

**Umthonyama**  
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LLLLUN001

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## **PLAGIARISM DECLARATION**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction...	1
Performance Space and ‘Processionalality’...	3
Orientating the Audience .....	5
The Space and its Story...	7
Medium and Eventhood...	14
Umthonyama and Umthonyama .....	16
Processionalality and Dialogism .....	19
Conclusion...	23
Reference List .....	25

## INTRODUCTION

The project is a continuation of a lifetime interest, and at once presenting my own rationalisations, both verbal and non-verbal, as the object of knowledge. Representing aesthetic thought and practice to a Faculty Committee presents certain challenges. Under the supervision of Mbongeni Mtshali, as well as several other members of staff at the Centre for Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies, and the aid of a collaborator and dear friend, Lukhanyiso Skosana, it is clear that there is merit to tying African religiosity, music, and performance together, while aiming for an approximation of personally resonant truths. This dissertation represents a commitment to further explorations of the ideas and conclusions that the work itself brought about, and an expansion of a necessary aesthetic self-reflexivity.

The study presented here follows a fluid stylistic outline in order to ensure both that the most important theoretical underpinnings and artistic choices are included in the paper, while allowing for shifts in the focus of the performance, based on an evolving understanding of this research and my changing perspective as an artist. The medium project is a component of the curriculum that enables students to investigate theoretical and practical impulses through performance. It serves as an arena for rehearsing what one's final project *may* look like. My medium project is entitled *Umthonyama* and is a cyclical installation in which two performers, who are adorned in white overalls, become progressively dirtier (they are eventually completely covered in *imbola*, or red clay, as they perform what seems to be a theatrical sermon. The performance is underscored by the music of Camagwini, Thandiswa Mazwai, Buhlebendalo, and DJ Obza, all of which can be classified as popular music strongly influenced by the religious practices of the amaXhosa.

The performance displays (in a manner which feels reminiscent of the museum / gallery space) the bodies of black people, which have been historically discriminated against and objectified, but are now freed in a manner that is empowering and that interrogates the politics of display. The potency of this choice comes from the manner in which queer people have been, and in many instances continue to be, rendered invisible. The reasoning for this is twofold, where firstly, the oppressive hyper visibility of heteronormativity, and secondly, the correlation between queer visibility and safety. Hate crimes against the queer community are rampant, and presenting as queer, or being openly queer, may increase one's likelihood of falling victim to unjust discrimination.

Objectification in this performance is therefore explored as it relates to race and queerness. The homily of *Umthonyama* is a discursive reflection on the evolving identity of the amaXhosa people, particularly as this relates to our music and religious practices. The many facets of this communal identity are explored to varying degrees through the isiXhosa text, *Umthonyama* by

Nokuzola Mndende, isiXhosa popular music, and amaXhosa performers, that centralises relationality.

The installation of the work acts as a means of practically employing, and exploring, José Esteban Muñoz's theorisation of 'disidentification'. The concept of 'disidentification' grapples with how identities are formed and upheld, emphasising the task of walking a fine line between what identity might be – as supported by ideology and performativity – and what it might not be (Muñoz, 1999: 31). The seminal essay, *Art as Technique*, describes Viktor Shklyovsky's concept of 'defamiliarisation', which is another conceptual tool that this research project utilises. Shklyovsky defines 'defamiliarisation' as 'making strange' that which is routine and conventional, and thereby increasing and extending perception and critical attention, which in this case, relates to audiences (Shklyovsky, 1917: 162). It is important to note that the objective of the final iteration of Umthonyama is not to merely reproduce it, as it was presented in the medium project. It is rather, self-recursively, to explore what has influenced me in the making of the medium project, and in doing so, being able to analyse my own artistic processes and understandings of the world. The medium project also functions as a source of experience from which I am able to garner what has proved to be successful, and to discard what becomes irrelevant. Simply put, this study builds on and incorporating the discoveries made in the medium project stage of the research, towards overall personal artistic and intellectual development.

## PERFORMANCE SPACE AND 'PROCESSIONALITY'

One of the more salient developments that proved fruitful is the choice of performance space itself. *Umthonyama* is engaged in a postmodern ontological destabilisation of the notion of performance space, viz. the spatial reconfiguration of the normative mode of being of performance.

The medium project took place in a small dressing room in Hiddingh Campus' New Building. This choice of location was influenced by one of our performances entitled, *Ubumnyama Bungasiginyi*, which was created with my artistic collaborator, and co-performer, Lukhanyiso Skosana. We described the performance as a collage of "screaming, shouting, singing, kissing, dancing, sitting, crying through the unspeakability of violence against the LGBTQI+ community and therefore reclaiming voices that have been rendered invalid and absent". This performance has haunted both of us, as a spectre of definitive meaning in our separate artistic careers, as well as in our joint ventures.

*Ubumnyama Bungasiginyi* grapples with similar themes, and like *Umthonyama*, the structure was processional in nature. It did however, it must be said, take place in a much larger dressing room in the same building. We felt that this space was an appropriate choice for *Ubumnyama Bungasiginyi* as it gave the audience a sense of intimacy and proximity. Intimacy, and the interrogation of intimacy, was a theme in which we were heavily invested. Dressing rooms, which have been inhabited by numerous casts of actors as well as dancers, are naturally imbued with the atmosphere of preparation which precedes a performance, and the decompression that performers may require, which succeeds them. The dressing room is the performers' sanctuary, a space where people prepare themselves both mentally and emotionally, gathering their thoughts as they prepare to re-enter life outside of the theatre, or the "real world". We were specifically inspired by the realisation that all spaces determined as 'private' or 'intimate' can also be used as sites for liberatory expression. Sites of privacy and intimacy, to be clear, have the potential to become liberating when they are, as frames of human experience, filled with content that departs from the habitualised norms and expectations of social reality.

An issue with the chosen space was, however, a limited audience capacity. The idea of 'processions' then came into play, as a means of ensuring a large audience, which we were anticipating, would all be able to view the performance. What we did not realise is that, what I will

describe as 'processionality,' would not only feed into the performance, but become a central aspect. The procession served to animate, intensify, and complicate the space in unexpected ways, where each iteration brought new ideas to the fore. The energy of the group dynamics of the differing processions – which is undoubtedly an important factor in all performance – created a feeling of instability and unpredictability. Certain audiences were highly vocal and energised, while others were still and silent, but all of them created a sense of self-determining dynamism. Some audience members were a part of numerous interactions, while others would only participate once. By the end of the three-hour performance, we were left with only one audience member. This ultimately 'private show' in *Ubumnyama Bungasiginyi* itself led to an unexpected intimacy.

In post-conceptualisation of *Umthonyama*, I wanted to continue exploring the idea of 'processionality' and to further understand the differing senses of intimacy created by the spatial dimension of the performance. What I did was to make use of a smaller dressing room, in order to maximise the sense of proximity, introduce juxtaposition, and further re-orient the ontology of the experience by placing the audience outside of, and above, the performance. I constructed a scaffold out of wooden rostra, which the audience would then need to climb in order to view the performance through a windowpane. The audience members would therefore have to physically negotiate their way up in order to get to the window. I imagined physical exertion as a symbol of commitment on the part of the spectator. In doing this they were, knowingly or unknowingly, declaring their participation in the performance, rather than expecting to slip into the more common role of passive observer.



Figure 1. Photographs from the installation *Umthonyama*.



## ORIENTATING THE AUDIENCE

The audience being physically close to the performers, and yet unable to engage with them directly and enter full participation, was both provocative and destabilising. The glass of the window, highlighting the membrane between the respective worlds of performance and spectator, acted as a constant reminder of this separation. My further hope was that it would create a sense of vulnerability for performers, as they would constantly be made aware of being watched. There are moments when performers engage directly with the audience through the glass, by making eye contact and gesturing towards them, thereby alerting the audience to their own presence in the space. However, as the glass becomes progressively dirtier, representative of *imbola* in its various states, and condensation gathers on the windowpane, it becomes more and more difficult for the audience to make out what exactly is taking place behind it. The audience is, by this means, made aware of the physical limitations, as well as the limitations and erasure of their own sense of perception.

In conceptualising the piece, I had set out to highlight the unacknowledged power struggle between the performers and the audience. I set out to create a space where the audience felt simultaneously involved with, but alienated from, the performers, by them being above. This conveys their situational, physical command over the performance itself. Nevertheless, as the view of the audience into the performance becomes more and more opaque, there is an inevitable sense of marginalisation and powerlessness. And all the while, the audience is made acutely aware of the voyeuristic and diminishing nature of how their voyeuristic spectatorship of the work does violence to the performers in the very act of consuming it.

The dynamic was influenced by that of gallery goers viewing an artwork, and more problematically, the method of 19th and 20th century ethnological expositions. My intention was to activate a reversal of these modes of experience. The audience is, therefore, placed in the position of spectator, though with this experience ‘defamiliarised’ to them, while the performers are in the position of what I codify here as the ‘subject-object’. The merger of subject-object is what I have elsewhere explained as the reference in the context of performance theory, to the non-Cartesian blurring of the dualistic distinction between subjects and objects, presented for display. My own method is therefore to generate a synthesis of the gallery and ethnographic mode of experiencing.

The piece draws specifically on the highly racialised nature of human zoos. However, unlike the human zoo, *Umthonyama* not only anticipates a racially mixed audience, but acknowledges it as

an Black, isiXhosa speaking audience too. This is in contrast to ethnological expositions which put black and brown people on display for the spectatorship of white, ‘Western’ audiences. The work draws upon my personal experiences within South African society, which often attempts to delimit human experience, based either on gender, sexuality, socio-economic standing, racial and ethnic markers, or other factors of identity. This performance deliberately does not allow for easy categorisation, where I wanted to challenge notions of who is, or isn’t, human, or more pointedly, who is more human, and which “animals are more equal than others” (Orwell, 1993: 88). In this regard, the theorisation of ‘disidentification’ of José Esteban Muñoz is an apt tool for both performance practice and theorisation. Muñoz describes ‘disidentification’ as being, “about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning” (1999: 31). Through ‘disidentification’ the performance functions as a site of destabilisation – that is – something that is not necessarily negative, but which potentially has the power to disrupt one’s fundamental understanding of the world. In the context of this performance, I am particularly invested in the idea of ‘disidentification’ as it relates to blackness, queerness, religious practices, and identity more broadly.

## THE SPACE AND ITS STORY

Bearing the idea of 'disidentification' in mind, this section discusses performance space. The space in which someone is situated as an observer necessarily exerts a certain power over you. It delineates or determines the manner in which you are to view and engage with a performance. German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, on the ontological nature of being, emphasises the existence of space, and how spaces shape our understanding of ourselves. In *Being and Time*, he states that, "Only in the opened space of a house does man first come to exist. In the house he opens himself up to what is outside" (2008: 92). Heidegger here provides a means by which to think ourselves into the idea of 'disidentification' in its ontological sense.

A space also carries with it a particular history. Although site-specific theatre has its own lineage, which foregrounds the 'energy,' so to speak, of a space as a fundamental element of a performance, performance art has its own relationship between spaces and their 'story'. The Russian performance art group, Pussy Riot's performance, entitled *Punk Prayer* is a pertinent example of this. "Punk Prayer" was staged in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, an iconic site of Russian state religiosity. The following chorale-like passage is the opening verse of the "Punk Prayer" and which gives a good example of the practice of ontological 'disidentification' of the performance space:

### *Punk Prayer*

translation by Carol Rumens

*Virgin Mary, Mother of God, banish Putin, banish Putin, Virgin Mary, Mother of God, banish him, we pray thee! Congregations genuflect,*

*Black robes brag gilt epaulettes, Freedom's phantom's gone to heaven, Gay*

*Pride's chained and in detention.*

*KGB's chief saint descends*

*To guide the punks to prison vans.*

*Don't upset His Saintship, ladies,*

*Stick to making love and babies.*

*Crap, crap, this godliness crap!*

*Crap, crap, this holiness crap!*

(Harding, 2012)

“Punk Prayer” is a political act of defiance against the Russian Orthodox Church and its continued support of Vladimir Putin’s inhumane regime. Punk Prayer was staged in a space that had significant historical and religious significance in Russian society namely Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. The narrative of the space, and the proceedings which take place in it, create its energy of religious sacredness. In this way, the space acts as a fundamental element of the performance itself and in turn, creates an environment conducive to the efficacy of *Punk Prayer* as a meaningful political intervention. Had the performance taken place in a gallery, or a theatre, it would have lost a great deal of its significance.

In a similar vein, Athi-Patra Ruga's *Things We lost in the Rainbow* (2018) disrupts, at a certain level, what Heidegger refers to as the "horizon of being" (2008: 362). *Things We Lost in the Rainbow* is a procession through the inner city of Cape Town, which challenges the oppressive ideologies that pervade South Africa. *Things we lost in the Rainbow* has particular resonances with race and queerness. Through the course of the piece, Ruga critiques colonial discourses, while simultaneously embracing contemporary queer aesthetics. Along with 34 other performers, Ruga spends the night 'queering' the city. This is achieved through a number of public interventions, including ballroom dance, song, the scaling of statues of prominent colonial figures or what Ruga refers to as "genocidal maniacs" (Hendricks, 2018). Despite its weighty subject matter, the work radiates a carnivalesque collectivising spirit.



Figure 2. Photographs from *Things We lost in the Rainbow* (Hendricks, 2018).

The procession concludes with the performers scaling the facade of Universal Church of the Kingdom of God on Buitekant Street. This massive religious structure invokes the Church's complicated relationship with colonialism, not to mention its role in creating a “homophobia-riddled society” (Resane, 2020: 1). Faced with the futility of eradicating anti-queer sentiments from the Church, Ruga chooses to break through the ideological barrier of the church by 'queering' it in itself. Ruga uses the architecture of the Church to critique it, therefore creating ontological destabilisation of its structural dimension. The church building of The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God is then made transmutable and becomes, albeit momentarily, a space for queer expression.

When selecting a venue, I try to keep the 'story of the space' in mind. I look for venues that will inspire me artistically, but also bring their own ‘unspoken, though experienced’ contexts to the performance. This was a difficult decision to make with *Umthonyama*, and the use of Dressing Room 3 – which had a number of advantages in terms of conceptualisation and productive creation.

My sense is that there is no ideal venue for the final iteration of *Umthonyama*, especially due to the fact that the performance needs to be recorded. Attempting to record the piece in Dressing Room 3 would be potentially disastrous, in practical terms. Firstly, *Umthonyama* is exceedingly dirty, (due to the use of a large quantity of imbola (red clay), which means any filming equipment placed in the room runs the risk of being permanently damaged. And secondly, there is precious little space on the rostra from which the performance is viewed. Between the spatial and technical impracticalities, especially due to the necessity of having a live audience, it simply is not tenable and would severely diminish the art of *Umthonyama*.



Figure 3. The entrance to Dressing Room 3.

After much deliberation, I began scouting Hiddingh Campus for a new space. A walk through the campus allowed me to get a better sense of all the possible spaces available there. Rather than merely assessing each venue's suitability for “Umthonyama,” I committed to an exercise of deep listening. I allowed myself to be phenomenologically receptive to what each space may be conveying. The first space that felt meaningful was the Rosedale Quad. This building is shared by the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance studies, the English Language Centre, as well as the Michaelis School of Fine Art. I was instantaneously struck by the multiplicity of possible perspectives present in the building. The array of doors and windows across a number of levels, and which seemed to symbolise different orientations, to the space, and to the world. It was clear that this space was persuading me to see how differences of perspective, hold a bearing on perceived reality.



Figure 4. The Rosedale Quad.

The security now in place on Hiddingh Campus is a manner of panopticon, after Foucault. Foucault used the panopticon as a way to illustrate how, through surveillance, a society subjugates its citizens. He develops the idea from a prison, built in a structure similar to that of an amphitheatre, with a central tower in the middle. While the tower is visible from the outside, it is impossible to see into it. The purpose of this is to ensure that prisoners are always aware of the fact of their own surveillance (Foucault, 1995: 173). They are also always in view of one another. One of the consequences of this design is that the prisoners “self-surveil”.

It struck me that when watching *Umthonyama* from the different windows and doors, the spectators would constantly be in view of each other. Foucault contents that: "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power" (202: 1995). Where the medium project was centred on the quasi- surveillance of the performing subject-object, this space seems to call for an exploration of the surveillance and subjugation of self, as well as the monitoring of other citizens (which may crossover to other audience members in the moment of performance). When leaving the space on Hiddingh that I had identified as a site, I was left with one question, namely to what extent does one's anticipation of the reception of other audience members shape one's internal world?

Another space that I explored was a trench outside of the Rosedale Building, as depicted in the images below. This space felt ominous and frightening, which was accentuated by the wet and dreary weather of the day of my campus exploration. The trench is deep and dark, with small and still puddles of murky water at the bottom, and leaves and litter had also gathered there. The trench has two large black metal gates, which add to the striking nature of its topographical sense-impression, and is set off by beige gutters along the tiled brown stoned wall, reminiscent of a Mediaeval castle. There are also three windows which run above the middle of the trench and are prominent from the audience's perspective. To my surprise, there were also plants growing along the floor and up the walls surrounding the trench. Although the space offers various natural opportunities for experimentation, I was especially taken by the menacing energy of the space, that triggered the desire for escape. The trench setting was determined not to be a conducive venue for the final project.

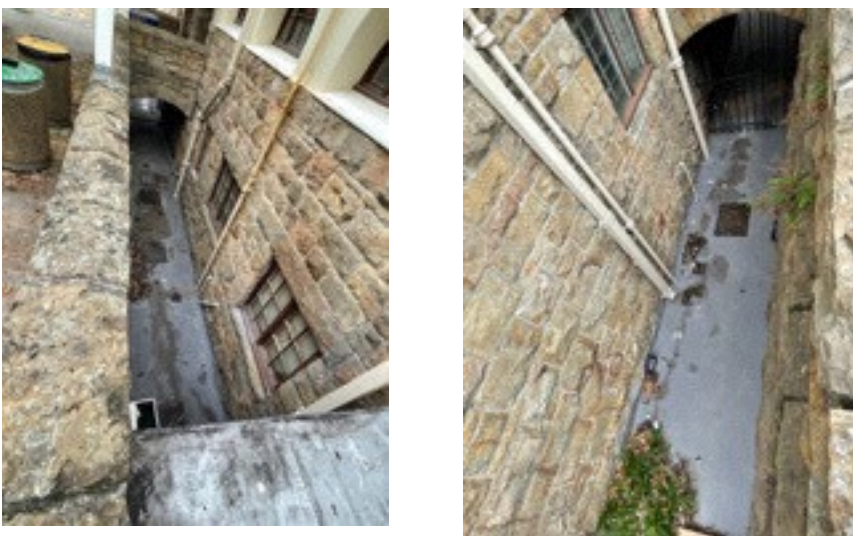


Figure 5. The trenches outside of the Rosedale Building



The final meaningful site, ironically, was situated just a few metres from Dressing Room 3. The space is a shaft situated between the entrance of the New Building and the staircase leading to the lavatories and dressing rooms. The gap, in architectural terms, seems vestigial. After discussing the matter with other members of the university community, it was brought to my attention, that the site had been where an elevator was intended, but for whatever reason, was never built. The idea of placing *Umthonyama* in a space which was both loaded with the potential of movement and convenience, as well as the disappointment of that which was never, or has not yet, materialised, appealed to me. During my medium project, I draped the space in white plastic. Not only did this feed into my artistic vision, but it also simultaneously acted as a simple and effective way of preparing the space for the purposes of art making, as well as a way in which to ensure that no accidental damage was done to the space. I immediately imagined a sheet of perspex placed on the bannisters, allowing for the themes of opacity and transparency to be invoked by the work. I quickly came to the realisation that it would be possible to film the piece while the spectators engaged with it. Although, as I've noted, filming does detract from and can hamper the organic ephemerality of artistic performance, I accept that we need to archive and preserve the artwork, as part of our shared creative history as South Africans. I left the space with a sense of reinvigoration and certainty that this would be a suitable space for the final project.



Figure 6. The elevator shaft in the New Building.



Unfortunately, my request was denied. After a seven-year delay, the elevator was finally being installed, making the space unavailable. I had a number of discussions with my supervisor, and we eventually decided to make use of the fire exit of the very same building. The principle of using the fire exit appeals to me, due to the fact that it is generally kept clear of obstructions. It is my intention that locating the performance in an emergency exit, a space which ought to be kept clear, adds a sense of transgression and urgency to the subject matter.

The architecture of the building is configured in such a way that the space is tucked into the building, facing outwards. One of the most enticing aspects of the space is that the audience can see into the Company Gardens. They can see the Iziko South African Museum and Planetarium, a large industrial building adjacent to the space, they can also see the greenery of the area surrounding the emergency exit. This juxtaposition of internal/external spaces and natural/constructed ones, creates a strong sense of tension. In placing the performance in a space of this nature, I emphasise the tensions present in fostering identity and the importance of 'disidentification' and 'defamiliarisation'. Both theories privilege a multiplicity of perspective, rather than singularity of perspective, a post-modern trope, and this is fundamental to my practice. Ultimately, what makes this particular space ideal, is its formulation. It is the formulation of both the performance and the space that shapes the audience's perception of the work.

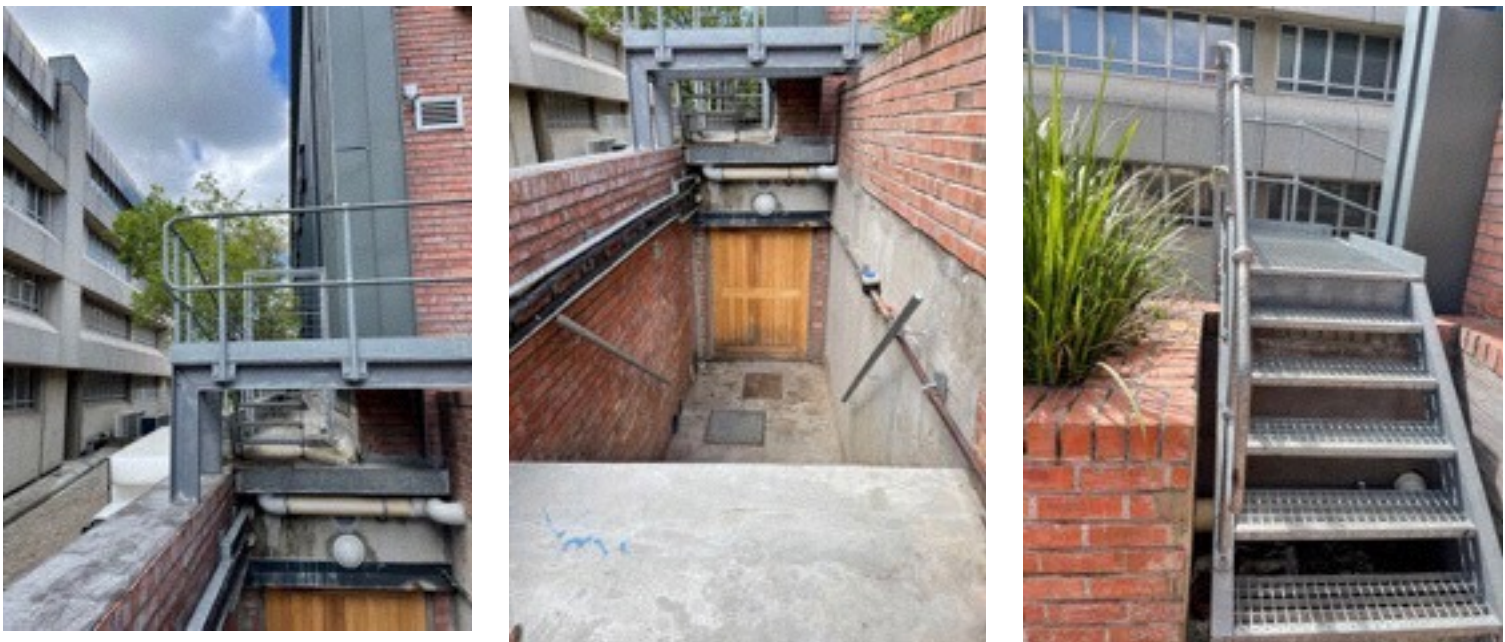


Figure 7. The emergency exit where “Umthonyama” will be performed.

## MEDIUM AND EVENTHOOD

Umthonyama was created with the express and critical intention of it being presented to, and securing the participation of, a live audience. Due to COVID-related safety concerns, I was ultimately not permitted to invite a live audience. The medium project was therefore presented as a short film, intended to be viewed at each audience member's discretion. The concepts of thereness and eventhood, which performance researcher Andrew Quick describes as: "being there before, with, and around us, in a particular space at a particular time" (93: 2012), unfortunately were not able to be activated when capitulating to filmic space and time, and I feel this has led to a disjointed performance. Our physical space is now that of the vast online world and our time is dictated by when each audience member chooses to view the performance. The ontological aspects of participation, the tactility of a defamiliarised space, and looking to activate disidentification of the spaces of the world are aspects I feel are highly diminished.

Once recorded, performances are distributed, and they become fixed and permanent records, always ready to be re-experienced. In contrast, live performance is fleeting, exists in the moment, and can never truly be replicated, even as the memory for audience members, becoming faded over time. Quick argues that: "Something in and about the encounter with liveness returns us to the unplanned and directionless condition of experience itself" (99: 2012). Manipulating what was intended to be a live installation into a filmed one initially seemed daunting, but the approach has allowed for an interesting process of deconstruction and reassembly to occur.

In performing *Umthonyama* in Dressing Room 3, with no live audience present, I realised that my fellow performer, Lukhanyiso Skosana, became both my collaborator and *my* audience. It was as if our energies were being jointly channelled into one another. In this way, we took on both the role of performer and spectator.

Once the recording began, we stopped seeing the camera as a cold and distant piece of machinery, and rather, saw it as the portal through which our audience was in fact in some sense present with us. Instead of performing for a camera, we began to realise our '(un)present' audience, negotiated in a different way than we had originally anticipated. I understood that what we were experiencing would be completely different to what the audience would go on to experience, which made the creation of this performance medium one filled with other possibilities. The gap between what only our camera operator saw, and what the audience would see, was vast, and there are a few aspects of these differences that are important to address.

The first is sound: our voices translated well onto film. Although one might have trouble hearing the more subtle elements of the vocal deliveries, they were well-conveyed. The other sonic element of *Umthonyama* is a pre-recorded soundtrack, which underscores the entire piece. The soundtrack features Buhlebendalo's *Mdali*, Cama Gwini's *Uphind' Ubuye*, DJ Obza's *Dlozi Lam*, as well as a recording of Thandiswa Mazwai performing *Thongo Lam (Iyeza)*, interlinked by percussive music. This soundtrack was almost completely omitted from the recording of the performance, because the sound levels were carefully selected and originally appropriate for the live installation. They do not, however, translate well on film. Unfortunately, many of the nuances in the music were lost, and at times, the music underscoring the performance is almost impossible to make out. This is made all the more disconcerting by the fact that the music is a central part of the research. The aural landscape of the work informs every aspect of the performance. The progression of *Umthonyama* is dictated almost entirely by the progression of the music, and the failure of the technology to replicate the sonic landscape of the performance is somewhat unfortunate. I hope to use this as an opportunity to try to understand the ways in which technology shapes the experience of a performance, and how that experience informs the way in which the work is perceived, as well as performed. Moving from one medium to another certainly changes the rules of engagement. It is my hope that, by failing to replicate the live soundscape, audiences will have developed a sense of curiosity, and may find enjoyment in mitigating between the performance they observed on their screens, and that which they will experience live. Above all else, I am grateful for the opportunity for audience members who have viewed *Umthonyama* to finally *experience* the work, in the medium for which it was intended, and without the constraints of technology.

In transposing and reworking the medium project, I wanted to elevate the aspects of the performance that I believed were worth exploring. A particular focus of the final integration of *Umthonyama* is to continue placing emphasis on the tensions present in the religious practices zakwaXhosa. Just as I am invested in the liveness of performance, I also chose to focus on the 'liveness' of identity. Identity is live in the sense that it is always being constituted by, among other factors, context, place, and time. In doing so, I hoped to demonstrate the ways in which my work as an artist engages critically with the relationship between the process of fostering identity, and that of enforcing, or railing against arriving at a prescriptive form of identity. Throughout the course of the work, I have been forced to confront and reflect on what I feel is important about performing my religious identity, as presented within this research. Furthermore, I have tasked

myself with the responsibility of navigating the contradictions of religious identity. The space between Christianity and the religious practices zakwaXhosa is a challenging space to navigate. It is a space filled with turmoil, contradiction, and sometimes even violence. This polarity makes it challenging for one to perform and produce black queer identity.

It is critically and theoretically important to explicate and interpret how my artistic and practical methods relate to the research question. The songs that I incorporated into the performances lie at the heart of this project. Of all the themes I chose to explore, more often than not, the visual components of my performance and the vocal and movement vocabulary that Lukhanyiso Skosana and I developed over the course of the piece, all have their roots in music. I have taken up music as a method of associative inquiry, and paired it with the broader academic literature, to create a rich variety of theoretical and sensorial knowledge. While writing, conceptualising, and working on the performance with Skosana, I always go back to the music, constantly examining the emotional content that each song holds, as well as the social and cultural context in which it was originally written and performed. Put differently, I use music as an entry point into a conversation with others, about the ways in which I understand my own relationship to performance, religion, and identity.

## UMTHONYAMA AND UMTHONYAMA

The title of this dissertation *Umthonyama* refers to a book of the same name by Nokuzola Mndende that is a manifesto written in isiXhosa, and interspersed with passages of poetry. At the end of my reading of Mndende's remarkable book, I realised that the consanguinity, or relation, to my own research was undeniable. Although the work lambasts the postcolonial presence of Christianity in contemporary black South African society, it also concerns the topic of African religiosity in a passionate, insightful, and provocative way. Although Dr. Mndende is a professor, and is committed to scholarly research and academia, she is also an initiated sangoma (traditional healer), and the manner in which she writes prioritises flair and artistry, qualities that a distinctly decolonial practice of knowledge production exemplifies.

Mndende's vast knowledge of the religious practices of the amaXhosa, and her commitment to preserving this body of religious practice, while at the same time using her platform to question and critique antiquated colonial power structures, religious suppression and white supremacy, are compelling and inspiring.

However, Mndende's contribution does not come without tension. One of the members of the teaching staff was surprised, dare I say mortified, that I placed Mndende at the centre of my research project. She shared an anecdote, in which she recounted an incident in which Mndende had expressed queerphobic remarks, while attending one of her lectures. The lecturer was puzzled as to why I would place such a figure in the midst of a research project which is vehemently committed to questions around queer identity. The question posed is valid, and one that therefore needed to be both investigated and addressed and I do so below.

Another similar instance is Mndende's television interview on the SABC television programme *Let's Have it Out*. In this interview, she seems to me to be agitated by a conflict between generations (namely young and old) about issues of gender and sexuality. In the interview, she takes issue with the young LGBTQI+ community, and the manner in which we “impose” our ways of being upon older traditional members of amaXhosa communities. It is clear to me that we are entering into dangerous territory here. Mndende's issues are twofold: the first is tone policing. Angelique M. Davis and Rose Ernst contend in their article entitled, *Racial gaslighting* that, "Through focusing on the manner in which the message is delivered, no matter the legitimacy of the content, tone policing prioritises the comfort of the privileged (Hugs 2015) and minimizes marginalized peoples' experiences [...]" [all sic] (2017: 763).

Mndende apportioned blame to the LGBTQI+ community for the sometimes dismissive and harmful treatment that we experience, in this instance, from older members of our communities. She attempts to legitimise the normative values of existing age-based hierarchies within our communities by suggesting that the older generations of the community ought to be respected and protected, even if it is to the detriment of the younger members of the community. Secondly, Mndende insists that the LGBTQI+ community would cause a great deal of confusion for her day-to-day life. She states that she operates with the notion that her eldest son will take the lead in their religious family. She feels that the LGBTQI+ community is in some way committed to supplanting the role of the first-born male child in the homes of amaXhosa. She noted that it makes her uncomfortable to believe that there may be an acceptable alternative path, or a plethora of them, which are different to the one that has been prescribed for the first-born male. This again speaks to the way in which the perceived subversive nature of LGBTQI+ values and identities, are unnecessarily placed, at odds with the religious expectations of amaXhosa communities.

Religious practices are deeply personal, and even when comparing heteronormative amaXhosa households, there are discrepancies and liberties that individual families take. Some families who incorporate animal slaughter in their religious practices may prefer goats, others may prefer sheep. Some families may lead their practices themselves, while others may seek guidance from a sangoma. Some families perform a ritual called *imbeleko*, which serves as an official introduction of a child to the ancestors of the family, when the child is young, while others choose to wait until the child is older and therefore understands the significance of the ritual. To sum up, the specificities of religious practices vary, and although they are guided by a communal understanding of religiosity, the intricacies are animated by the choices of families, and not by external parties, especially not, for some, the “imposition” that the LGBTQI+ community represents. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the belief systems of many people in our community are indeed not monolithic, as Mndende suggests them to be.

Mndende raises a number of important questions relevant to the debates surrounding gender and sexuality in South Africa today. One of the central tenets of her argument, is that LGBTQI+ people bring with them an entire new set of beliefs and values about gender and sexuality. Beliefs and values which cannot be reconciled with the established norms. While Mndende's work as a researcher is invaluable, I now understand, and to a certain extent agree with the concerns expressed surrounding Mndende's work, and the way in which I draw upon them in my own research. For me, what appears to be a conflict of interest is really a means of mitigating and exploring the complexities of identity. Our identity as amaXhosa is complex, and there are a number of tensions which arise, and will continue to. Rather than trying to iron differences out, I believe in trying to understand them, and to find productive ways to deal with them. Instead of denouncing Mndende as a

homophobe, and rejecting her work from my study, I decided to embrace it, and use the conflict it creates, to further the research. In this way, we can use the controversy surrounding her personage to open up important discussions about identity and the ways in which communities negotiate their own perceptions of religion, gender, and sexuality. I do this through sonic, gestural, and textual performative queer engagement with the traditions and other codes that signify Xhosa belonging.

## PROCESSIONALITY AND DIALOGISM

'Processionalality' is a concept crucial to *Umthonyama*, one which helps us to understand the critical impulses I am exploring that refer to the ways in which the performance is structured and negotiated through repetition. Specifically, through repetition, which takes up the religious nature of the homily, the procession is constantly bringing recursive awareness to its invocation of the practices of charismatic Christian churches. Church sermons, in themselves, are highly performative and involve a variety of processes, such as narration and rhetoric, and through which the church attempts to create and maintain a unified collective belief system, as well as the governing of the behaviours of its members. As the sound of fervent words fill the air, and the congregants sway back and forth to the rhythm of the pastors' voice, they are overcome by a powerful current of ecstasy moving through them. Sermons are punctuated with grunts, exclamations of "Amen!", arms raised to the heavens, fainting, talking in tongues, stomps on the floor, and so forth. All of which culminate in a euphoric outpouring of emotions and energy, often resulting in tears and orgasmic bodily reactions among the congregation. These joyous and highly charged rituals create a sense of interconnectedness and community between congregants.

I describe the feeling created by Christian sermons as a cathartic rush of emotion; an energy that flows through the congregation, as a sermon builds momentum. Ironically, in this moment, the church becomes filled with erotic vitality. It is charged with an overwhelming feeling of vulnerability, receptiveness, and presence, that is often mirrored in the climax of an exceptional sexual experience. In thinking about my final project, I ruminate on the similarities between Vito Acconci's seminal performance, *Seedbed* and the elements of a church sermon. The thematic similarities depict elements of performance, which come to the fore in the church service. *Seedbed* is a performance that takes place in a wedge-shaped ramp, which slopes up from the floor, to cover an entire gallery. Within this wedge, Acconci spent two afternoons a week "sowing his seed," or masturbating.

A section from a transcription of the performance reads:

*I can go on as I think of you, you can reinforce my excitement, serve as my medium (the seed planted on the floor is a joint result of my presence and yours). You can listen to me; I want you to stay here; you can walk around me; walk past me; come back; sit here; lie close to me; walk with me again (Moma, 2022).*



In essence, Acconci invites the audience to participate in his sexual fantasy; to engage in the performance with him, by walking beside or behind him at various times throughout. His sexual encounter becomes an interactive one and the participants become stimulus. What both Acconci's performative sexual actions, and the delivery methods of the church sermon have in common, is the desire for connection and communion between the performer and the audience. Both of these experiences necessitate participation on the part of the audience and so as to achieve a sense of intimacy between the performers and the spectators. I am less interested in the overtly sexual aspects of *Seedbed*, and more interested in the way in which it draws attention to its spectators, as an integral part of the performance. The church sermon on the other hand, is just as overt in its desire to draw the audience into the service through the spoken words and gestures of the preacher. Similarly, the preacher is engaged in a deeply personal act, connecting to his creator, God. The preacher requires the audience in order to constitute this performance as a church service. Though the two acts differ in the extreme in terms of their content, they both strive for the same goal, namely to create an environment in which the relationship between performer and audience can thrive. In both instances, a 'dialogical' relationship between performer and spectator can be observed.

By engaging the audience in a dialogic relationship, the performance is able to evolve and grow beyond its original conception. Theorist Mikael Bakhtin, uses the concept of 'dialogism' in relation to discourse and the carnivalesque, and though his theorisation is centred on the novel, his concepts are certainly applicable to the communicative aspects of performance. Between individuals, through jointly coordinated social communication, expression and signs arise, whereby through speech, meanings gain dialogic structure (Clegg & Salgado, 2011: 225). The act of meaning making, within this structure, is at the heart of dialogism.

The thematic content of any artwork is reinforced by the inclusion of the audience to a creative process. As this process continues, the work becomes a dialogic relationship between artist and audience, where both parties feed off of each other's energy and ideas, and thereby create dialogic uniqueness, and in the case of a live performance, something ephemeral. Acconci states and displays the following principles in *Seedbed*:

1. The room is activated by my presence underground, underfoot—by my movement from point to point under the ramp.
2. The goal of my activity is the production of seed—the scattering of seed throughout the underground area. (My aim is to concentrate on my goal, to be totally enclosed within my goal.)
3. The means to this goal is private sexual activity. (My attempt is to

maintain the activity throughout the day, so that a maximum of seed is produced; my aim is to have constant contact with my body so that a maximum of seed is produced; my aim is to have constant contact with my body so that an effect from my body is carried outside.)

4. My aids are the visitors to the gallery—in my seclusion, I can have private images of them, talk to myself about them: my fantasies about them can excite me, enthuse me to sustain—to resume—my private sexual activity. (The seed “planted” on the floor, then, is a joint result of my performance and theirs) (Artforum, 2022).

I embrace these principles in *Umthonyama*. The first is centred on Acconci’s activation of the space through his bodily movements, within the confined space of the ramp. As I decide on a performance space for my final project, I insist on one which brings with it a sense of confinement. I have opted for an emergency exit and a small stairwell. Without this imposed limitation, the themes of intimacy, gaze, and surveillance, may not read clearly within the context of my practice. This is not to say that I am shackled, or confined, to this space, but rather that I am using this restriction to heighten my experience of its limits. Another aspect of this first principle, is movement. *Umthonyama* uses gesture as a primary meaning making device. Gesture often becomes a starting point for the formation of ideas in my practice. It is a tool which Lukhanyiso Skosana and I use to communicate with one another, and subsequently with the audience. Through gesture, we attempt to give form to the feelings we experience, while drawing attention to the heightened awareness of being watched.

In Acconci’s second principle, lies the goal of his performance; to produce seed. In this instance, seed is used as a powerful metaphor for erotically charged energy, the starting point of something beautiful, a promise of generations to come, perhaps even the desire to create a legacy. The potency of the image lies in accumulation. Acconci does not 'sow his seed' once, or twice, he does so numerous times over an extended period. Similarly in my work, I make use of the accumulation of imbola (red clay), to gradually expand and intensify themes of religion, progression and regression, filth and opacity.

The third principle, foregrounds privacy within the gaze of an audience. I intend to continue playing with the tensions present in the politics of display, by resisting the urge to allow my practice to be readily visible to others, despite the fact that it is quite obviously produced to be spectated. The audience is given access to the performance, and then met with a series of boundaries that they need to navigate; the primary boundary being the increasingly opaque nature of the performance. By deliberately obscuring the spectator's view, we are able to shift the focus of the performance, from its content to the ideas and emotions it may elicit from the viewer.

The final principle revolves around the dynamism added by the presence of the audience. Both *Seedbed* and *Umthonyama* are subtly, but consistently, responding to the spectators. The themes that jump to the fore are in some way dependent on the kind of audience the performance may attract.

## CONCLUSION

*Umthonyama* is a re-affirmation of my commitment to further exploring the concepts and conclusions I've drawn, as well as to developing insights, interests, and concerns on a highly personal level, in preparation for a future as a creative and intellectual. I have found myself consistently returning to the challenge of making work that is simultaneously deeply personal and highly conceptual. Maintaining a balance between these two poles has proven to be both difficult and rewarding. The manner in which I approach this challenge is constantly changing in response to new experiences, ideas, and relationships. Throughout the course of this master's programme, I have been continuously reflecting on my practice, and experimenting with different visual aesthetics, in order to engage the ways in which I am able to explore questions around queerness, religion, and ultimately, identity. This process of self-reflection has been, and continues to be, imperative to my growth and development as both an artist and a scholar.

I have spent a great deal of time exploring spaces and conceptualising them. I believe the fire exit I have chosen bears potential for an exciting final iteration of *Umthonyama*. The very image of the fire exit intrigues me, due to its dual presence as both a signifier of safety and danger. This tension, partnered with the unique architecture which surrounds the emergency exit, offers the potential of an ultimately exciting performance space.

'Disidentification' and 'defamiliarisation' continue to be the guiding principles of this research. I continually use them as a standard to which I can measure the efficacy of my practice, even as it relates to, and is placed in conversation with other theory moulding my evolving perspective as a performance artist. The complexities and contradictions of identity are most pertinently reflected in this research, through my relationship with Mndende and her work. Inevitably, these will need to be navigated. As my work continues to progress, so will my journey with, and relationship to Mndende's *Umthonyama*. All of the various aspects of the performance merge to create an exploration of 'postmodern ontological destabilisation'. *Umthonyama* does so by repeatedly challenging normative modes of being.

Acconci's *Seedbed* has proved to be a great exemplifier of the dialogical relationship between a spectator and a performer. I very much look forward to performing *Umthonyama* live for the first time. As I move away from the online platform it was first presented on, I am excited to observe how the state of 'eventhood' and this relationship, unfolds. The music of Thandiswa

Mazwai, Ntobethongo, Cama Gwini, DJ Obza, Aimphiwe Dana, Ntsika Ngxanga, Busi Mhlongo, and so many other artists, continue to be my sonic and emotive guide. And it is both a joy and an honour, to incorporate the work of these artists into academic and artistic endeavours, and I trust that the inspiration I draw from them will be present in this culminating installation, my research and my dream, *Umthonyama*.

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