a more nuanced layering of sound may have been a better way to add complexity to the project.

Despite having achieved two of my main objectives, I was taken aback by this project. I remember not immediately being able to rewatch or engage with the content because of how close it was to me and my personal experience of trauma and loss. I did feel safe during the creation of the project because I had taken steps and employed approaches that protected me from feeling vulnerable, but I had undressed an internal wound in the process. The vocal soundscape was emotionally very difficult for me to create because of my own trauma and loss. I had employed a music-making approach to retell one of my 'body stor[ies]' (Johnson, 2018: 6-7) of loss and trauma. For instance, I used humming and singing the lyrics of the hymn sung at my mother's funeral whilst her coffin was lowered into the grave. That is still such a tender but increasingly beautiful and musical wound in my life. It is a rupture that is transforming me. I vocalised some of the emotional journey through turmoil and ruptures I have experienced. It ranged from the 'ooo's' that created a ringing white noise, to the repetitive, staccato 'k' sounds and to the suffocating, gulping 'g' sounds and humming, gasping, singing, and talking as I mapped part of my journey through emotional ruptures using my voice.

As previously mentioned, the body(mind) and voice are inseparable. Bodyvoice is pertinent to one's idea and presentation of self/identity. This relationship fuels the continuous feedback-loop of the bodyvoice relationship (Lessac, 1960; 1997). That is why an interrogation of the influencing variables in and around one's interpersonal environments and communities is significant for consideration of the materiality and plurality of voice (Thomaidis, 2015: 1-3; Rockwell, 2011:1-17; Cavarero, 2000; Cavarero, 2005). The refusal and rejection of subjugation, homogeneity, and stereotype in favour of a self-narrated alternative reality is processed through the body. It becomes a desire to repair the rupture through an embodiment of social justice (Johnson, 2018: 1-7). What happens to and around the body is received, processed, and stored as embodied or experiential knowledge and it informs the behaviour, responses, and reaction of the body. This influences the voice and

²² As this was a recorded iteration of the project, I did not have a live theatre audience. Viewers within the UCT's Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies postgraduate cohort and staff watched it individually online.

voicing. That then in turn influences the production and expression of voice which is part of identity formation (Rockwell, 2011:17) as well as identity expression.

This includes all the factors that contribute to social conditioning, starting from childhood and early socialisation. For instance, certain social gestures are considered acceptable and appropriate while others are not (Butler, 2010: 2-3; Johnson, 2018:1). These gestures and social cues inform behaviours and what to emulate. As I understand it, imitation starts from an early age for multiple reasons, including (1) survival and (2) belonging. As such, markers of identity form a large part of the elements that influence the bodyvoice. Race, sex and gender, sexuality, class, language, nationality, culture, ethnicity, environmental surroundings, religion and beliefs, education and so on, all influence one's identity, which in turn influences one's voice and its expression. I understand these identification elements to be split into two groups/categories: those identifying 'what' we are and others that identify 'who' we are. I argue that while both influence our identities in varied ways, the former can negatively impact on our identity because of ontological rigidity, while the latter can, contrastingly, add value and freedom in our expression of self.

For purposes of this study, I would suggest that we read these factors as ranging from 'malleable' ('*who*' we are) to 'less-malleable' ('*what*' we are). The factors are visual (either immediately visible or invisible), cultural, environmental, communal, or individual, and can be advantageous and disadvantageous. They impact on how we are perceived in the world, and we perceive the world through lenses fashioned by these factors. Stated differently, we often neither have much control over the classifications of race and sex that are assigned at birth nor (to an extent) over our class status or the education we receive. However, these classifications/qualities form part of what we are (perceived as). We have partial control, to a larger degree, of how we perform 'who' we are, despite the 'what' we are. This forms part of that which our communities embrace or reject about us. Identity is also shaped by this navigation of belonging or rejection as part of survival.

As voice forms an intimate part of identity, the relationship and struggle between *who* we are versus *what* we are must have some bearing on how we engage the voice. In seeking vocal liberation, we must consider what conditions could possibly inhibit such liberation and why. I am interested in embodied empowerment as part of embodied social justice because of the bodyvoice's inextricable link to self-narration and the performance of identity and, because of my own experiences of embodied empowerment through self-narration. These

kinds of liberatory impulses have the potential of resisting-into-transcending the various forms of inhibition and oppression across the board.

Clinical psychotherapist, Judith Blackstone, writes about the reclamation of one's body through a process she terms 'inhabiting your body'. The process produces what she argues is a "felt sense of ourselves as a complete form, distinct from other forms" (2018: 49). In other words, the process of separately engaging one's own 'Inner environment' whilst remaining aware of, responsive to, and present in, the shared 'Outer environment' (Lessac, 1997: 13).

In the *Inner environment* one can separately, as an internally unified form, experience witness and be present to one's individuality, thoughts, feelings, emotions, sensations, and perceptions (Blackstone, 2018: 49; Lessac, 1997: 13). This environment can also be ruptured by external abrasive intrusions, traumas, and loss. Stated differently, the *Outer environment* can influence the state of the *Inner environment* through traumas and loss including other more pleasant factors.

I endeavoured in my Minor project to not only bring forth yet another version of my own reckoning with being raped but also allow myself what I had not immediately been permitted – to voice my anguish. I did this as I resisted the notion that I, as a blackwomn, am a natural receptor of violence who is both, to borrow from Butler, *(un)grievable* (2010: 22-31), as well as what Gqola coins as *unrapable* (2021a: 78). *Unrapable* is defined by Gqola (2021:78) as a condition in which blackwomn are apprehended as stereotypically hypersexual and carnally sexually insatiable as well as positioned as natural receptors of violence, which suggests our bodies are not only disposable but are also impossible to harm, thus unrapable. One cannot harm rape injure or kill a life that is not apprehended as living (Butler, 2010:1; Gqola 2021: 78).

In my projects I mourn (for) my body and grieve too. In particular, my Minor project, can be seen as me grieving my body in motion through a self-narration, creative re-visioning, or autobiomythography (Lorde, 1996; Milatovic, 2014). Therefore, I understand my project as being a *creative re-visioning* which black feminist literary scholar, Barbara Boswell, coined to be "a subject's ability to re-envision or reimagine what is possible for her to achieve within her lifetime" (2010:1). The acts in the Minor Project of (1) consuming the oranges with an insatiable appetite, (2) dislodging the knives from the oranges and (3) breaking the tape, are all part of grieving in motion which is an autobiomythographic, creative re-visioning, self-narration of the rupture called sexual violence.

In my project, I did not want to simply (re)present another blackwomn suffering but rather reimagine how depicting violence and embodying trauma may look without subjecting myself to actual harm. This, whilst all too well aware of the constant threat of violence which is in and of itself a rupture. It produces a perennial hypervigilance which impedes one's ability to *inhabit the body* or even enjoy the privacy of one's own *Inner environment*. This in turn, can go on to be detrimental to how one thinks and performs what one believes to be true about oneself. This is not unlike what Judith Blackstone terms a loss of agency: "The loss of agency from trauma also sometimes stems from a sense of having failed oneself, of having "allowed" a terrible thing to happen to oneself" (2018: 50).

For my Medium Project, I wrote in my artist statement that:

The piece speaks to a reimagination of self through one's own embodied and envoiced self. It experiments with self-narration and how sensorial knowledge and awareness can better facilitate a path towards embodied, sonic expression (Cavarero, 2005) thus 'actualisation' or the assertion of one's existing humxnity. As such, the element of autobiomythography (Lorde, 1996) is explored through this work because the piece is an autonomous sonic utterance and voiced narration of my journey through emotions and experiences of trauma. (Nkonyeni, 2020:1).

Following Gabrielle Goliath's video installation *Elegy* (2019), I also aimed to create an 'archive of mourning' (Goliath in Neelika Jayawardane, 2019) using sound. I endeavoured to use the project as a lament or process of grieving in motion for the victims and survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. This was the most aurally diverse project in that I used a range of audio recordings from my grandmother praying²³ to original text shared across my projects and, from American composer Meredith Monk's (1997) vocal invocations²⁴ to audio snippets from a documentary about patriarchy²⁵ (MTV ZA, 2018). Similar to Goliath's *Elegy*, my project endeavours were to commemorate the womn and LGBTQIA+²⁶ individuals murdered, silenced and or erased or forgotten. The project was a reckoning with the exhaustion from ongoing ruptures of sexual and gender-based violence. Whilst I was still reeling

²³ This was an accidental recording made because a video I had been recording during a family gathering did not end before the prayer started and I used the audio.

²⁴ I used two of Monk's a cappella styled songs from her album *Volcano Songs* (1997). I used a duet called *Walking Song* and a solo called *Offering* (Monk, 1997) at altered tempos to layer the soundscape of the piece.

²⁵ This was directed by South African documentary maker Lebogang Rasethaba to collect public opinions on patriarchy and its effects.

²⁶ This stands for a spectrum of Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer/Questioning Intersex and Asexual and more sexual orientations

from the murder of 19 year old UCT student, Uyinene Mrwetyana²⁷ and the subsequent protest marches and performances I participated in, I read an article about judges in Peru dismissing a rape case because the survivor had worn red underwear²⁸. I used the project to display and voice my exhaustion and I linked it to my previous projects using themes and texts about God as a blackwomn and the onslaught of sexual and gender-based violence. Aurally, I think this piece had the potential to work better without additional audio from other artists. It could have also worked as a purely audio project. Visually, the images of red cloth which I used to signal red underwear, dead people's bodies and graves did not fully capture my objectives on camera therefore, the project did not achieve the desired effect. This was also due to my disembodied emotional distancing again as a coping technique to avoid the heavy subject matter triggering me.

In hindsight, from the perspective of both further reading and engagement with my practice, I can now add on to the foundational thinking of the above statement. In particular, the last sentence where I reference 'autobiomythography' (Lorde, 1996). Where, previously, I wrote that autobiomythography is explored *because* of the piece's sonic soundscape, I now propose that it is explored *through* the embodied and sonic utterance of self-narration, as well as reimagination/*creative re-visioning*, of self.

The Medium Project had two iterations, and both iterations were installations to capture my despondency with constantly reckoning with the precarity, the traumas and the loss of my experience as a blackwomn. Ruptures and violent interruptions to my existence seemed to be innumerable and constant threats. Ruptures, reckoning and resistance into refusal (which I use interchangeably because refusal is part of resistance and vice versa) are central to my tool of inquiry which is performance. This is because, for the most part, my preoccupation with this study and the subsequent questions about my blackwomnhood are located outside of performance. They are political. However, they are political *through* performance and by means of performance because, among other things, the inextricable significance of one's voice to one's identity is political.

Precarity is critical to understanding the Practice of Refusal (Campt, 2015: 1) which is a "rejection of the status quo as livable". Precarity is also used to describe the "lives of those whose 'proper place' [in society] is non-being". That designates a 'socially assigned disposability' to those classified as 'non-beings' (see Butler & Athanasiou, 2013). The assigned disposability is a condition that is fundamental to neoliberal regimes of power because it uses fear as a controlling device (Gqola, 2004: 44). Similarly, the traumas and

²⁷ Uyinene Mrwetyana was raped and murdered by post office worker Luyanda Botha in August 2019. ²⁸ The judges threw the case out because the red underwear signaled that the survivor was 'willing to have sex' (Mitchell, 2020).

losses and what will later be unpacked as threats, anticipations and experiences of suffering (Quayson, 2021) can be understood as controlling devices. That is why refusals and resistances must come through ruptures and reckonings.

Maria Lugónes maintains that "[r]esistance is the tension between subjectification (the forming or informing of the subject) and active subjectivity, that minimal sense of agency required for the oppressing-resisting relation being an active one, without appeal to the maximal sense of agency for the modern subject" (2003: 746). The significance of the Practice of Refusal is thus the "refusal to embrace [or embody] the terms of diminished subjecthood with which one is presented, utilizing negation as a generative and creative source of disorderly power to embrace [and embody] the possibility of living otherwise" (see Campt, 2015).

An example of a seemingly 'non-race'-related example of rupture: I have stage 2 endometriosis. It was misdiagnosed for years because I was always assumed to be exaggerating. In various instances, across three provinces in South Africa²⁸, I was turned away, given poor medical attention or, advised to deal with 'anxiety and manage my time better'²⁹ despite debilitating cramps and frequent nausea, pain, and discomfort. The assumption that I was 'simply stressed/depressed' was made by medical professionals too often. No one believed me. Realising that my pain and expression thereof did not receive necessary attention, I started questioning myself and the excruciating pain I was experiencing – *was it just me?* Each time I saved enough money to go to a doctor, I took on the risk of having my pain trivialised – "who comes to the hospital for period pain?" or ignored. Similarly, having to constantly explain to friends and family who either did not understand or did not believe me, caused me to keep quiet about my immobilising discomfort. I picked up a habit of 'disappearing' monthly. This created an environment where I neither felt safe nor that my experiences were valid. That created a relationship with silence that intensified my anguish. Later, people wondered and still wonder why I did not tell them immediately that I was raped. The ruptures have far-reaching effects.

B. Hannah Rockwell, writes about beginning to "locate how and in what ways discourses find their way into social laws inscribed onto bodies to constrain, guide and enable individual speech" (2011:1). This became important to my own study as a foundation to build

²⁸ Namely, KwaZulu-Natal (where I was born and raised); Gauteng (where I studied towards my undergraduate degree); and Cape Town (where I am currently based).

²⁹ This is a direct quote from a doctor's consultation in Cape Town, 2019.

and link the body's relationship to the voice and their inextricability from one another. Thus, the premise of the notion that what happens to (and is subsequently, felt, experienced, and stored in) the body, happens (or manifests) in the voice. In a similar vein, Munro and Larson posit that "... body alignment and body integration have an influence on voice production (1996:17). It is from this vantage point that I consider both the internal and external factors that influence the body and, therefore, the voice. Rockwell goes on to suggest that "[a] world of discourses shape affect, perceptions, memories, identities and, ultimately, human expression" (2011:1). I do this as a way of locating and identifying how I move from the precarity of blackwomnhood into the significance of Voice practice as modes of expression and expressivity. Correspondingly, Rae Johnson posits that:

... [the] lived experience of the body - that is, our bodily sensations, perceptions, and behaviours - is the essential ground of human identity. Developmentally, our visceral impulses serve as the foundation for personal agency, guiding us as we move through the world, reaching for things and refusing others. Our bodily encounters with the physical environment shape and reshape our understanding of the world. (2018: 1)

The projects engaged in as part of the research, reflected on above, were borne out of reckoning and refusal. I have been in ongoing battle with resisting ontological arrest in favour of self-narrated freedom. Through my performance installations, both the successful and unsuccessful components, I was able to locate the repetitions, obsessions and identify the circulations. I progressed from understanding the precarity of blackwomnhood as tragic, in colloquial terms, to moving to a more nuanced understanding or grappling with the concept. I started engaging with this in my first seminar paper³⁰ which I wrote as part of my MA Coursework— the idea of insanity and repeating the same action in hopes of a different result (Remember 'Headgirl-slash-palatable-black' who ran from one stereotype into another?). I was physically exhausted, and that exhaustion led me to a place of recognition and reckoning again. I was exhausted because of my proximity to the study and project; because of the global pandemic and because, as I realised, I am in a cycle of oppression and resistance. I was fighting battles against stereotype in favour of self but repetitively getting caught in other stereotypes, wanting to escape the arrest in favour of freedom, only to find myself arrested

³⁰ The MA programme requires two submissions of Seminar papers (one for each year of study) to present one's findings, critical reflection, and process from the performance projects.

again and again. Countless battles, endless deaths. Yet the insatiable need to exist beyond remained.

I died again last night. By fire this time. I won't bore you with the details of how he did it. It was faster than I thought. Minimal pain really, compared to... My skin melted right off as I became smoke. It was fascinating. By the end, you couldn't really tell I was once an abomination. (Nkonyeni, 2020)

Here, the tragedy of the insatiable hunger/thirst to exist and to exist beyond a social inscription of precariousness, played itself out. My projects have captured this resistance and it has sometimes felt like I have 'lost' countless battles against the ontology that renders my blackwomnhood precarious, but I refuse to lose the war.

Claim your throne, Black womn You
are God!
God is She whose voice can be heard from down the street
And even further down on a good day. (Nkonyeni, 2017b)

The study locates itself outside of performance as a broader political inquiry, but performance is the mode of inquiry, and the study is political because it is performed. If I consider my projects from the minor project, where it was clearer for me to see and therefore stage the violence and pain that I want to resist, to my medium project, where the landing was murkier, and I was despondent and mourning, the reckoning is as nonlinear as is the resistance.

Reflecting on these performance moments allows me the ability to glean lessons from them and show in practice how nonlinear the battle is. I want the freedom I know I deserve but what does it look like and how do I get there if the chains keep pulling me back? Is this aspired freedom the tragedy or is the tragedy that I know and long for its existence, but I don't know how to achieve it?

EPILOGUE:

Waging war against Precarity

"To my daughter I will say, when the men come, set yourself on fire"

(Warsan Shire, 2012)

Following being raped, I have repetitively said that I would sooner throw myself into oncoming traffic than allow any man to ever violate me again. This 'extreme' position has been, of course, met by the protests of friends and family because of their attempts to rationalise my statement. What I believe they do not realise is that that too was a reckoning with rupture.

My projects have brought me closer to the awareness that this extreme of proposed self-mutilation is brought on by a deep self-love. Without romanticising pain and mutilation, this is a harm that comes from an insatiable desire to repair, preserve, and even protect one's person from harm. I understand it to be mutilation as an act of self-love as well as defiance.

Theoretically speaking, I will, of course, burn myself alive/jump out of a moving vehicle, and/or plummet to my death before I endure another rape. I definitely would prefer to die on my own terms than to be killed by a man. However, what can I do practically in place of killing myself to avoid death which is uncannily similar to running from the trap of one stereotype to be caught by another. Perhaps, if we are to fight fire with fire, the answer lies not in creative revisioning or reimagining alternatives, adding to Warsan Shire's advice in the quote above; I propose that when the men come, "set *them* on fire". Another extreme which is in and of itself a rupture, one that many a tragic protagonist has employed as a way of reckoning with their own trauma and loss. On reimagining alternatives, David Scott writes:

...as Hannah Arendt says in *On Revolution*, the idea of revolution has been a founding paradigm for modern organization of political time, for connecting old endings to new beginnings and, therefore (I would add), connecting our dissatisfactions with the past to our hopes for alternative futures. (David Scott, 2014:3 citing Hannah Arendt, 1963:21)

In a similar way to the quote above, resisting the prevailing narratives and working towards reimagined alternatives aligns with the concept of 'autobiomythography'. Michael Benton (2015:65) defines (auto)biomythography as a practice of collecting, remembering and

organising scattered fragments of and from the past and using them to meet the needs of the present thus connecting old endings to new beginnings.

Isililo sikaNandi: Thesis Production

In preparing for my thesis production, I am considering other womn who have been remembered or written as characters of precarity. By this, I mean a vast majority of womn characters in tragedies who have in one way or another, had a taste of precariousness and or experienced ruptures, and have reckoned with their position in the world and forged or reached for alternative futures through resistance – which includes murder and or death. It is also a form of grappling with the practice I have done. A kind of reckoning if you will. It is influenced by the self as well as the stereotype. Stated differently, it mediates the difference in battle between who and what we are. Mediating is a tentative word choice to indicate that performance in a way intercedes or umpires what can be called the tragic headlock, that social precarity/stereotype, that one's self is arrested in.

Formative ideas about my Thesis Production began with wanting to meditate on characters such as Aeschylus' Cassandra as well as the stock characters of the Nurse, the Mistress, and the Witch(es) throughout various tragedies. However, the characters listed above are arguably white and authored by white males. It is not for lack of blackwomn writers or characters that I use these characters. I note that while a spectrum of blackwomn characters does exist, they are not documented in ways that are celebrated or mainstream. My aim is not to use the white characters listed above but rather to use their identities and narratives to draw parallels, highlight differences and to offer alternative perspectives of my own blackwomnhood through performance, thereby adding to the voice of blackwomn waging war against precarity. Stef Craps asserts that trauma forms a bridge between disparate [or individual] historical experiences" (2013:2). Tragedy is on our doorsteps and speaks our language(s) in Africa because there is a way in which "listening to the trauma of another can contribute to cross-cultural solidarity and to the creation of new forms of community"(Craps, 2013:2). The assembling to witness each other's lives and narrate our own stories becomes a link to bridge disparate histories to form a collective moving from the margins in order to give expression to embodied knowledge. Therein lies the link between the characters as well as to my study and to performance.

Professor Ato Quayson writes about tragedy not as catastrophe but as an experience

or anticipation of suffering. This engagement with tragedy, as argued by Quayson, does not privilege the existence of a spectacular catastrophic event but rather the experience or anticipation of threat/s that infringe on one's biological continuity therefore hampering one's ability to narrate one's self both to oneself and to others (Quayson, 2021). Similarly, Hans-Thies Lehmann writes that in quotidian language the "tragic as a colloquial parlance is in its broadness inclusive of the 'experience of suffering'" (2016:45). The experiences and anticipations of threats contribute to trauma or traumatic stressors and it scrambles one's ability to imagine oneself beyond that trauma. The constant fight against this despite being disadvantaged by powerful opposing forces is what makes it tragic.

As part of the thesis production, I envision using the narrative and mythologies of Queen Nandi who was King Shaka Zulu's mother as the main character of interest. Her life as a blackwomn in the 17th century was not very well documented, however, some of her legacy, contribution to history and or notoriety remains through orally transmitted narratives, some written records and the remains of praise poetry composed for her. I chose Queen Nandi as a historical figure of interest because I wanted to explore a blackwomn in history that I could somewhat align with to create a vocal soundscape or performative score of her experience of the suffering and precarity of blackwomnhood. In so doing, biomythologising³¹ her life. Nandi appeared ideal because she was, like me, was Zulu-speaking and her life as a blackwomn in her time was punctuated with hardships that were not unsimilar to those experienced by contemporary blackwomn.

I am interested in revisiting their lives, passionate words, worlds, ruptures, losses and or deaths through the perspective of blackwomnhood. I want to employ the use of chorus in tragedy to inform the chorus in my thesis production. A common trope that can be drawn from all these womn are the notions of distress and loss, which bring with them a mourning and, of course a reckoning. I imagine the womn's passionate actions and speech as a choral lament – a dithyrambic lament. This will be a kind of dirge for their own deaths and those of others like them. I envision a chorus of blackwomn, bringing these voices to life through song, silence, words, and utterance. I will use original poems to devise a choreopeom using

³¹ Similar to autobiomythography, "biomythography is a term that subverts any concept of life-writing based on a simplistic account of supposed 'facts'. It acknowledges the importance of context and historicity; but, more than that, it reflects the ways in which what we take as facts are subject to narrative representation and cultural mutability" (Denzin, 1989: 81 cited by Benton, 2015:).

the narrative of historical figure/s. I am yet to decide whether this will be as a funeral (wailing or mourning for Nandi) or as Nandi's own lament or both.

So, I hold funerals for my former selves every night, say goodbye to my body each morning (just in case) and once a month I join hands with other womn, as we let out a collective sigh for each other and the selves we've lost and continue to lose. The tears no longer come. (Nkonyeni, 2021)

That is why I began exploring Nandi's history, including the parallel histories of Mnkabayi, and that of the womn who is said to have been the mother of Shaka's unwanted heir. The way these womn have endured through, but simultaneously disappeared from, history because of but not limited to oral history, is particularly interesting to me. The memory has also lived on through word-of-mouth accounts including rumours, songs, cautionary tales, idioms, *izibongo*/clan names, and praise poetry as well as oral testimonies. These are importantly all voiced accounts of her life. Nandi's life and story has been stretched or contracted to suit whoever was telling the story, but the praise poem recited for her accounts what may have been the utterance of those who witnessed or were close to the person being 'praised'. The praise poetry is carried through generations as oral tradition, so this influences how she is remembered.

Oral testimony suggests that Nandi was the lastborn and only daughter, thus named the "sweet one," of Mbhengi kaMhlongo who was the "chief of the Langeni [clan]" (Laband, 2018:18). Historian, John Laband uses oral testimony to postulate that "Nandi's mother [was said to be] Mfunda" and Mfunda was the sister of Phakathwayo who was the chief/king of the Qwabe and would later become "Shaka's formidable foe" (2018:18). Laband continues to write that Nandi was described as "dark-skinned, big, and strongly built with small breasts" and that her 'praise' poem included the lines:

She whose thighs do not meet, They
only meet on seeing her husband.
Loud-voiced one ... (Laband, 2018:19).

This is said to comes from a praise poem that described Nandi as having an "evil reputation as a sexually frigid, bad-tempered shrew" (Laband, 2018:19) and it is an example of just how much of what Nandi was, was captured using quite harmful and problematic, patriarchal language. Nandi was shamed for being unmarried and pregnant, regarded as 'damaged

goods', characterised by and taunted because of her sexual history/encounters and resultantly hypersexualised – Much like what happens to us today. She was also considered negatively against existing ideals of good girls/womn because of her outspoken, stubborn nature and fierce temper. She displayed some of the qualities that her son, Shaka, would later be celebrated and feared for but she is regarded with disdain and resentment for it.

I argue that Nandi experienced cycles of hardship including trauma and loss at various points in her life and this contributed to her performativity of herself (as documented and shared through oral narratives). This is not an engagement with history with a desire to romanticize her life, but rather to interrogate how the experiences of loss, trauma, and traumatic stressors as well as the anticipation of threats influenced her expressivity by reimagining how Nandi may have performed who and what she was. I am interested, especially, in the many times she had to flee from life and death situations, for instance when Senzangakhona, Shaka's father, angered by the existence of an illegitimate child (Shaka), sent for him to be killed, but Mkabayi, who was Senzangakhona's elder sister and Shaka's aunt, helped to spirit Nandi and the child away in secret (Laband, 2018:28).

Nandi's death came after she and her prolific son, Shaka, had defied many odds including assassination attempts. Her life was rife with resistance, defiance, and deviation from the prescribed narratives or the 'norm.' I believe she was far more nuanced than she was made out to be. She is recorded as having died on the 10th of August 1827 (Laband, 2018:79) but the cause of her death has been debated. Some oral narratives suggest a short illness while written documents say dysentery and other oral narratives suggest matricide, stating that, in a blind fury, Shaka had stabbed his mother to death upon hearing that she had defied his orders and not banished/sentenced to death a womn who had fallen pregnant with what was believed to be Shaka's male heir, thus directly threatening his reign. Shaka was known for his ruthless or tyrannical reign, therefore an enraged execution of his mother cannot be ruled out as improbable. I draw my inspiration for my thesis production from these conspiracies surrounding Nandi's death.

Michael Benton asserts that biomythography requires a 'good death' because it often acts as a prologue to a life and if the death is violent, premature, youthful and or for a good cause then it is even better (2015:65). As a way of creatively revisioning blackwomnhood I explore both autobiomythography as well as Nandi's biomythography using her death as a catalyst.

I wonder about a possible matricide, or a dramatic faked suicide that was part of an elaborate plan. Did Nandi experience or anticipate a threat and then decide to 'set fire' to herself in defiance? What would be the aftermath of that? Did Shaka's mourning come of guilt? I consider Nandi's emotional range, considering what she is said to have gone through, in particular her defiance in the face of those who sought to police, silence or kill her. I imagine her fierceness equalled by her tenderness and the complexity of being a humxn fuelled and afforded such great power. I am interested in creatively re-visioning her story to critically fabulate the 'missing links' and explore with a potential vocal soundscape.

In a sense, there is an illusiveness to Nandi. A tantalizing myth that both challenges and defies reality. It is almost like a loss of self which results in an ongoing search for *who* one is despite prevailing narratives about *what* one is pushing back constantly. As such, I imagine my thesis production presenting an aural landscape of loss or a sound score of precarity. I do not aim to obsess over the sound/utterance or lack thereof but also engage with the en fleshed awareness and understandings of the performers. I would like to take poem/s of mine (within the theme of various kinds of loss) and potentially pair them with stock female characters and historical figures. I have selected Nandi's timeline because I want to engage the way she has been remembered and or forgotten. I also use an existing isiZulu saying for the title of this project 'Isililo sika Nandi' which translates to both 'Nandi's wail' and 'mourning for Nandi'. It is also a direct link to the 17th century when Shaka Zulu's mother, Queen Nandi, died, causing Shaka to force the Zulu nation through an extensive and prolonged period of mourning known as isililo sikaNandi (Mourning for Nandi). Added to that, this saying can be understood as a parlance in isiZulu that is tied to intense crying/wailing (even outside of death and funerals). This made me imagine the processions that accompany a funeral and grieving in motion which led to the aural score of dirges, and, of the dithyrambic dirge.

I imagine that using the history of Nandi's burial and the mourning performed for her, including burying her with servants to escort and keep her company in the afterlife, will be fertile ground upon which to build a production. What does a grave sound like? Who is with Nandi in her grave? How does she feel about dying? Did Nandi die 'at the hands' or because of a man or was it her own doing? This has a similar theme to the posthumous monologue I performed as part of my developmental project. Blackwomn's voices from beyond: ghosts and violence.

Parting Thoughts:

My identity plays a large role in the study. As a blackwomn, I am inextricably linked to this study. It lives in me and I in it. Thus, it became essential to find a framework to help me navigate the battle without traumatising myself further or again. My works, thus far, have been a very sad and real indication of tragedy as an existential condition. My vehement refusal of precarity and violence against my body, led me to staging the very thing I so fervently opposed. This is an example of the intricacies of this battle between self and stereotype.

By using performance as a tool of inquiry, I was able to wrestle with ideas of a battlefield between who I am and what I am, between resisting precarity and fighting for self-narrated or self-defined freedom. This brought into play the materiality of the bodyvoicemind as well as the circulations of identity. This is where the trouble begins. It is another example of how repetitive the cycle of fighting against a calcified or arrested ontology towards the freedom of self-narration is. The tension and subsequent tragedy are in the constant wrestling between the freedom of self-knowing/narrating/defining versus the rigidity of ontological stereotypes (based on 'what' I am or am said to be). Performance has aided me to map and navigate this battle in a way that can potentially facilitate transcending stereotype in favour of self/ 'who' I am by re-visioning, reimagining, and refusing the ruptures. I hope to be able to continue exploring with this in more depths through my thesis production.

Imagine, for a moment, you are embodying the unenviable role of a top surgeon who might be embarking on a lengthy, complicated surgery to remove tissue from internal organs without damaging said organs. You cut into the patient, only to find that the harmful tissue has spread further and more circuitously across the same organs you are trying to save. This not only makes the surgery longer and more life threatening but also calls for a repetition of lifesaving acts – for instance, locating the harmful tissue, deciding whether to cut, preventing a bleed out and repeating. You have no certainty that the patient will live or die on your table and immediate no way of telling if the effects of your surgery are going to impact the patient's organs, life and livelihood and or motor skills but alternatively, even the successful removal of some of the harmful tissue could guarantee a transformative change in your patient's quality of life. You also know that even if it's successful, this surgery is the first of many. The issues and adhesions on the organs will return and so will the patient's debilitating pain. Would you make the first cut? Would it be futile or worthwhile?

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