Sexuality and cultural heritage at odds: *I Fuck What I Like*, an ode to the young queer black woman in South Africa

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SBSNOL001

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

Faculty of the Humanities

University of Cape Town

2021

COMPULSORY DECLARATION

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

Signature: Signed by candidate Date: 26 September 2021

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ABSTRACT

I write this paper as a theatre practitioner to complete a creative research project in line with complicating and archiving queer black women's narratives in the South African performance and literary canon. As a strategy of social reform, I aim to complicate what I argue to be an insistent narrative of queer black womanhood as emblematic of abjection by exploring the concept of queer black woman joy. I use Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness*, alongside Lethabo Mailula's theory of a tripartite erasure of queer black women, to frame what I consider to be queer black women's cultural heritage. In search of research methods, I turn to the work of Koleka Putuma, Zanele Muholi, Athi-Patra Ruga as my artistic influences, from whom I garner multivocality, collage, ode, and play as methods for my autoethnographic explorations concerning writing, performing, and archiving joy as part of the queer black woman narrative. This research project culminates in the writing, performance, and archiving of *I Fuck What I Like* as an ode to the young queer black woman in South Africa.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Mandiphefum'le

This document is sacred grounds. Consecrated with the love, care, and kindness of many without whom the findings would not stand. Over the past two years these are some of the many who have journeyed with me, who time and time again answered the question of intimacy, joy, certainty, and necessity. Here I will list my lovers, heart's keepers, and those I broke bread, theory, and into performance venues with:

Shabnam Pansari; for being the first to welcome me onto Hiddingh and advising that I familiarise myself with the likes of Tabassum Pansari, Lungile Cindi, Justin Jacobs, Mark Miller, Leigh Bishop, Shamiel Abrahams, Moeneeb Dalwai and Ronel Jordaan, thank you. All the above mentioned people held me with care and determination towards finding solutions and answers to all the performance concerns and questions I arrived with. I would also like to thank Wolf Britz and Namhla Blou for their assistance in the final leg of staging the performance.

Warona Seane and Sara Matchett; under your supervision I learnt to trust my voice anew. Thank you for breathing space, for encouraging me to play, and nudging me to dive in and swim when deadlines approached. I did not drown, and I now know intimately what it is to confidently produce knowledge, and unreservedly be a play-write. Thank you for witnessing me and doing so on terms that felt like my own.

Mark Fleishman, Jay Pather, Jacqueline Manyaapelo, Morné Steyn, Mbongeni Mtshali, Mandla Mbothwe, Mwenya Kabwe, Mlondiwethu Dubazane, Thembela Madliki, Mmatumisang Motsisi, the MA cohort, the 2021-Second-Year-undergraduate class, and the greater CTDPS community; thank you for the spirit of inquiry, the reassurance, and all the food!

Manoko Tlhako and Toby Ngomane: Play Boom Shaka's *it's about time* and tell me "What you think about this Lebo?". You have homed me and loved me through so many versions of self as human, and self as an academic. I love you. Katleho Motaung, Kamogelo Rakgwale, Keolebogile Namane, Anneline Hlangani, Zamah Nkonyeni, thank you for the ways you keep showing up, I love you. I am grateful to you Busisiwe Maphumulo, Nande Siko, and Siphesihle Cele for making Makhanda a safe place to return to for the purposes of rest, play, and food. I love you. Hayley Axford, and Mahlatse Magau, your memes and motivational quotes made

WhatsApp a better place. My old friends: Hlengiwe Sibanyoni, Nosipho Shabane, Sebabatso Mapheleba, Tshegofatso Lenake, Lethabo Themba, and Siyamukela Ngqumshe you understood the depths of my grief and still hoped for my joy, thank you. I love you. To Kamohelo Mabogwane AKA Juno/Kanye: I love you, through and through, you have been so good to me.

Lynda Spencer and Katlego Gabashane, for supervision in ways I did not know I needed. You have held me like kin. I will never forget. To my mother, Mama Segopotso, Mbali, Kea and my family at large, thank you.

Lastly, to my oldest and best friend, I miss you daily and I wish you were here to see this chapter come to an end.

This MA would not have been possible without the assistance of the Rosalie van der Gucht Scholarship, UCT Masters Research Scholarship, the National Arts Council, and the Institute for Creative Arts.

kuKhanye, Kwande

n_m_(j)_sibisi

NOTE ON THE STYLE OF THIS PAPER

The aesthetic presentation of this paper draws from my personal copy of the 40th anniversary edition of *I Write What I Like* published by Picador Africa in 2017. The reader will note that each chapter begins with an italicised introduction. These introductions are meant to give the reader context of the form and structure of the chapter as each chapter takes on a different form. Because I make use of multivocality and collage throughout this paper, I also employ italics to help distinguish one voice/character from another in the instances where the contribution is too small to take on an entirely new form.

I have made the stylistic choice of leaving the words I have strikethrough visible throughout the paper. This has happened in the cases where I have made statements that I was not entirely sure I could make (as they felt bold/presumptuous/impassioned) but I wanted to keep anyway because the conviction remained even post my revising the paper.

1. PROLOGUE

WHEN ONE CONSIDERS the title of this paper, each word approached as a signpost carrying centuries of information, the curiosity with which Noluthando writes this poem becomes all the clearer. This lyrical poem is both a probing and a memorandum. It maps out several routes all leading to, and arriving at, the life reserved for queer black women in democratic South Africa.

Noluthando composed this poem as a formal address to the subject of her inquiry: The? Young? Queer? Black? Woman? In? South? Africa? Here, law, tradition, an irrevocable history, nostalgia, and self-determination cross paths.

This lyrical exploration is written to be chanted or sung with an accompaniment of the readers choosing.

And what do we say when we speak of you

Many things are true,

That you were born a black woman in possession

Of the physical and practical traits of sex?

That your body can be read as an index

Of your inherited cultural disposition: abjection?

And what shall we say when we speak of you

Many things are actually true

like the laughter belonging to you by reason of birth

the ease with which you command the most daring vowel:

"I…"

Like your passion with lover's arms knotted around your girth

Holding in place the rapture in your rearranged bowel:

"…fuck what I like" (whatever that is)

You are a devotion.

2. LETTER TO SELF

THIS CHAPTER CONSISTS OF a letter written by Noluthando to herself. The letter was written during her postgraduate studies spanning between 2019 and 2021. It gives an overview of the thoughts that led her to her research inquiry and an authoritative rationale for undertaking this research project.

Noluthando formally addresses herself first before the tone of the letter shifts to a curious and experimental undertaking.

John 1:1 "In the beginning was the word [A ceremonial dinner invitation]…"

Dear Noluthando Mpho (Jupiter) Sibisi

You are writing to you after having found yourself standing on research's compass-rose – confused, captivated, and frustrated by the sight, sound, and smell of strange words strung together, sentenced to spending eternity side by side. Words, signs, and symbols signifying the significance of one concept and the insignificance of another. Words, the stepping-stone upon which systems, which supposedly determine the whole world, are structured. It is written that creation began with a Spirit spitting spoken word upon a hollow shadow and water. So, here is a word to begin all beginnings: Black.

The time? 2019 post-#Fees-Must-Fall-#RU-reference-list-protest o'clock. Co-ordinates? Outside the staircase of the Rhodes University Drama department, between the pages of Collective Amnesia (Putuma, 2017).

Your index finger is hovering over a letter from the west, you are reading a compilation of Koleka Putuma's poetic meditations, the first poem in the anthology is entitled *Black Joy*. In it, Putuma recalls how "we were spanked for each other's sins" (Putuma, 2017:12) and goes on to describe our childhood characterised by religion, discipline, and community. You remember this like it was yesterday: the whack, smack, spank of collective childhood misdemeanours. Alongside this memory, you mouth the names of the cousins and friends you mounted your grandmother's mattress with, you smile. Putuma recounts the times we all gathered and ate, ate until "we were filled" (Putuma, 2017:12). You remember that, too like it was, in fact, it happened yesterday,

Noluthando. You were with Cele, Nande, and Maphumulo, four mouths crammed with chicken wings, potato chips and chuckles. Throughout the poem, Putuma relates occasions of abundance, satisfaction, and the ways "we were home and whole" (Putuma, 2017:12). Now you shortly reminisce. The word shortly is used here because next comes a conjunction, a sign, a symbol indicating opposition, contrast, "But," she interjects (2017:12),

> isn't it funny?
> That when *they* ask about black childhood,
> all they are interested in is our pain,
> as if the joy-parts were accidental.
>
> I write love poems, too,
> but
> you only want to see my mouth torn open in protest,
> as if my mouth were a wound
> with pus and gangrene
> for joy.

There are currently two words for you to consider now Noluthando: "black" and "joy". Cautiously, you pencil in the question, *Koleka, who are 'they', the ones who have been asking about black childhood having already determined it?* below the poem. There are several deductions you can make from the information presented in the final two stanzas of the poem, the most obvious inference being that "they" are the West, *True West*[1]. In their beginning, it seems, blackness and joy cannot co-exist. We, Noluthando, are invited into this conversation with an understanding that "they", *True West*, have been asking after blackness, its conception, imagination, and reality with restrictions already set in place. Margins stipulated in books and, according to Barbara Tuchman (1980:16), books without which history should be considered "silent, literature dumb, science crippled, thought and speculation at a standstill". Tuchman (1980:16) insists that,

[1] Here I introduce *True West* as a character. *True West* is representative of the Western world and I initially inserted the "True" before west to help distinguish between the West of Putuma's writing (the Western Cape) and the West as the occident.

> without books, the development of civilization would have been impossible. They are engines of change […], "windows on the world and lighthouses erected in the sea of time". They are companions, teachers, magicians, bankers of the treasures of the mind. Books are humanity in print.

Humanity in print, print dominated by a people who only conceive of Africa as a country, a feral destination where Africans speak African (Diakite, 2019: n.p.), a civilisation devoid of its own history before colonialism (Mailula, 2019:19). Africa, a constant people, consistently finding more complex ways to die, Europe's dependents with charred skin, darkened by corruption, poverty, and war (Diakite, 2019: n.p.). This is the Africa that comes up on Google when searching "stereotypes about Africa", Noluthando. Africa, unlike its contemporaries, is not a union of proud, opinionated, and independent countries each with their unique attributes and global contributions. No, instead it is still largely spoken for, about, as a ravaged homogenous entity, there on the darker side of the world, not the First, nor the Second, but the Third far-removed world.

Do you not find the language used by Tuchman disorienting, Noluthando? It is such an immobilising way of considering words and worlds that do not exist in books. "History is silent, literature dumb, science crippled, thought and speculation at a standstill" (Tuchman, 1980:16). Silent, dumb, crippled, standstill. Much like the Africa of Google: the corrupt, poor, and war-stricken Africa. A narrative that is congruent to the anticipated blackness Putuma calls our attention to; painful, accidental, protest-ridden, wounded, diseased. What was it that Miriam Makeba said about written history again?

> The conqueror writes history, they came, they conquered, and they wrote. Now you don't expect people who came to invade us to write the truth about us, they will always write negative things about us, and they have to do that because they have to justify their invasion in all the countries […] We don't write our histories, it has always been handed down to us orally by our elders, of course the white man came, and he writes history. In fact, you don't know anything about any place until the white man gets there (1969: n.p.).

Noluthando, what do you think it would have been to sit Miriam Makeba and Barbara Tuchman down at the same table and have them in conversation? Makeba (1969: n.p.), positing that what we presently understand as written history is an extension of an invasive, exclusionary, dominant,

and violent colonial project and Tuchman (1980:16) counterarguing that without written history "the development of civilisation would have been impossible". Impossible, she says, this is how people without writing are said to have vanished without a trace (Taylor, 2003:xix). For Tuchman it proves "difficult to think about embodied practice within the epistemic systems developed in western thought; where writing has become the guarantor of existence itself" (Taylor, 2003:xix). This is how Makeba (1969: n.p.) comes to ironically conclude that "in fact, you don't know anything about any place until the white man gets there". In fact. In books.

Moreover, if Miriam Makeba was speaking about the reduction of blackness to negative imagery in dominant written literature during Apartheid South Africa, and during democratic South Africa Koleka Putuma writes about how blackness has been dissociated from the concept of joy (joy in this instance is thought of as positive imagery), how would they, Makeba and Putuma, hold space for each other now in 2021? Would the thread that binds one black woman to the other look like collective grief? Or would they simply admire each other's attempt at articulating the inherited disenfranchisement experienced by black persons under the *True West*'s tyranny? Would they celebrate their personal efforts towards "real black participation" beyond black visibility (Biko, 2017:5) in South Africa our land? Imagine witnessing Putuma at the Makeba and Tuchman table, and then imagine yourself also seated at this hypothetical table, Noluthando. What would you contribute to these conversations? Would you still cite Khadija Khan (2017:110) and mandate yourself to the task of centring black queer bodies, too, specifically black queer women for you, as the subject of enquiry to subvert the historic uses of the written word? What would you add to the many attempts being made globally to create more centres of literary and performance knowledge, to make what have been peripheral personhood and narratives more visible, complex, and therefore accurate?

Consider now that the words "black", "joy", "woman", and "queer" are how you are entering the discussion. In this thought experiment, yours is to frame the convergence of cultural representation, academic scholarship, and lived experience within a performance piece. Your claim to a seat at the Makeba, Putuma, Tuchman, and Khan table is as a critical reader, respondent, and performer of post-apartheid black queer woman identity and desire. This is how you might attempt to explain your meditations turned occupation to the table:

Theoretical Scene 1:

Noluthando:

You see, *True West* has recollected, recited, reduced, and subsumed queer black woman identity formation as a derivative cultural product. Queerness, from black South African bodies, is read as a cheap imitation of "western queer identity politics and cultural representations" (Spurlin 2006:5). And the imitation must be cheap, failed that is the only way the story of perpetually oppressed and trauma ridden black existence will stand.

The song Pata Pata begins to softly play in the background, NOLUTHANDO smirks in MAKEBA's direction

Noluthando:

I think ~~ours~~ mine has become to document ~~our~~ my own dynamism and striving towards multiple freedoms; to examine queer black woman identity in South Africa as extending beyond, to borrow from Njabulo Ndebele (1986:143), the "spectacle" of hyper-victimisation and trauma. Through writing and performance, ~~we~~ I must insist on a rediscovery of queer black woman ordinary living, or at least attempts at exploring alternative emerging norms as sites that evidence diversity in the preoccupations and realities of queer black women in post-apartheid South Africa. Because there is a knowing in doing, I must arrive at identity as an individual who centres and writes herself as praxis. It is important that at the intersection of ~~our~~ my queerness, ~~our~~ my blackness, and ~~our~~ my womanhood, ~~we~~ I ~~begin to~~ perceive a tangible normalcy and cultural belonging and that the world around ~~us~~ me sees it too. I must see myself, yes; equally I must be seen too. Perceived by others as fully human and capable of an array of human emotions and experiences.

End.

Noluthando, this is an appropriate time to rehearse table etiquette, to prepare actual acknowledgements and responses to those whose thoughts you have been drawing from, in case,

in some other life, Putuma, Tuchman, Diakate, Mailula, Makeba, Khan, Biko, Spurlin and Ndebele RSVP and you have to present them with an outline of how they came to be seated at this table.

Here are some questions I hope you will begin to consider in response to you:

1) What is the value of being seen/perceived?
2) By whom do you want to be seen/perceived?
3) What is the value of the archive?
4) And why do you want to enter the archive through writing and performance?
5) Lastly, why joy? Are you even happy enough to become an expert on black joy?

Eagerly awaiting your responses,

N.

3. SEXUALITY AND CULTURAL HERITAGE AT ODDS

IN THE EARLY 2020s there were attempts made by Noluthando to establish the experiences that informed her inquiry and gather the major theories and opinions that would shape the framework of her inquiry. She had set out to further her research by facilitating a public conversation between what was empirical (read: experiential) and its evidence (read: critical theory and studies).

Noluthando decided to invite some of the participants and thinkers behind the theories she employs to a dinner of sorts. The following is her address to The 1st International Formation Dinner Of The Ode, I Fuck What I Like*, held at an undisclosed location, at an unclear time.*

> *John 1:1 "In the beginning was the word [A ceremonial dinner invitation:], the word was with God [This will be the Supper after the Last one, a hobbit's eighth meal]…*

Very few of the guests gathered here today know the purpose of this assembly. As the saying goes, "There is strength in numbers"; or is it "There is safety in numbers"? Either way, the former accounts for your presence here as an expansion of my data set and proof of my academic vigour. The latter satisfies my desire for fellowship; I imagine that when two or three researchers are gathered some sense of community and comradery begins to exist.

Therefore, I will address some of you personally as I uncover the potential in thinking about queer black woman joy as a concept.

Without further delay, I would like to first greet you, Miriam Makeba, and share my thoughts about your 1969 remarks on *True West*'s use of negative imagery to depict black people in written literature in order to justify centuries of black subjugation. Your thoughts during this interview urged me to invite Arthur Jafa to share with us his sentiments from the 2019 interview titled *Not All Good, Not All Bad.* During the interview Jafa (2019: n.p.) expands on how he arrived at his preoccupation with blackness and its depiction in literature, media, and the arts; after which he goes on to reflect that,

> it's a very complicated thing to try to come to terms with being part of a community that is seen in some ways as the emblem of abjection or something like that, you know? The way blackness exists in relationship to whiteness and purity is a very

> complicated thing […] Black people are not the repositories of badness any more than white people are the repositories of goodness.

Two images stand out for me from how Jafa speaks on blackness here, the first being the idea "of a community that is seen in some ways as the emblem of abjection" (Jafa, 2019: n.p.). Abjection means, "of person or behaviour completely without pride or dignity; self-abasing" ("Abjection", 2021: n.p.). Synonyms of the word include crawling, servile, creeping, snivelling, cringing, submissive, craven, and humiliating. The second image to capture my mind is that of the conception and depiction of black people as "repositories of badness" (Jafa, 2019: n.p.). It seems to me a potent concoction to poison a community with both shame and guilt as a result of constructed racial identity. Still, as you had stated, Makeba (1969: n.p.), *True West* had to justify its contribution to the "complicated thing" which Jafa highlights, and the justification systematically vilified and undermined the humanity of the non-western, non-white, non-male, non-cisheterosexual, differently abled […] body.

Next, I greet you, Koleka Putuma, and sprint through the doorway you furnished in 2017 that made the conversation about abjection more apparent and accessible to me, the statement of "Black Joy". I thought it appropriate to parallel your thoughts to those in Sara Ahmed's work, *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), as a response. In her book, Ahmed (2010:13) proposes that the "history of happiness can be thought of as a history of association". Happiness, as theorised by Ahmed (2010:1-2), has been thought of as the consensus, a common (and I must add ill-defined) wish, will, and want that we have all consented to pursuing because we believe that happiness as an end will provide "meaning and order to our existence". In this framework, happiness, much like most ideals, "might keep its place as a wish by its failure to be given" (Ahmed, 2010:1). Like Ahmed, I am not interested in arriving at a fixed definition for happiness; rather I am interested in the idea that happiness results from a selection of decisions afforded to some groups of people and not others (2010:2). Here is my understanding of the argument Ahmed establishes, Putuma: 1) we currently exist in a global community underpinned by white heteronormative and capitalist ideals; 2) happiness, as we are encouraged to understand it, is inextricably linked to said ideals; therefore 3) those who are written out of the centre of this global community are also written out of happiness as a concept and a goal. That is, any person or community of people who are not associated with, or fail to meet, standards set by white heteronormative and capitalist doctrine also fail at attaining

the goal of happiness. Happiness, in this instance, is a form of world-making that has been historically politicised and capitalised on to "justify oppression" (Ahmed, 2010:2) since it is framed as something that can only be attained through a combination of very particular sets of behaviours and associations. When considered on its own merits, the word happiness has no universally objective meaning; it is heavily dependent on subjective feelings and how one self-reports on those feelings (Ahmed, 2010:6). Since there is no way to measure and corroborate the personal feelings of another, it becomes necessary to concede to Ahmed's (2010:6) assertion that "reading happiness is a matter of reading the grammar of ambivalence". I offer that even in the case of an objective group consensus on what constitutes happiness, two groups of people with differing value systems are likely to report on happiness differently, re-affirming the ambivalence. *True West*'s longstanding philosophical and political tradition of attempting to standardise the meaning of happiness created the necessary environment for a commodified conceptualisation of happiness that would be innately exclusionary.

Returning to the statement of Black Joy, Putuma: I offer that joy is a concept that falls within the paradigm of happiness and should, in the case of this address, be considered synonymous with happiness. It therefore becomes apparent that it is no mistake on *True West*'s part, Putuma. The historic union between negative imagery and blackness, or the dissociation of blackness from positive imagery and ideals, in literature and performance is no mistake. Ahmed (2010:13) observes that,

> Where we find happiness teaches us what we value rather than simply what is of value. Happiness not only becomes what is valued but allows other values to acquire their value. When happiness is assumed to be a self-evident good, then it becomes evidence of good.

And what you articulated in *Black Joy* (2017) was a value system for pleasure and measurements of good that did not correlate with White cis-heterosexual male values.

True West has in many cases excluded those who do not conform to its values from positive written imagery. Ahmed (2010:17) provides us with a non-exhaustive list of "those who are banished from [the concept of happiness] or who enter this history only as troublemakers, dissenters, [and] killers of joy,". In the list she cites the trope of the "angry black woman", side by side with the "unhappy queer", the "feminist killjoy" and the "melancholic migrant". Here we are

offered insight into archetypes designed and written into history as descriptions, narrative, and consequently tools of alienation from positive imagery, complex imagination, and meaningful world-making. This makes me wonder how a person who cannot attain whiteness by virtue of their blackness, is biologically removed from maleness because they were assigned female at birth and identify as a woman, and who also finds expression in dissident sexuality is meant to insist on their right to self-determine? If such a person is written out of their society's theorisation of happiness, they are inevitably denied participation in determining the parameters of what is of value and what is good in their society. This also means that said person is not considered in the drafting of social contracts and keeping of social order as they exist as pariahs of society.

As all of you who are seated at this table know, the subject of my enquiry is black, queer, and woman in a world thrice removed from *True West*. Therefore, I must take seriously Lethabo Mailula's (2018) expansion on the tripartite erasure experienced by queer black women in South Africa. In her dissertation *Violent Anxiety: The erasure of queer blackwomxn in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, Mailula (2018) offers that queer black womxn have a unique history of exposure to systematic racist, sexist, and homophobic ideologies that have resulted in Epistemic, Material, and Symbolic erasure. I am, in turn, arguing that this legacy of erasure as contextualised by Mailula has become a cultural inheritance, a heritage of concerns reserved for queer black women further burdening them with the expectation of relating to themselves only as emblematic of abjection or as trauma porn.

Having developed my investigation and located its subject, the queer black woman, in a global history of being compelled into abjection and consequently alienated from joy as a concept, I would like us all to turn our attention to the public archives evidencing her historic erasure within the South African context. In this part of my address, I think it appropriate to welcome to this gathering the first two South African ~~openly~~ queer black women I encountered while growing up. I will introduce them to you all as I remember them, in the order that I experienced them.

First, I would like to welcome Beth. I met Beth in 2007; I was in grade three, age nine going on ten. At the time, Beth was a character on a South African television channel (SABC1) Drama series called *Society*. I was in the comfort of my grandmother's living room when she first extended the

invitation for me to witness her fictional life as scripted for public consumption. I found a synopsis of the life Beth was leading from inside the television set and it reads as follows:

> Beth – a teacher at a private girl's school is in a loving relationship and can afford that beautiful house and luxury car. This subscribes to society's expectation of the economically empowered black woman. The only discrepancy is the fact that she is lesbian. (Society Season 1, n.d.)

"The only discrepancy is the fact that she is lesbian" (Society Season 1, n.d.). Discrepancy also means deviation from accepted societal standards. In this synopsis being a lesbian is framed as being incompatible with living as a happy and an economically empowered black South African woman in 2007. In order to fill in the gaps in my memory of the actual series, I decided to extract all of the instances Beth is mentioned in the show's synopsis to plot an overview of her character arc (see appendix i.). I can easily recall how beautiful the black women of *Society* were. I remember that they all seemed happy but for the purposes of a good plot they all had unpleasant secrets and flaws. So, the show begins, and I remember how seemingly happy Beth was. But Beth is a lesbian. She initially hides the fact of her sexual orientation from her childhood friends, with whom she is reuniting in preparation for the burial of a mutual friend. However, she eventually "comes out" to her friends and her family, at which point she is met with resistance from her family for being a lesbian. Beth's story takes a turn for the worse when she decides to publicly embrace her sexuality by attending her first Pride march; because of this decision, she is fired from her workplace. Beth loses her job because she "came out" as a lesbian teacher at an all-girls' private school. This is it! The only episode of *Society* that I do not need help remembering. My family was gathered in front of the television set in the comfort of my grandmother's living room. But Beth is a lesbian. During this particular episode, Beth was on the other side of the screen, being televised, while losing her job. I watched in dismay as Beth lived through international humiliation, I knew that the whole world was most probably watching too. And then something happened in the comfort of my grandmother's living room: someone pulled all the members of my family out of the school office in which Beth was being fired and back into the living room by bellowing, "Niyabona uku ba amaLesbian?"

Beth was a successful black woman, but Beth was a lesbian; her divergence produced a series of seemingly irredeemable losses, and somehow one of the adults at home saw it coming. “Niyabona (Do you all see)?” We had all seen, yet no one countered how this one person saw the issue at hand. The members of my family were no strangers to conflicting opinions and disagreements. I was raised to know to only hold an opinion if I could support it with evidence. And no one in my family contradicted this expression of disapproval, an act which I would then, and many times after, interpret as consensus. The consensus was that something was wrong, not with what was being done to Beth rather something that was wrong with Beth. The adults in my family knew something about being a black woman and its incompatibility with queerness, and that night Beth became a personal cautionary tale. Being a black lesbian was cause for spectacle. Being a black lesbian was risking one’s economic and, most importantly, social status.

The adults in my family knew something about being a black woman and its incompatibility with queerness, and all acts of knowing have their places in history. Lethabo Mailula (2018:1), in her chapter on the epistemic erasure endured by black queer womxn, speaks on the war waged against all knowledge systems that would validate the existence of queer relationships in African history. The imposition of westernized learning institutions, which facilitated western knowledge systems, meant large scale Epistemicide that relegated indigenous African queer knowledge to the margins (Mailula, 2018:14). If there was a precolonial queer Africa it, alongside many other African knowledge systems, became a casualty of *True West*’s imperialism. *True West* deliberately destroyed knowledge systems with the aim of dismantling nations and refashioning them in its own image. The rhetoric that this Epistemicide relied on is the idea that “Africa was devoid of history before colonialism” (Mailula 2018:19). This was an instrumental step in the process of othering the black body and all its practices; further, it ensured that all violence meted against the “other” body was excusable (Mailula, 2018:18). Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí unpacks the production of history and tradition in Africa because of colonialism and distinguished between 1) history as lived experience, 2) history as a record of lived experience that is coded in the oral traditions, and 3) written history (Oyěwùmí, 1997:80). Of the three categories, written history is considered “a category of history [that] is deeply entangled with western engagements with Africa” (Mailula 2018:19). Mama Makeba, what was it that you said about written history again?

From those seated at the table a voice responds

Miriam Makeba:

> The conqueror writes history […] In fact, you don't know anything about any place until the white man gets there (1969: n.p.).

And write they did. In the main, it was a history categorized by gender and race, and the hierarchy which resulted from this was a "four level tier with white men forming the apex, followed by white women and then by black men. At the bottom, serving as the Other, [was] the category of blackwomxn" (Mailula 2018:21).

It goes without saying that Africans, having knowledge of themselves and desiring the reinstatement of their liberty to self-determine, wrote back to the Apex from the bottom of this pyramid. However, a considerable amount of the African scholarship dedicated to unpacking the effects of colonialism on the identities of African persons centred the category of Black man as the subject of inquiry. This is evident in the framework of colonialism as an "emasculation project" (Mailula, 2018:26) that is devoid of a critical consideration of the commonalities between what was characteristic of colonial masculinities and what was being imagined or reclaimed as pre-colonial masculinities. In the absence of this consideration, hetero-patriarchal African scholarship failed to imagine that there may be shared oppressive features in the world-making that was taking place in African literature – literature that was dominated by men. Written western colonial scholarship and African post-colonial scholarship began to have this in common: a regard for patriarchy and heterosexuality as "unchanging, universal, essential, and ahistorical" (Mailula 2018:30). What becomes apparent is the shared and overwhelming disinterest from both Western and African scholarship in the identities, and concerns of bodies that remained effeminate and presented womanhood throughout African history.

The contemporary rendering of Africa as the "hotbed of ignorance, backwardness and gross human rights violations" (Mailula, 2018:16) often occurs without consideration of the "consequences of imported colonial intolerance into Africa which continues to be reproduced at a grander scale" (Mailula, 2018:33). Colonialism founded a universal moral compass through the convergence of law and religion (Mutua, 2011:452) that would trespass significantly into the personal lives of those who were colonized. I wonder now how the laws that criminalized homosexuality, and induced heteronormativity as a strategy of hetero-patriarchy (Mutua, 2011:461), might have found

their way into the four walls of my grandmother's living room. I have always known the adults in my family as honest and law-abiding citizens. How did it then come to be that although the laws criminalizing homosexuality had been abolished in democratic South Africa there was still resistance being expressed in my home against queer visibility?

The adults in my family knew intimately a 66-book long written history in which they had mapped themselves out in metaphors spanning from Genesis all the way through to Revelations. I wonder now: did they also know how sodomy was characterized as a common law crime because it was regarded an "unnatural sexual offence" under Roman-Dutch law (Mailula, 2018:35)? The adults in my family also painfully knew of a South African written history in which black people barely appeared as agentic and independent. They had seen, written in black and white, statutes that forbade their very existence and had lived to tell the tale of life after apartheid. Although I cannot assume that they condoned the state sanctioned homophobia that also made its way into apartheid law under the 1969 Immorality Amendment Act and the Sexual Offences Act (Spurlin 2006:5), I also cannot confidently say they did rally against homophobic ideals. I knew the shapes and depths of the wounds inflicted by racism on their skins; they could recite in detail the laws that diminished the value of black lives and I wonder now why they did not know to also cite The Act of 1969 ("Immorality Amendment Act", 1969:4) criminalizing any sexual conduct between men in the company of others, stating that:

> 20A. (1) A male person who commits with another male person at a party an act which is calculated to stimulate sexual passion or to give sexual gratification, shall be guilty of an offence.

Considering that somewhere in the telling of stories, queer history morphed itself into the history of an unAfrican homosexuality that presented "a threat to the project of [black] nation building" (Livermon, 2012:301) in post-apartheid South Africa, black queer woman depictions would be a grossly underrepresented topic in the archive, more so in public archives. I suspect that Beth, the idea of Beth, an openly lesbian black woman, was meant to remain in the periphery and unimagined at home.

But you came to us through the TV screen, didn't you, Beth? You came as knowledge, so alternative and far removed that yours had to be interpreted as a narrative of constant threats,

struggle, and rejection. The only way you could be legitimate in my grandmother's living room was if you existed as a lesson on what I should not become and why. Even though, in 2007, South Africa had a constitution protecting the rights of queer persons, the heteronormative attitudes I would witness towards you, both on screen and at home, my home, failed "to mirror what is expressly stated in the constitution, the right to equality and the prohibition of unfair discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation" (Mailula, 2018:46). In democratic South Africa there remained in place cultural structures and systems that allowed for further erasure of queer black bodies (Spurlin, 2006:3). I watched your family coerce you "into pursuing the nuclear family model in order to escape persecution" (Mailula 2018:43). I think the adults in your family knew something about being a black woman and its incompatibility with queerness, too, Beth. I watched you ~~anxiously, eagerly~~ deliberate your first pride march. You also knew something about being a black woman and its incompatibility with queerness. I watched you go to the march and return to your whole world knowing the discrepancy in your story; your whole world collapsed into itself because of this knowledge. What is now apparent to me from this memory is not just the deliberate erasure of queer history, it is also the advocacy for an absenting of queer present and future. In the discomfort of my grandmother's living room, none of the adults in my family defended your constitutional rights that evening. What I was meant to see, how I was meant to see, was a queer black womanhood of abjection.

Mailula (2018:94) posits that "belonging is used as a tool to measure inclusion". In her theorizing of symbolic erasure, she speaks to the pervasive legacy of the apartheid Group Areas Act that still relegates the "majority of black South Africans [to] residing in the townships where the economy remains inaccessible and multiple factors contribute to systemic poverty" (Mailula, 2018:99). The financial disadvantages experienced by black communities impact the access members of the community have to social services. This reality, alongside the previously mentioned rejection of queerness in black identity formation has the potential to mean a very particular denial of citizenship for queer black bodies living in the township. Beth, do you think that you could have left the security of your suburban home, the acceptance of your three well-off friends who made up the Society, and the reality of being an openly queer black fictitious character to seek out community, security, and cultural belonging in a space such as the township I grew up in? I imagine that by virtue of your socio-economic standing and geographical status, you were probably spared some of the symbolic erasure perpetuated against queer black persons living in

spaces that were historically delegated to large black populations. Thinking back to the idea of queerness being theorised as a "bourgeois western import tied to a legacy of colonialism" (Spurlin 2006:3), do you think that what you had, Beth, the privilege of privacy through an ability to opt out of being perceived by certain societies, could be read as a qualification of the "association of queerness to opulence and wellbeing which translates back to queerness being tantamount to whiteness" (Mailula, 2018:104)?

I am now also thinking about the period during which you were deliberating going to your first Pride. What was it that you had hoped to achieve by going, Beth? I suspect that the march was your attempt at asserting your queer identity and belonging within the queer community, and then the belonging of the queer community in society at large? Riddle me this: Pride has been criticized for being inaccessible, as the marches are often held in exclusive suburban areas, a spatial construction which perpetuates the non-belonging of queer black women who cannot financially afford to occupy these spaces (Mailula, 2018:92) and for becoming a space devoid of radical politics (Mailula, 2018:113). Did any of these concerns cross your mind during your deliberation? Did you ever feel the need to consider the status of your queer identity at a socio-political level and unpack what it means to enter post-apartheid scholarship as a "highly complex and contradictory question" (Spurlin, 2006:1)? Was your negotiation of post-apartheid subjectivity characterised by "either a deracinated queerness or a blackness divorced from sexuality" (Livermon, 2012:15)? Was it both? Was it none?

I pose these questions to you, Beth, after having read the introduction to a book titled *How To Be A Real Gay: Gay Identities In Small-Town South Africa* by Graeme Reid (2013:1), who begins the text by stating that the book "was inspired by the unexpected discovery of gay spaces proliferating in the South African countryside in the wake of the transition to democracy". Reid (2013:1) goes on to confess,

> I had expected to find gay people living in secrecy and fear and dreaming of migrating to the cities. Instead, I found niches where gay identities were being expressed in the most unexpected places.

I am thinking seriously about the implications of Reid's "unexpected discovery" for African queer theory and its subjects. I am thinking seriously about the Epistemic, Symbolic, and Material

erasures as theorised by Mailula (2018:118) and how useful the theory proved in framing my thoughts, and then I am thinking about how I should position this theory in relation to the actual people it talks about. If I am to take seriously the task of complicating queer black woman narratives by looking at queer black woman joy, I must labour further away from essentialising queer black woman experiences of either rural, township, or suburban life within the South African context.

The second queer black woman I recall encountering growing up is actually a celebrity from one of the townships I grew up in: Kwa Thema. I am not sure how to best introduce her so I will simply call her by the name I know her, Eudy. Well, I did not really know Eudy inasmuch as I heard so much about the end of her life. What I did not hear, and wish to know now more than ever, is what made her happy. I am of the idea that right now is the most fitting time for those gathered here to attempt to find out with me. It should be possible for us to all generate answers in the next few seconds because Eudy, unlike Beth, was a real person who was inserted into mainstream media and whose name has been featured in a number of international conversations about black queer womanhood in South Africa.

Here, I invite the whole table to google search "Eudy Simelane". When we click on the Wikipedia ("Eudy Simelane", 2021: para. 1) link which is the first of the results to emerge from the pool of knowledge that is the internet, we immediately read in the entry's introduction:

> Eudy Simelane (11 March 1977 – 28 April 2008) was a South African footballer who played for the South Africa women's national football team and an LGBT-rights activist. She was raped and murdered in her hometown of Kwa Thema, Springs, Gauteng.

The contents of the Wikipedia entry are as follows: eight words to describe her early life, another 30 swooping over her football career, and then a good 164 words describing her brutal murder. My hope is that at this point the entire table is scrolling down to attentively read the citations of the articles used for this entry ("Eudy Simelane", 2021: para. 7):

> "Raped and killed for being a lesbian: South Africa ignores 'corrective' attacks" (Annie Kelly, 2009). "Eudy Simelane – the international footballer murdered for being gay" (Keely Watson, 2021). "Tribute to The Late Former Banyana Banyana Player, Eudy

> Simelane" (SAFA, 2008) "Joburg Pride Wall of Remembrance (sic)" (GMax.co.za., 2008) "Stop the Violence - Live Updates from South Africa" (Dipika Nath, 2009). "Life for killing lesbian activist" (News24, 2009). "Eudy Simelane honoured posthumously" (Victor Khupiso, 2009).

Beneath these citations is an italicised disclaimer: "This biographical article related to women's association football in South Africa is a stub. You can help Wikipedia by expanding it" ("Eudy Simelane", 2021: para. 9). We collectively click the hyperlink to find out what a stub is: "A stub is an article that, although providing some useful information, lacks the breadth of coverage expected from an encyclopaedia, and that is capable of expansion" ("Wikipedia: Stub", 2021: para. 1).

Capable of expansion, yes; "the epistemic, material and symbolic" (Mailula, 2018:118) expansion necessary for black queer women bodies, such as Eudy Simelane's, to experience and express a myriad of complex emotion and enter mainstream media imagery not only as victims of a brutal system. Expansion, broad enough to answer the question of life as vigorously as it does that of death. Eudy's death adequately evidences the material erasure of black queer women characterised by "violent acts such as murder, rape, physical and verbal abuse" (Mailula 2018:1). I imagine that Eudy's life, on the other hand, was an elaborate network of stories, so many stories and experiences that were reduced to the moments of her life ending. This portrayal of black queer womanhood in media "continues to elevate negative imagery of queer black women" (Mailula 2018:54) as perpetual victims of violence and unable to lead a fulfilling life.

In KwaThema, Springs, there is a street called Ncwadi. Ncwadi is known for the numerous churches lining the street. I wonder if Eudy went to any one of the churches there, and if she did, did she wear Isambatho every Sunday? Did gospel music lift her spirit? Which hymn was she sent off with? What are the other things she will be remembered for? Again, what made her happy? And if we cannot answer the question of Eudy's joy, can we at least return to Putuma's love poems and from there claim personhood for black queer women that is non-emblematic of abjection? An existence that is not drowning in the pooled efforts to maintain its peripheral placement as traumatic and therefore undesirable?

4. (NON)EMBLEMS OF ABJECTION

THIS IS A CHAPTER produced for the purposes of locating the research inquiry, as presented by Noluthando, in practice. What is included in this chapter are the artists that influenced the thinking behind the practices Noluthando would use to journey into her scripting and performance.

> *John 1:1 "In the beginning was the word [A ceremonial dinner invitation:], the word was with God [This will be the Supper after the Last one, a hobbit's eighth meal] and the word was God [an ode to the young black queer woman in South Africa]…*

Pumla Gqola, in her 2011 article titled "Through Zanele Muholi's eyes: re/imagining ways of seeing Black lesbians", develops a vivid image of the violence that informs how black queer women are perceived. She speaks of the negative hypervisibility of black queer women and how, in turn, it has rendered their bodies and livelihood as "highly visible manifestations of the undesirable" (Gqola, 2011:623). It is a visibility that has been captured in the imaginations of South African and global citizens as "high -profile cases of [corrective] rapes, beatings, and murders of black [queer women] combined with other forms of homophobic violence experienced by black […] queers" (Livermon, 2012:301). Further, alternative instances of black queer woman visibility manifest as either hypersexualization of the subjects' bodies (Gqola, 2011:627) or position said bodies as "a threat to the project of [black] nation building" in post-apartheid South Africa (Livermon, 2012:301). What becomes increasingly apparent here is the cultural and political insistence on publicly viewing black queer women's bodies through a lens of pathology and social depravity (Livermon, 2012:308). This lens renders black queer womanhood as premised on not belonging, and further alienates black queer women from the democratic aims of post-apartheid South African nationhood.

Having distilled my practice as research interest to a documentation of black queer womanhood which is not dependent on trauma narratives, I would like to now turn my attention to the artistic cardinal points of reference that have informed the (re)routing and rooting of this practice as research process. I began this letter by outlining the creative explorations of Koleka Putuma and would like to further scaffold using the thoughts and practices of Zanele Muholi and Athi-Patra Ruga to arrive at an interdisciplinary compass-rose. From this, I will unpack how they offer a black queer counterculture that has and will continue to inform how I approach my discipline. Using

Arthur Jafa's (2019) refute of blackness as the "emblem of abjection" or "the repositories of badness" alongside Sara Ahmed's (2010) theory of those who are banished from happiness to create my theoretical framework, I posit three things. 1) There is a tendency in popular media to write positive imagery (such as joy and pleasure) out of the black narrative, 2) this, in black queer woman narratives, has translated into a demand for trauma porn in place of complexity, and 3) has created an archive of black queer women as "emblems of abjection". I therefore attempt to locate the various responses, (re)actions and retorts in the different methods I draw from the abovementioned artists' practices to arrive at a personal exploration of South African black queer woman representation.

Here I am webbing a foundation that will build towards a black queer woman aesthetic that is non-emblematic of abjection. I started this explication with the medium I feel I have practiced the most: words. I think it is necessary to highlight here that I believe that the language I am writing to you in, the language of English, is intrinsically designed as a symbol of power. It has historically worked in favour of its designers and will almost always signal to its founders. This recognition functions as a note to self to constantly return to an investigation of the semiotics I have been deploying in my writing. To recognise that "joy" (beyond Sara Ahmed's take on it) can only make sense to me when put side by side with iNjabulo and Lethabo: the words denoting joy in the languages I grew up hearing at home. That those words exist in this world as the names of some of the thinkers whose work I have been making use of in this paper does not go unnoticed. Njabulo, Lethabo. What is becoming clear is that the languages of this letter must expand beyond those of the English written word to capture my queer imagination.

Zanele Muholi (2013) refers to themself as a visual activist who uses photography as a tool to impress a reading of queer, gender and race politics in spaces occupied by members of the LGBTQI+ community. They are engaged in documenting and preserving queer identity within South Africa's history (Muholi, 2013). I am particularly drawn to Muholi's work as a series of works that "map out a visual vocabulary that interrogates ways of seeing" (Gqola 2011:623). According to Gqola (2011:622), Muholi's 2004 work *Visual Sexuality: Only half the Picture* was "applauded [for its] courage and unwavering focus of Muholi's lens on the otherwise unseen Black lesbian experience in South Africa" while being criticized for being "work that resists pleasurable consumption". It is, for me, the initial considerations of Muholi's work as "outlaw culture" whose

requisite for consumption has always been for the viewer to "[grapple] with the competing and nuanced meanings highlighted in the represented subjects", that in turn "underlines the importance of seeing the agency – life choices, decisions, failures, confusions, discoveries, rejections – of the Black [queer] in the picture" (Gqola 2011:623).

In a 2013 Human Rights Watch film showcasing Muholi's photographic work, they travelled to Kwa Thema, the same Kwa Thema of my upbringing, of Eudy's life and subsequent death. Muholi (2013) says, "Very, very interesting township […] I shot the first gay wedding in 2002". I wonder if this was their first commission for a gay wedding photoshoot, or if the wedding itself was the first of its kind in Kwa Thema? What matters most to me, though, is that now I can say, "When I was five years old, Zanele Muholi came to Kwa Thema to shoot a gay wedding." During this filmed trip, Muholi meets Tumi. To Muholi's surprise, Tumi is a lesbian who owns a dog. They interact with the dog and go on to say, "This is for the first time that I know someone who owns a dog" (Muholi, 2013). Now I can also inform others that, "Zanele Muholi's first encounter with a lesbian who owned a dog was in Kwa Thema." Muholi is in Kwa Thema to take portraits of Tumi as part of their now iconic photographic series *Faces and Phases.* As they prepare Tumi's hair for the shoot, Muholi (2013) goes on to say, "I just want people to look good. I really, really want people to be fresh". As the pictures are being captured Muholi (2013) observes "the young lesbians now are socialites connected by social media and they are free with photography". Tumi goes on to affirm that the process of being photographed was "fun". Fun as in "pleasurable", denoting enjoyment: It is only in this context that the following conversation could also take place:

Muholi:

[…] and this township is so popular with–

Tumi:

The killings.

Muholi:

(*laughs*) No, gay lives.

Tumi:

And the killings.

Muholi:

> There are a lot of gay people in KwaThema. And, also, it has since become notorious for hate crimes because in 2008, a known black lesbian was brutally murdered here.

Now Muholi (2013) goes on to reflect on the homophobic violence enacted on black queer women and highlights the importance of unrelenting documentation of queer livelihood by way of creating "awareness, capturing the moments, those truths, and realities, [so that] the world will learn about our cultures". Photography for Muholi functions as a tangible document and text that others can physically touch and see. It is a contribution to texts about queer intimacies, pleasure, joy, vitality, errors, and difficulties that are often excluded from mainstream media. In a conversation with another woman named Lerato, Muholi (2013) asks, "What would you like to read about in the mainstream?" and Lerato responds,

> Not even read. Even when seeing, I'd like to see an advert of a family where it's the mother and the mother and the baby and they're fighting germs in the household. It shouldn't only be about the violence and the homophobia.

Both Muholi and the abovementioned participants emphasize the lack of, and subsequent need for, positive and complex visual texts of black queer womanhood. This call echoes Gqola's (2011:623) assertions about the ways visual texts, such as photography, determine not only what we see but also how we see what we see based on what is reinforced in popular media. The reliance on trauma porn in headlining black queer womanhood not only reduces black queer woman narratives to those of protest and pain, but it also denies the public access to imagery that humanises and affirms the citizenship and cultural belonging of black queer woman bodies in the South African socio-political landscape. What I also find interesting in Muholi's process of documenting is the way they facilitate their participants' pleasure and enjoyment throughout the process of documentation, which in turn results in a visual document that captures black queer woman existence beyond the realm of abjection.

Similarly, Muholi's (2013) desire to be able to seek out and "find positive lesbian icons" in popular and social media speaks to a need for an elaborate and saturated black queer woman visual and

written archive. The photographic documentation of the intimate lives of black queer women therefore presents the potential for a much more complex seeing, capturing, and historicising of black queer women as it works against a disembodied blackness and an unidentifiable queerness. Moreover, it begins to facilitate a private and public centring of black queer women's imagination, creative will and ingenuity that is also not dependant on trauma narratives.

And as far as my own imagination goes as a writer, theatre maker, and visual artist the works and thoughts of multi-media artist Athi-Patra Ruga have helped to deepen my thinking around the development of an aesthetic that is, for me, non-emblematic of abjection. Ruga (2018), who makes use of visual and performance art, created a "maximal" work titled *Of Gods, Rainbows and Omissions,* which dealt with world and character-making to confront what are, for him, important socio-political issues. An explanation offered by Ruga (2018) of his work was as follows,

> So 'of Gods': of the people, the men that we actually put in power. Uhm, of 'Rainbows': the promises that come with them and the promises that we give ourselves sometimes, and each other as society. And then 'Omissions' […] 'after we reach a place of liberation how do we write a history that includes the trans, that includes queer, lesbian, gay, black, white in a way that is true and is not mythology?'. So, I use mythology to highlight truth, I use utopia to highlight the lack of utopia.

The work exists as a "compact story" of mythical inclusivity told through multiple media (Ruga, 2018). What interests me in Ruga's exploration is his consideration of colour as "democratic" and his use of colour "to disarm people" (Ruga, 2015). Colour, in this instance, is treated as an invitation into conversation that extends beyond what has been the dichotomous existence and treatment of narrative. The mixing of media and centring colour divorces the viewer from the proverbial "black and white" way of reading visual text, "filling the white noise of intergenerational silence with [both] factual and made-up stories" (Ruga, 2015). History here is revised using layering, texturing, colouring and collage and Ruga's revisionism informs not only the ways the past can be presently performed and (re)interpreted, but also provides clues into how one might go about documenting visual ephemera and text that informs how we presently imagine and create imagery that helps us identify with our future ideals. It is Ruga's (2018) artistic claim

to South African nationhood, in the face of what is often experienced by those at the periphery as a failing state and continued epistemological, material, and symbolic exclusion, that attracted me to the work.

I draw then from Putuma's (2017) written literary claim to personal black joy, intimacy, and pleasure, alongside Muholi's (2013) photographic portraits of ordinary black queer woman living, and Ruga's (2018) imaginative collaging of multiple media to arrive at the process of writing and creating a performance that accounts for my own ambiguity and multiplicity.

5. MULTIVOCALITY, COLLAGE AND ODES AT PLAY

IN THESE AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC REFLECTIONS, Noluthando sums up the core practices of this research inquiry. The practice as research methodology is explored through multivocality, collage, odes, and play. Important ideas such as the call to archive and the exploration of digital archives as contemporary mediation are called to question.

> *i held my fear by the hand / honored its existence, and / thanked it for teaching me / that happiness exists beyond the boundaries it creates* (yung pueblo 2018:201)

I saw myself struggling in the clutch of a global pandemic. Grasping, each day, for a clear beginning and coherent word. The initial letter did not find me well. Hours clotted into days that hindered the flow of the months. There were complications, more confusion than captivation, more social media and over-stimulation than structure. Words were fading into a dull hum, shifting into symbols that signified the year the world ended and would not begin again, but continued to continue, nevertheless. Here is a word to shatter the idea of beginning: COVID.

Hello fear.

The time? 2020 beginning-of-COVID19-national-lockdown-and-the-Masters-will-be-adapted o'clock. Co-ordinates? A guesthouse in Makhanda, Eastern Cape, scrolling through social media feeds.

Under the South African lockdown regulations, the thematic concerns of my personal life have changed from a fortnight-long romantic visit to a four-month-long mandatory stay. The world is in survival mode and, it seems, the potential for joy, pleasure, and intimacy have remarkably decreased for most of humanity. The world has stopped, and humanity is beginning to come undone. I begin to wonder where this unprecedented occurrence will locate my project, whose methodology involves Practice as Research? The theme here is survival. Synonyms: persistence, endurance, and adaptation. Digital adaptation characterised by isolated making and remote performances; in this new world we have had to abandon casting calls and in-person physical collaboration. The task at hand? To create a performance in line with complicating the queer black woman narrative by exploring ways in which I can write and perform joy and/or pleasure ~~into~~ out of the queer black woman account. This research is in response to, and in order to counter, what I

am arguing to be an insistent reduction of queer black women to emblems of abjection. This project is meant to illustrate how the concept of ~~personal~~ "queer black woman joy" can be scripted and performed utilising the methods of multivocality, collage and lyrical poetry in the form of an ode. What is meant to remain upon completion of this inquiry is a dynamic, critical, and playful contribution to Queer African theory and episteme.

I am alone and it is dark.

In previous creative ventures I have thrived on play. In this project I mean to play. I should be playing, given "play's classification as enjoyable, social and educational" (Atkinson 2006: 1). My research demands it of me to play: play to arrive at the different relationships and interactions that informed how I presently understand my personal world. Play to access the world as I imagine it. Play to unpack the world as it exists. Play here intervenes as a way of identifying with everything… an overflow with identification (Taylor, 2003:xv). I am meant to play as a way of casting my imaginative power and arriving at agentic world-making. Through play, I can partake in a willing suspension of disbelief, and safely detangle my "entangled surplus subjectivity, full of tugs, pressures, and pleasures" (Taylor 2003:xv) as valuable social knowledge. I understand play as performance; therefore, play as verb (as a doing word/as doing for enjoyment/as embodied performance) offers a route to transmittable knowledge and archive "through embodied action, through cultural urgency, and by making choices" (Taylor 2003: xvi). But here, in this halted world, I am stuck. I do not fight. I do not take flight. I freeze. It is possible that herein is where the potential of the first iteration of *I Fuck What I Like* is located. In suspension. Interruption. Arrest. It is possible that the most rewarding path to clearly seeing my relationship with the spatial, temporal, ritualistic, embodied, and mixed media visualizing practice of queering black womanhood is in the stopping and observing in detail the ~~perceived~~ absences. The ~~perceived~~ absence of queer black woman joy in space. The ~~perceived~~ absences of queer black woman joy in time. The ~~perceived~~ absences of queer black woman joy in ritual. The ~~perceived~~ absences of queer black woman joy in embodiment. The ~~perceived~~ absences of queer black woman joy in mixed media visualising. If I am to play, my embodiment of play must be perceptible as play. I need witnesses for my play.

I am the darkness.

I reluctantly enter play alone. I allocate the parking bay of my temporary lockdown home to myself as a performance space. In the bay I install a makeshift washing line. The opening image of the performance consists of colour coordinated clothing items hanging on the line, blue clothing articles hang on one half of the line while pink and maroon articles hang on the other half of the line. In the middle of the line, I suspended a translucent grey raincoat. The choice to colour coordinate the clothing is two-fold: 1) My grandmother instilled in me a reverence for colour, and preserving the intended appearance of clothing by constantly insisting that laundry should be washed with a regard for colour to avoid the potential of dye unintentionally transferring from one item of clothing to another. 2) "Blue is for boys; Pink is for girls" was a seemingly harmless binary assertion I constantly heard from my schoolmates as a child; it therefore becomes all the more interesting to begin reading the implications of these associations of colours with opposite and binary gendered identity in a home characterised by queerness. As the metaphor of "grey areas" begins to take form in my conception and understanding of self, and subsequently self in relation to others, the grey raincoat begins to act as a safer point of departure. My preoccupation throughout the performance is the mundane task of hanging up and taking down the clothes on the line. This ritual reminds me that I have approached clothing with great caution in the past. This ritual reminds me that I had a distaste for my own clothing growing up. I took no pleasure in the clothes I was encouraged to wear, and those that elicited my own pleasure also meant being a recipient of harsh criticism from my parents and the community at large. It was only after leaving home for university that clothing began to evoke pleasure, to become a place for the mind to wander and then wonder, to begin to capture in my own imagination and the imagination of others that which I did not always want to explicitly express in words. The memory, social knowledge, and sense of identity (Taylor 2003:3) transferred through elevating a mundane task to the space of ritual and back to the mundane is asserted and affirmed through the space and time in which the behaviours are repeated.

What is also conjured in this exploration are Shadow and Echo as developing characters and playmates for *I fuck what I like*. Shadow enters as a body of work made manifest through a sonic exploration while Echo appears in this iteration as a silhouette of my body partaking in shadow play against the grey raincoat I mention above. Multiplicity is echoed using both sound and visual text. I attempt to script Shadow's thoughts through stream of consciousness. From the initial trial I outline this excerpt and recite it in the performance,

Archive 1: Shadow, Echo and Mundane things

> Shadow: We like things, many things. Named things, like cakes, rainbows, and the ocean. Echo and I have collected all these things, like this item of clothing and that, named things. Raced things and gendered things. Real things. Like some blue-black things are boy things and some red-pink things are girl things. And some queer things are the devil's things and other not gay things are god's things. We have all these things. Rainbow things and ocean things. Things that are and aren't. Are we impossible?

My shadow self becomes an object for my own scrutiny, analysis, debunking, and explaining. It is a shard of self, a fragment of my lived reality that I must extrapolate a whole intelligible human being out of. I must play but play it safe. I quote "Embodied performances have always played a central role in conserving memory and consolidating identities in literate, semiliterate, and digital societies. Not everyone comes to "culture" or modernity through writing" (xviii). I came to writing through embodied practice and this gives me permission to approach my body as a work of literature, as the beginning of a script, as a site of knowledge. I am compelling, I am justifying, and I am qualifying why I am here. I approach myself as a site on which the embodied practice of living has meant production of knowledge.

This first iteration for all intents and purposes is an attempt at a personal shift from essentialism in my own conceptions, my framework, and subsequently in my approach towards articulating my ideas. I do not wish to position my body in opposition to, but rather as an extension of, an ongoing conversation. Through engaging other theorists, I have located black queer subjectivity in what I have argued to be an unjust geopolitical context and social formation. It is true that queer black woman bodies are subjected to unimaginable micro and macro violence which is being articulated throughout popular media and academia. Simultaneously, the same bodies are leading lives that are characterized by agency, urgency, and fragments of ordinariness. I argue alongside Ndebele (1986:52) that the inherent problem in the over-articulation and emphasis of combatting injustice through "spectacular political statement" has narrowed the means of addressing said injustice. Through my own exploration of an articulation of black queer woman life beyond the narrow focus of a violent state characterised by rape and trauma, I am finding value in the details of ordinary living.

There are so many other things about the human? the black? the queer? the woman? the archive? its body, its clothes, its music, the (de)construction of its intimate spaces, its things that Echo, Shadow-things that exist and mean something but never quite give rise to anything definite. There is life to negotiate, ordinary everyday life, in which the body mediates a spectrum of varying emotions and experiences, each of which are valid.

The time? 2021 I-lost-my-grandmother-during-COVID19-national-lockdown-but-the-Masters-must-go-on o'clock. Co-ordinates? Between the University of Cape Town's Hiddingh Campus, my bachelor flat, and social media feeds.

The thematic concerns of my personal life have shifted from potential narratives of joy, pleasure, and intimacy to those of grief. Through the second iteration, I recognise a need to write because I recognise writing as central to academia and an obvious place to retaliate. I know that in writing I can claim an intrinsic knowledge of myself, which makes intimate my understanding of the cultures and communities that inform the self and expand my awareness of the rest of world. I also know that there is a contestation between my chosen mediums of embodied ephemeral practice and fixed written literature. I know that I need to consider my contribution to both the written archive and performance repertoire in tandem and explore a generative collaboration between the two.

But I do not write. Instead, my lockdown days are spent scrolling through a maze of social media profiles and thoughts. The practice here, it seems, is showing up to social media timelines daily and witnessing the black queer women of the world surviving, some grieving as well, others breathing, and others still celebrating life. The culmination of this exercise is a folder on my phone containing screenshots from Queeriosity SA magazine, the Instagram profiles of @Kolekaputuma, @naledytheactivist, @photography_with_chego, @nataliepaneng_ @iamafreedom and @muholizanele, to name a few. Zanele Muholi is working on a series of thirty-one painted self-portraits under the level three lockdown regulations. I decide to do the same: to wake up and curate colour co-ordinated photoshoots of myself within the comfort of my own home for fourteen days. Thus begins the more tangible practice of this iteration. I am creating a digital record and compilation of personal videos using Instagram filters, photos, screenshots of texts, and digital self-portrait paintings.

The material arising from and surrounding the photoshoots brings to life the idea of multivocality as an autoethnographic method that shows that I, as a researcher, do not possess a "single and temporally fixed voice" (Mizzi, 2010:1). The notion of a personal fixed voice and approach to practice to generate performance and written material is abandoned in favour of a more fluid process. Depending on the context and contestation within any given day; my landscaping as an auto-ethnographer who is making connections between the "personal self and the social context" (Mizzi, 2010:1) is derived from both my digital explorations and conventional academic research. My writing voice, therefore, becomes a non-linear, sometimes non-categorizable and multidimensional (Mizzi, 2010:1) investigation. This, in turn, complicates my work by considering my personal experiences and how they contribute to my ways of existing in the world. The varying degrees and medium of self-portraiture become an examination of the tensions within my own body as a site of knowledge.

Using Heewon Chang's *Autoethnography as Method* (2008), I script three voices from the character and world making I describe above, namely: Reflection, Shadow, and Echo. While the criterion for Reflection is a descriptive and realistic voice, Shadow occupies the script as an emotive and confessional voice, and Echo's voice exists as an impressionistic and imaginative poetic account. To aid my staging of these voices as personal multiplicity and complexity, I make use of collage as another one of my methods to combine the mediums of painting, photography, voice over, physical performance, digital art, and Instagram filters onto a digital backing. Through this process, I identify my turn to non-survival activity, such as the ritual of getting dressed, taking pictures, and posting them on social media daily, as subjective play. Repeatedly revisiting these instances of play in my own home begs the question of what it is I have been engaging and witnessing on the social media accounts of other black queer women throughout lockdown. In the instances where social media presence and curatorship on a platform such as Instagram, for example, is not a matter of immediate physical survival, what then is it that I am constantly going back to see on those accounts?

I will posit here that, through social media, I am witnessing the personal curatorship and consequent digital archives of other black queer women living their ordinary lives. The claiming and detailing of a broad landscape of existences and portrayals by black queer women are, to me, the repository I was both drawing from and arguing for. The second iteration of *I Fuck What I Like*

therefore begins for me the work of speaking to other existing works of art, literature, and performance that portray/explore queer black woman subjectivity to clarify what it is I am selecting and/or refuting in the written and performance archive. From here, I move onward into a better understanding of the roots (routes) of my key framing statement: "black queer womanhood does not equate to trauma narratives".

The time? October 2021 This-is-not-a-drill-the-final-thesis-production-must-be-performed o'clock. Coordinates? Playroom, Hiddingh Campus.

Survival and grief are inextricably characteristic of my experience of the past two years. Inextricably: which is how I am learning to understand the relationship between this Masters, digital media, and social media. The world as I understood it has changed, ordinaries have changed, I have changed and my conception of joy… this remains the same. Joy will always be distinguished by subjective agentic will. What has brought me to this moment is play, it is agentic world-making, and this ability to choose has led me to this choosing for the final iteration of *I Fuck What I Like*:

I choose to complete scripting Echo, Shadow, and Reflection in order to invite them to a playdate. I choose to enter the playroom and play. I choose to reinsert the washing line with colour-coordinated clothing hanging from it in the space. In my mind's eye I imagine that the room will be an all-white exhibition space. In it, I sit with the human, the black, the queer, the woman, and the archive. I willingly exhibit my body, my clothes, my music, the (de)construction of my intimate spaces, my things that Echo, Shadow-things that exist and mean something but never quite give rise to anything definite. This is the life I negotiate, ordinary everyday life, in which my body mediates a spectrum of varying emotions and experiences.

The practice extends beyond the bounds of the playroom, it shows up on social media too. On an Instagram account with the handle,

@strange_queer_other (https://instagram.com/strange_queer_other?utm_medium=copy_link) I imagine that, on this page, the work of curating a digital archive of the process will continue to unfold beyond the final Masters' iteration of *I Fuck What I Like.* That space will be a space on which I choose to turn to non-survival activity and subjective play to evidence life.

6. EPILOGUE

Act ii.

Voice: Shadow

When I meditate on Black Queer Womanhood I panic. I have been deliberating all the ways community has felt more like warring than it has harmony. And how cultural schisms between blackness and queerness and womanhood often feel irreconcilable. I am trying to thread ideals, customs, and heritage to fashion a person, and then a people, and then some land on which to be fruitful and multiply. All before commanding light over water, shaping a dome to separate the water in two, and pooling the water below those domed heavens into an ocean.

I suspect that my disregard for linearity is hereditary. A dis-ease that can(not) be helped. From my grandmother, I have inherited time unaccompanied by order. But, unlike my grandmother, I am not inspired to turn this into a faith in constants and eternities. Instead, it has become in me an anxious memory of the future, an eagerness to predict the past and a present fixation with how volatile Genesis, origins, and roots can be. "Right now," is my preoccupation. And right now, has been a spirited plunge into the seas of identity politics in hopes that it would result in my buoyancy and a suspension of some of my more disagreeable realities. Instead, what I am finding is that this place is its own crisis; and I am too heavy with experience and histories to not feel like I am constantly drowning in the implications of one identity marker, or the other, if not all of them at once.

There is this terror that makes it impossible to be certain that I can spread my limbs and propel myself through public decency, reparenting, making ends meet, and then making enough sense of myself to wittingly refute unwarranted observations and perceptions of self by others. A stagnating horror I fear I may sink in, quite the opposite of how I remember childhood in my grandmother's home. I have grown to ache for those childhood days of collecting words and stacking them one expression at a time to make a universe of my choosing. Days on which etymologies of words, and the epistemology that flowed from words, did not translate into shame. It is a shame. A poor-black-fat-dark-hairless-nailbiting-defeminized-female-tribeless-heretic-queer shame that has left me far from the securities of hoods – as in the blackhoods, queerhoods, and womanhoods of the world. There are seemingly too many immediate, more quantifiable,

complications. Freedoms for black men, heterosexual women, white queers, and the apprehensive middle class that still need the lifeboat.

Survival in this instance has often meant abandon, sometimes demanding that you only angry black woman, sometimes demanding that you only Mbokodo, sometimes demanding that you only live to tell the tales of the trauma and violence you overcame, and then asking that you understand how you are still comparably better off, further from death, closer to the shores of South Africa our Land. So, this body, this struggling body, this body predisposed to struggle, remains secondary in struggle. Its lungs further fill with words, philosophies, and histories which MUST account for all aspects of its existence leaving less room for air, discovery, less of everything, especially joy.

A body meant for drowning even on the days it successfully floats; even on the days when the waves calmly carry this body home it is denied the pleasure of certainty. As if to say: anything that defies struggle narratives and trauma porn is antagonistic to this body's claim to communal identity. There is no space for the inconsequential, the additional, the ordinary, the mundane, no room for interiority, the human amongst the people. Once more we arrive at this: there are people who just do not get to be human, who will never be allowed to determine themselves. Bodies that can only function as placeholders, analogies, and metaphors; people who can be anything but complex individuals making up an intricate community and culture.

Ntokozo and I were talking about the possibility for redress, and he said Sue pointed him in the direction of Strategic Essentialism. I asked Sue about it on WhatsApp and she explained it this way:

> Strategic essentialism is: so you DON'T think identity is reducible to one thing e.g. male, gay, black etc – but rather fluid and performative (as Butler would say). Which means: DON'T be boxed in. BUT (heh! heh!) there are REAL issues to take a stand on e.g. the way that women are discriminated against - or black people. So, that's where you adopt an essentialist position (I'm black, a woman, queer), but it's a strategy i.e., you don't want to be ONLY & forever defined by that. Struggle needs identity politics [...] Biko's BC was a form of strategic essentialism.

To summarise: Not reducible (complex)/fluid (continuous)/don't be boxed in (escape)/performative (mimetic)/BUT stand (pause)/a strategy (plan)/adopt a position (simplify).

A place between the ocean and South Africa our land. As in “struggle needs identity politics”; equally we are more than our struggles and therefore want more than just identity politics. Like a trip to the beach, like how do I answer the yearning to create good art, good self, good others, a good world, good freedom?

An ideal: The place after gender, and race, and how we sex, and after the ideas of self that were constructed without our input or consent. I wonder what will happen when we resign from identifying in order to justify why someone should be afforded the appropriate conditions to live and stay alive in. I wonder: who will we discover when our lives are not being threatened, and what will Queer Black Womanhood at such a juncture, beyond only responding to misogynoir, look like? As a preoccupation with the here and now, the desiring, feeling, eating, needing, laughing, bathing, thinking, hurting, whatevering queer black woman. As she likes it. As she wants. As she wishes it. I am now tempted to say, “Good luck,” pathologize, and adopt cynicism. To point out the errors of idealism and abandon the abovementioned body at “impossible” by way of avoiding disappointment and insignificance. But I will pursue the former curiosity – if only to glimpse at a non-avoidant unashamed self and embrace the fluidity of identity to determine its boundaries too. Like a trip to the beach in South Africa our land. I assume that if we are no longer hypothetical about our freedoms, then we can be more definite about the extent of cruelty we will no longer endure.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper responds to a personal inclination towards complicating and archiving more dynamic queer black woman narratives within the South African performance and literary canon. I posit that queer black women have inherited the burden of being emblematic of abjection which has in turn limited readings of queer black woman bodies to oppression and trauma narratives. Throughout this paper I deliberate cultural representations, academic scholarship, and performance and literary records concerning queer black womanhood. I also consider queer black woman joy as a way into critically reading, responding to in writing, and performing post-apartheid queer black woman identity and desire. Ultimately, I reject the total reduction of queer black woman subjectivity to narratives of victimhood and damage. I propose that in nuancing the details of my subjective experiences of black queer womanhood, I begin the project of decentering trauma narratives by locating alternative and dynamic takes on queer black woman depictions. I turn to the tasks of elevating the ordinary to the space of ritual and back to the ordinary in my writing and performance in search of the omissions in the present archive, and by way of inserting the queer black woman subjectivity I want to archive. My key framing statement is: queer black womanhood is not emblematic of abjection.

Using autoethnography as a methodology, and multivocality, collage, odes and play as my methods, I have been exploring the possibility of scripting and staging interiority. Since the transition from live performance to digital performance due to COVID19 presented a new opportunity to explore multi-modality, what has resulted is an ongoing conversation with digital and social media as mediums for curating performance through the multiple lenses and mediums. I have been thinking and creating from social media platforms in my attempts at scripting the characters Echo, Shadow, Reflection as representative of a class concept. This paper documents how I have investigated the generative collaboration between my chosen mediums of performance and literature as they presented differences and tensions. In my undertaking this performance and research I hope to arrive at an independent performance and literary text titled *I Fuck What I Like*, which exists as an exploration of black queer joy, pleasure, and intimacy.

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appendix i: Beth's character arc

Both season's one and two are sourced from: Impact Videos Available:

https://impactvideo.co.za/shop/society/ [2021, September 10].

1. Beth – a teacher at a private girl's school is in a loving relationship and can afford that beautiful house and luxury car. This subscribes to society's expectation of the economically empowered black woman. The only discrepancy is the fact that she is lesbian.
2. Beth the in love lesbian
3. Beth and Thuli gets an unexpected visitor.
4. Beth challenges her family to accept her relationship with Thuli but it turns out to be easier said than done.
5. Beth makes a big deal of meeting Thuli's parents.
6. Beth takes part in her first Pride and the Society supports her
7. Beth's participation in Pride has serious consequences for her.
8. Thuli tries to get Beth her job back.
9. Beth gets a settlement offer from her school
10. Beth experiences a lot of pressure back at work
11. Thuli breaks some bad news to Beth
12. Beth starts her new life as a single woman
13. Beth finds the courage to finally bid her students good bye and to also put herself out as an ,out of the closet, single and ready to mingle,.
14. Beth is woken by the news that Thuli has been hurt.
15. Beth continues to nurse a bruised Thuli at home.
16. Beth decides to help Thuli regarding the police and their handling of the assault case.
17. Beth continues her makeover
18. A traumatised Thuli and Beth try to comfort each other after Beth is a victim of a smash and grab
19. Beth finds herself a new hobby
20. Things between Thuli and Beth seem to improve although Thuli is unaware of Beth's quest to seek justice for her.
21. Beth puts her self-defense skills into practice when she feels the need to defend herself against Ayanda's constant mocking and insults during soccer practice.
22. . Beth's anger still has not settled and she lets her family bear the brunt of it.
23. Beth's coaching position has been preserved while she was on leave.
24. Beth tries to find out where Thuli went but it turns out that Thuli does not want to be found, especially not by Beth.
25. Beth receives an unexpected call from Thuli who asks for them to meet.