



**EXPLORING MEANING IN *XHALANGA BLUES*: A THEATRE OF *NTSOMI*
PALIMPSESTS ENCOURAGING SUSTAINABLE STORYTELLING**

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PLAGIARISM 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.

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the notion of the *ntsomi*; the oral storytelling custom of *amaXhosa*, by identifying ten elements listed by various writers as unique to African oral storytelling and weaving these elements into poetics which assist us in tracing how they are used to stage and facilitate conversations around sustainability in the production *Xhalanga Blues*.

The unique African oral storytelling poetics include; contextually, sensitive storytelling; etiological formula usage; deviation or ring composition; an opening formula; orature in the form of narrative proverbs; personal metaphors; riddles and songs; analogous explanations; personification; image-repertoire; extensive use of long speeches or monologues and survival construct.

The research further explores the challenges of using these poetics as I try to make sense of my experiences, the visibility of black theatre-makers and self-representation. The research essay is presented as an autoethnographic narrative that hopes to archive my experience, develop a shared understanding of the challenges facing emerging theatre-makers, clarify my values as a theatre maker and centre storytelling as a systemised approach for imagining a dramaturgy of sustainability.

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GLOSSARY OF XHOSA TERMS

Xhosa terms used in the study

Intsomi: The Xhosa oral storytelling custom, also singular for one Xhosa story.

lintsomi: Plural for many Xhosa oral stories

Ntsomi: Pertaining to the form of Xhosa oral storytelling

Nomatye: The one who collects stones.

Isiqendu: A storytelling game played with stones.

Umfanekiso: An image/ a mimetic portrait/ a re presentation

Umfanekiso wentsomi: Something made in the likeness of the Xhosa oral storytelling custom.

Kwathi ke kaloku: Once upon a fantastical time.

Chosi Ntsomi: The storyteller may proceed with the story.

INTRODUCTION

This work comes as a gift to the reader in the form of an offering. The sense and sentiment I have about this dissertation is best expressed by Julie Nxadi reflecting on her work in her Master's dissertation when she states that her research is "[...] a personal and artistic reflection and meditation. Which is to say, narcissistic as it may read, I have been the primary reading for this creative project" (Nxadi, 2018).

In this research, I will offer my artistic reflections and meditations on *Xhalanga Blues*, my own theatre production where one part is this written dissertation, and the other is a staged production. It is important that I say something about myself and how I come to produce this dissertation and *Xhalanga Blues*. I am a black South African woman theatre-maker. I am *Xhosa*, I speak *isiXhosa* and my language and culture is a proud one of rich histories and stories. I locate myself as a storyteller through the medium of theatre. The most dominant medium of traditional storytelling amongst *amaXhosa* is the medium of *Intsomi*.

Intsomi is the oral storytelling custom of *amaXhosa* but is not unique to the *Xhosa*; the *baTswana* call it *Mainane*, The *Zulu* and *Ndebele* call them *Ingwanekwane*, it is *Nnonoane* or *Dinonwane* for the *Pedi*, and the *Shona* call them *Ngano*. These oral storytelling customs are often translated as fiction, folktale, fantasy, nursery tale, myth, fable, allegory or mythical allegory, legend, and folk. The dominance of *(i)ntsomi* as a form of storytelling is prevalent in my theatre-making and I declare my relationship with it as a palimpsest that is ever-present.

Xhalanga Blues as a creative piece of work is situated in the exploration of transforming the *ntsomi* palimpsest into a function that makes sense of my diverse experiences in trying to navigate a career in the theatre industry. It chronicles thoughts that drew me to study further, plans of my research process and thought sharing with other female theatre-makers on the African continent. It also includes reflection and analysis of the influence of past projects, the challenges of self-representation, limitations of the study, my recommendations, and my concluding thoughts.

The Beginning/*kwathi ke kaloku*

“In Perpetuating the myth of writers as selfless slaves to the muse rather than people who need to stay alive if they are to write, academics do the public a disservice” (Archer, Thomas & Turley, 2015:10).

It feels appropriate to begin my research with this quote from *Reading Shakespeare with a grain: sustainability and the hunger business* by Jayne Archer, Howard Thomas and Richard Marggraf Turley. In the article, the writers analyse the concept of sustainability in the plays of Shakespeare and the way in which some of Shakespeare’s literature paints a “symbiotic relationship between the drive for sustainability and literary creativity” (Archer, Thomas & Turley, 2015:11).

In trying to sustain myself as a theatre-maker, I enrolled in a Master of Arts programme at the University of Cape Town’s Centre for Theatre Dance and Performance Studies, through the Institute of Creative Arts. I had no clear research question, only a deep desire to learn how to sustain myself as a theatre maker, to find harmony between the administration I was doing in my day job (which paid all my bills) and my theatre making. Creating theatre is a skill that I work on timeously and it is more important than anything else I do. It is my hope that this research paper does not fall too short of the theatre production component when it comes to discourse comprehension.

Figure 1 below outlines the process from which I imagined my research question would stem. I would create a short piece, ask the audience for feedback, develop a research question based on their feedback and then expand on that as my dissertation project.

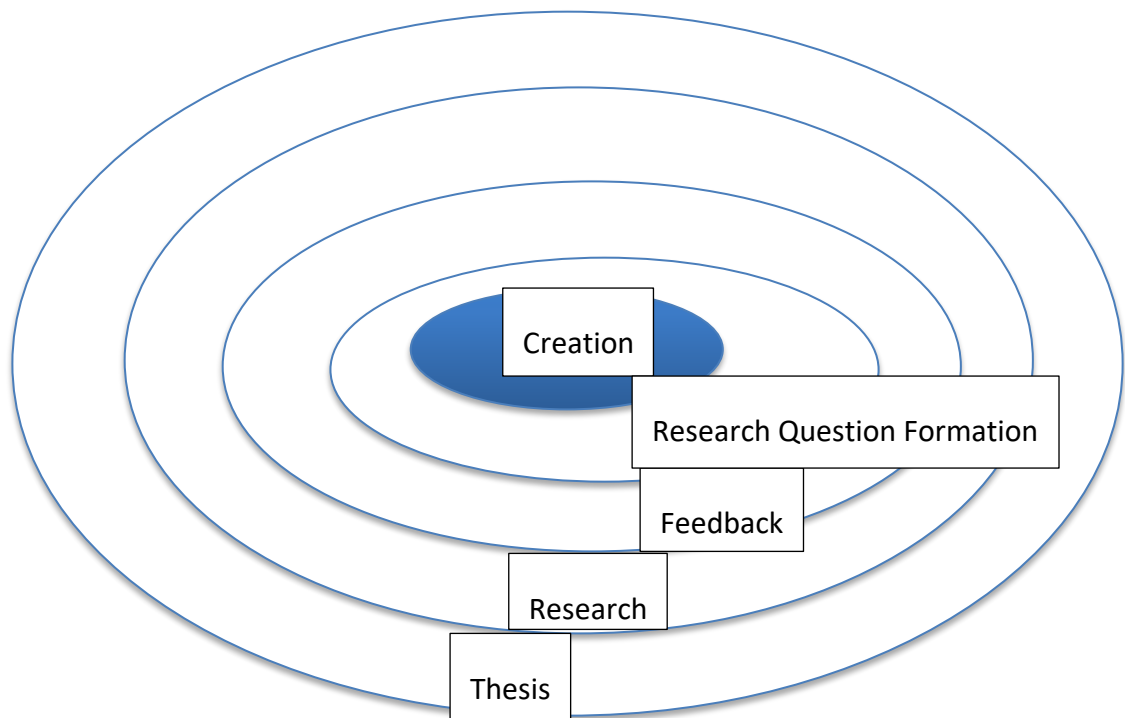


Figure 1: The Research Plan

The first project I staged was a minor project titled *Wise Up Waya Waya* (2018), which was structured as a theatre game show, using trivia to test both my own and the audience memory of theatre knowledge and terminologies. This short process was about figuring out what I know and what knowledge I wanted to develop to expand and integrate into the final project.

Wise Up Waya Waya was followed by my medium project where I wrote and staged an hour-long play titled *When We Awake*. I then carried out my plan and asked audience members for feedback. What was being reiterated was this idea that it resembled the *ntsomi* form. I further developed the piece based on this feedback and (re)titled it as *Xhalanga Blues* (2019). The reaction and reception of *Xhalanga Blues* as *ntsomi* sent me searching and trying to locate where the resemblance lay to what I had known as the *ntsomi* form through my lived experience.

In the period during which I was confronting and engaging with the feedback to *Xhalanga Blues*, I created two new productions; the first one inherited the initial title

When We Awake (2019) because of its focus on the use of oral storytelling in aiding difficult societal conversations and also because I was hoping to awaken through it *ntsomi* pieces from my childhood. The second one, I titled *Fragments*. It is an afro-speculative theatre piece set in the not too distant South African future and uses oral storytelling to look at the lives of three generations of women asserting their personal, cultural, familial and sexual identities in a safe space that they have created in the path of an approaching storm. Through the play, we come to learn which part of them will survive the attack on oral storytelling, nostalgia, and memory. I mention this so that the reader is aware that even in navigating research questions and trying to understand them, I navigate the struggle through narrative and theatre-making.

Tracing the influence of *(i)ntsomi* in *Xhalanga Blues* was an invitation to delve into nostalgia, memory, and the lived experience. After all, I grew up listening to *iintsomi* and had viewed the *ntsomi* form as something separate from my theatre-making until the reaction to *Xhalanga Blues*. Never had I imagined that *(i)ntsomi* had ingrained itself as an independent variable in my theatre-making, ensuring its visibility in some form or other, often beneath the surface and almost invisible, a phenomenon I describe when using the term *ntsomi* palimpsest in this paper.

Even after writing *When We Awake* and *Fragments*, the likeness of the *ntsomi* in *Xhalanga Blues* was, however, not visible to me. That is, I could not see *ntsomi* poetics in the production suggesting that *Xhalanga Blues* is in the likeness of *intsomi* as suggested by my audience members. It is at this point that I chose the word palimpsest to describe its presence. In this search for *(i)ntsomi* in *Xhalanga Blues* I also took a mental flight into my childhood where *iintsomi* were centrally featured through the maternal heritage. To help me think through this set of questions, I then staged the third performance, a solo performance titled *Nomatye* (2019) as part of the Masters programme, tracing my relationship and fascination with stones, which like *intsomi*, goes back to childhood. *Nomatye* marks how I practised my oral storytelling through a stone game called '*isiqendu*.' In this game, the storyteller casts the stones as characters and then weaves a story for them. In the process, I realised that my relationship with stones is analogous to my fascination with stories. This

invokes the term analogon coined by Jean- Paul Sartre and defined by Iman Isaacs as an object standing in the place of something absent (Isaacs, 2018). This object then invites the performer to start imagining a story that they associate with it. I gather stones in places that I visit because they remind me of my experience in that place and therefore are invitations to memory and storytelling, but my solo piece could not help me trace where or how *Xhalanga Blues* resembles the *ntsomi* form. The word palimpsest however, recognised its presence, however faint. I then returned to *Xhalanga Blues* to deal with what made me feel uneasy about the perception and characterisation of this production as resembling the form of a *Xhosa ntsomi*. The sense of uncertainty continued even in the writing of this project as I wish(ed) to clarify to myself, to the reader and to the spectator as to the character of *Xhalanga Blues* as an art form.

As a *Xhosa* speaker, it felt to me as if my audience assumed that I created (*i*)*ntsomi* and had thus boxed me in. Already on the defensive, I started by placing myself within my language and considered the possibility that perhaps I was researching the influence of the *ntsomi* form in *Xhalanga Blues* to help fellow theatre practitioners and the research community locate, understand and critique my theatre-making.

The background I give here is intended to contextualise the setting upon which the set of questions that undergird this dissertation are shaped, and what they, in turn, seek to address, invite or make possible for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Classical Archive

The earliest academic studies of *(i)ntsomi* dates to the extensive work of American scholar Harold Scheub who is renowned for recording, compiling and theorising about oral storytelling in Southern Africa, including that of the *amaXhosa* in particular. He identifies poetics which define the *Xhosa intsomi* but in his archive uses the term “*ntsomi image*” (Scheub, 1975). The term “image” translates to “*umfanekiso*” in *isiXhosa*. A “*ntsomi image*” translates as “*umfanekiso wentsomi*,” meaning something that is made in the likeness of the form but is not the form. The *Xhosa* word *ntsomi* sitting firmly with the English word ‘*Image*’ suggested a hyphenated identity for the oral storytelling form for me which made me question the authenticity of the archive. Scheub had also used *Xhosa* storytellers as subjects in the production of knowledge. As a *Xhosa* storyteller myself, I heeded Pamela Maseko’s assertion that questions on the Africanisation of knowledge in academia, “emanate from a historical context, where focus is on Africans as subjects rather than masters in the production of knowledge” (Maseko, 2017). I took this as an invitation to produce knowledge.

I could make an elaborate effort to explicate the reason for the problematic nature of using works like that of Scheub which is rooted in the colonial library which, according to Mudimbe, is the way Westerners form knowledge discourses about the colonised (Mudimbe,1988). Instead, I actively take up an intellectual discussion of epistemic decolonisation and Africanisation of our own knowledge.

Counter Classic Archive

Challenging the classical archive which includes major proponents such as Scheub, I am encouraged to work with the research of academics in the African diaspora and broaden my scope from a South African perspective to a continental conversation focusing mainly on the influence of African oral storytelling in various forms such as the novel and theatre.

Dontsa, Odun, Miri, Achebe, and Anyidoho are but a few that help to elucidate signifiers which could serve as markers of the African oral storytelling tradition through which I could analyse *Xhalanga Blues*. The influence of African oral literature on the Western novel has occupied many researchers in Africa. Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, and Wole Soyinka's work have been researched extensively, with writers such as Angela Miri, Emmanuel Obiechana, Edward Sackey, and Sara Zargar mapping traces of traditional oral literature in their works. In South Africa, through Luvuyo Dontsa's research on *Contemporary Political Performing Arts*, one learns of the consequence of blending African forms with western forms. Such hybrid art forms; *izitibili* - a South African music genre - is a result of such blending (Dontsa, 1990). Renowned South African theatre professor Mark Fleishman states that what is known as Workshop Theatre in South Africa is the result of blending traditional oral literature and western theatre (Fleishman:1990).

What is clear is that whenever African oral literature meets with a western form, a hybrid style emerges. Kofi Anyidoho explains the phenomena through a poem by Osundare:

When two languages meet [,] they kiss and quarrel. They achieve a tacit understanding on the common grounds of similarity and convergence, then negotiate, often through strident rivalry and self-preserving altercations, their areas of dissimilarity and divergence (Osundare 2000:15 in Anyidoho, 2003).

The meeting point of two worlds in South African theatre has brought cutting edge work with the industry often defining it as African theatre or describing the theatre-makers as being in the process of Africanising theatre or constructing a theatre based on African oral literature. Contemporary examples of this hybrid style which can be viewed as African theatre are visible in Mfundo Tshazibane's adaptation of Nongenile Masithathu Zenani's traditional oral story, *Mbengu-Sonyagaza ndazkwenzi'int'embali* (Tshazibane, 2016), Mandla Mbothwe's *Ingcwaba lendoda lise cankwe ndlela* (Mbothwe, 2010a) and *Inxeba Lomphilisi* (Mbothwe, 2010b). Mbothwe and Tshazibane brilliantly draw from orature, Mbothwe using mostly proverbs in an attempt to create "communitas" and heal the nation and Tshazibane revitalising oral

storytelling as theatre. Their theatre productions remind the audiences of an African culture rooted in storytelling and community building while also preserving oral knowledge.

Research on the influence of African oral literature in Western forms is broad and introduced me to various elements such as telling a contextually, sensitive story, learning to use an etiological formula, personification, and deviation or ring composition (Miri, 2004). Odun Balogun mentions the ring composition when he maps the influence of oral storytelling in western forms (Balogun, 1995). Through Emmanuel Obiechana I engaged with the use of orature and narrative proverbs (Obiechana, 1993) and extended these to analogous explanation taking into consideration my experience in the creation of my solo piece and how I came to understand stories as analogon's (Isaacs, 2018). Luvuyo Dontsa helped me make sense of my use of long monologues as he views this as something that the theatre-maker has borrowed from the *ntsomi* form and attributes the use of such monologues to oral storytelling (Dontsa, 1990). My readings allowed me to map descriptions of an opening formula, but the emphasis often fell on the narrator. Reflecting on my theatre-making processes, I realised that I do not always use a narrator, but I always establish a beginning sequence. An opening formula then became, for me, one of the necessary components of African oral storytelling. Familiarising myself with Roland Barthes and his works on semiotics encouraged me to form image-repertoire, as another important component of African oral storytelling. By researching the influence of African oral literature in Western Forms, I found elements which suggest what constitutes a *ntsomi form* and this research views these elements as tools that I can use to start tracing the *ntsomi* palimpsest in *Xhalanga Blues*.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

This research traces the presence of the above-listed elements in *Xhalanga Blues* in an attempt to enrich the production and develop a shared understanding of the challenges facing emerging theatre-makers, clarify my values as a theatre maker and

centre storytelling as a systemised approach for imagining a dramaturgy of sustainability.

While I have made considerable strides in making meaning of the structure and content of *Xhalanga Blues*, and in developing original works such as *When we awake* and *Fragments*, the value of this paper as a signifier of education imposes a form of writing and disseminating knowledge that is often exclusionary. Writing for young, black, female, theatre-makers interested in pursuing a career in theatre-making, I have opted for narrative research. It is my hope that the knowledge discussed in this written segment of the dissertation is more accessible to those who may be part of creative and intellectual communities other than academic.

METHODOLOGY, DESIGN, AND ANALYSIS

Comparative Textual Analysis

The uncertainty around the *ntsomi* elements in *Xhalanga Blues* impels me to begin by problematising the focus on my artistic identity, and the influence on this identity of the *ntsomi*. Coming into my Master's research, I had tried not to do anything that would make me reflect on my identity as a black theatre-maker. I have come across research by various black theatre-makers making sense of their identity, and although they have contributed to an understanding of my own identity as a theatre-maker, they have, in my view, also signified a pattern of entrapment circulating within the voices of black theatre-makers. It seems to me that the only requirement to pursue postgraduate study in Theatre and Performance as a black theatre-maker or actor is a constant reflection on identity. My initial impulse for my Master's research, therefore, questioned the value of pursuing a career in theatre and performance in South Africa. *Xhalanga Blues* was created as an experimental theatre piece depicting the hidden effort involved in the process of theatre-making such as application for funding, production administration and the lack of audience support, as a way of navigating artist unemployment.

At the centre of the play was an exploration of the kind of dramaturgy, theatrical experience or fictional literature that would emerge from the urgency of searching for opportunities and resources in order to create. I intuitively leaned towards myth and folktale creation as a way of generating solutions. The feedback I received from my lecturers, however, did not focus on the content or context of the piece. Instead, it recognised the influences of the *ntsomi* form on *Xhalanga Blues*. Consequently, I trace the elements which make *Xhalanga Blues* similar to the *ntsomi* form.

I wondered if other black female playwrights considered the possibility of their work being influenced by the form. In an effort to hold a conversation with other black women creatives, I developed a self-report questionnaire consisting of open ended questions that would help me get to know ten women who produce theatre on the African continent. Initially I conducted a WhatsApp conversation with these women before sending them the questionnaire. The open-ended questions were meant to give me an idea of their thoughts, beliefs, processes, reflections and how they choose to describe themselves, and their work, rather than recognise a pattern or data that needed to be analysed. The following paragraphs introduce these women.

Lillian Tshabalala, a mid-career Theatre-maker, actress, playwright and director based in Joburg describes African oral storytelling as a necessary presence in her work which is a journey of self-discovery, a path to finding out what kind of woman lives inside of her and how both outside forces and her upbringing have influenced her decisions. Culture is a starting point of reference for Lillian because she likes to write about characters she has encountered. When asked if the decision to make cultural references in her work is conscious or happens automatically, she said both, explaining that it often depends on the kind of work she is putting together. She, however, thinks oral storytelling influences her work because it is the base of her training as a theatre maker and possibly what influenced her to go into theatre (Lillian, questionnaire responses, 2020 November).

I asked each of the theatre-makers to choose one word to describe the presence of oral storytelling in their work. I have already mentioned that I chose the word “Palimpsest”, for Lilian it is “Necessary”.

Tshepiso T. Kebotsamang based in Gaborone, Botswana, is an emerging writer, actor, MC and the coordinator for CHIPABO Girl Power which is a registered association for performing arts. They specialise in interactive community theatre with an aim to empower women in the arts and entertainment industry. She describes her work as engaging as she writes about issues that affect women currently and explores them from different angles and perspectives. Like Lilian she is also interested in how a person’s culture influences how they think and do things. She likes to pair what she learned from her culture and traditions with how she interprets her experiences. And usually throws in common phrases and idioms from her culture in her playwriting. Tshepiso notes that the influence of her culture happens automatically and the word *letloko* (lack) describes the presence of oral storytelling in her theatre-making/playwriting (Tshepiso, questionnaire responses, 2020, November). I wondered if “letloko (lack)” is the appropriate description since she uses common phrases and idioms from her culture in her plays.

Gcebile Dlamini, a mid-career theatre-facilitator and director based in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, has been working with an organisation called Outreach Foundation for an after-school programme in Hillbrow. She explains that she was brought up within a strict *Swati* culture and believes there has to be discipline in the space. For her, cultural influences happen automatically, and the word “Reality” describes the presence of oral storytelling in her work (Gcebile, Questionnaire responses, 2020, November).

Lesego Chauke an emerging theatre practitioner and scholar working between Cape Town and Johannesburg, explains that her work is centred on using performance to further understand her academic research. She describes herself as a performance researcher because she not only researches performance but uses performance to conduct research. Lesego’s Questionnaire paralleled questions I had for her after

reading her Master's research paper titled *(Re)membering history: performative disinterment in post- TRC South African theatre-making*. Lesego explores the "implications of researching the self" and wonders what it means to "represent" Chauke (2019). Because the very nature of this paper deals with self-representation, I was already aware of the challenges that came with it, but I wanted her specific view. I also noticed that though her paper addresses the challenges of self-representation, and asks questions around what it means to represent, I felt her research gives a voice and visibility to the works of other black female creatives, but does not capture her own creative work, I wondered if that was a process she was still undergoing:

I mean, what the paper offers and departs from is the very idea that self-representation is perhaps impossible. That we always speak in relation to, and carrying the voice for the groups we represent: Black, womxn, queer etc. My conjecture is exactly that, that identity politics has 'colonised poesis', and that I cannot make without making as a black womxn, as a womxn, as a queer person, etc What I offer in this paper, and with the makers that I chose to reference, is that materiality can perhaps lessen the burden of representation. That by centralising material in performance, even the corporeal body as material, we might be able to make for ourselves and not for the groups we represent. On the question of shining light on my own work: I have not made enough since graduating to reflect on. What I have found productive is to reflect instead on why I have not made, who are some of my peers who have made, and how and what have they made; and how can I engage with that in the academic space - which is where my voice sits at present (Lesego, personal communication 2020 November 23).

Her response sparked a question or perhaps a provocation, which is perhaps the reason for this paper and the reflections, questions and meditations that come with it; why has she not made enough?

With regards to the influence of culture in her playwrighting and theatre-making, Lesego explains that she knows too little about her cultural practices to use them as a point of departure for her work. She contends though that she does, however, borrow from lived experience, "from the stories of my grandmother and great-grand parents, family events etc. I borrow from life and how I understand and experience it rather than focus specific on the cultural."

She is very conscious of cultural influences and it is not something that happens automatically. “Presently-absent” is the one word that Lesego chose to describe the presence of oral storytelling in her work. (Lesego, questionnaire responses, 2020 November). I am attracted by the double meaning of such a word, but I did not ask her to explain her choice. On the one hand, “presently-absent” could mean it is presently absent, this meaning suggests that perhaps in the future the influence might be visible. On the other hand, this same term could suggest an in-between space, a grey area between present and absent.

Sophia Mempuh Kwachuh, a mid-career, Theatre and Cinema Maker, Director, Writer, Director of Shammah Company, and Director of SHAZAMA (Kenya-Cameroon Theatre Company), describes her plays as African: “The names, setting, story: theme and stories, songs and dances used, almost everything ... Being an African from Cameroon, some stories, names, or themes come naturally.” (Sophia, Questionnaire responses, 2020 November). For her, the influence of culture and oral storytelling in her work is both involuntary and intentional and she chose the word “cultural-heritage” to describe the presence of oral storytelling in her work.

Hlobisile Mahlangu an emerging theatre practitioner and performer (Actress, Playwright, Director) based in Pretoria describes herself as a storyteller and likes to explore uncomfortable and controversial subject matters.

I am also big on Women empowerment ... Seeing as I comment so much on social issues, I think culture does play a role ... How we are brought up determines how we relate to others, although I do not consciously involve culture it does sometimes pop up ... automatically ... My grandmother used to tell us oral tales and it always triggered my imagination and creativity, because there were no pictures, I created them in my head. Which is how I usually start writing something, I see a beautiful scene in my head and go from there (Hlobisile, questionnaire responses, 2020 November).

Hlobisile chose the word “Poetry” to describe the presence of oral storytelling in her work.

Tiisetso Mashifane an emerging playwright, theatre director, choreographer, producer and educator based in Cape Town, South Africa, describes her work as “[...]”

fearless and experimental contemporary South African theatre that explores South African society's relationship to history and social violence.” She borrows from her culture by focusing on the, “[...] temperament, experiences and world perspective of young black female characters as well as particularly expressive dialogue” The influence happens automatically, and she would describe the presence of oral storytelling in her work using the word “Foundational” (Tiisetso, questionnaire responses, 2020 November).

Chipo Precious Basopo, describes herself as a professional Theatre and performing arts expert for children and young people based in Harare, Zimbabwe. Her work has had great impact on many who have seen it performed and even those that have taken part in the making of the productions. She uses theatre to nurture and mentor and explains that throughout her work whether a play or dance, there is history and meaning and the location they pick to stage the production also has meaning.

So if I have a play about identity I will choose to pick either traditional dance, symbol, props, songs or pictures, It does happen automatically, due to the excitement and deep thoughts, imaginations as well and wanting to share my culture and teach whenever I have the opportunity to do so ... Storytelling is one of the major way of learning and listening and also being able to interpret and engage.

Chipo chose the word “AMAZING” to describe the presence of oral storytelling in her work (Chipo, questionnaire responses, 2020 November).

Mariame Darra Traore, an actress, director, chair of the socio-educational and cultural association *Germes de Pensées* in Benin, an association that puts art and culture at the service of education and society, describes herself as being at the realisation stage of her projects:

I have 14 years of artistic career. In addition to directing, I play, give training in acting, I lead the public speaking conference at the Bar of Benin and with individuals ... My work is passion, love and inspiration. It is a process that always takes time for inspiration, reflection and maturity before being exposed [...].

When I asked if her culture and oral storytelling influence her theatre-making and directing her response was: “Verry much ... In fact, I adapt texts from authors and

integrate the African Fon language a lot. This is valid for my training. It is important for me to include the language of my home in my creations and texts.” Mariame did not choose one word to describe the presence of oral storytelling in her work, but instead described the influence of oral storytelling as “A precious wealth that gives colour to the shows” (Mariame, questionnaire responses, 2020 November).

The final person that I choose to foreground is **Lebogang Disele**, a PhD student at the University of Alberta in Canada and a Lecturer at the University of Botswana. She describes herself as an emerging maker whose work is Experimental:

I am interested in centering the body and finding ways to communicate besides straight dialogue. I also like challenging my performers to reach beyond their comfort zones and try something different. I mostly do devised work. But I have been trying to find ways to incorporate "poko" - Setswana praise poetry - and traditional dance into my work It's a conscious decision because I have to learn those things first.

Lebogang chose the word “New” to describe the presence of oral storytelling in her work. Similarly, to Lesego, Lebogang’s questionnaire went hand in hand with a few of my own questions which had been sparked by some of the research papers she has written. When I looked at staging sustainability for theatre makers, my audiences recognised similarities between *Xhalanga Blues* and the *ntsomi* form and my research has focused on tracing the *ntsomi* in *Xhalanga Blues*. This has encouraged me to try and understand the oral storytelling form *intsomi* which the *baTswana* call *mainane*, and the degree of influence this has on my work with regards to thinking through sustainability and distribution. Lebogang references *mainane*/oral storytelling as she explains how The Gaborone company @Maitisong looks at developing sustainability in theatre. I wanted to know why it was important to explain the forms of theatre in Botswana before expanding on sustainability:

Botswana Theatre is not well documented, so that has become one of my research interests. I think it also came from the fact that the article was written for a special issue focusing on Botswana's 50th anniversary of Independence, so I was looking at the contribution theatre can make in the economy. Ours is a fledgling industry that has struggled to take root (Lebogang, personal interview, 2020 November 21).

Why might it be important for us to draw on traditional theatre when talking about sustainability in Theatre?

I am a fan of African contemporary dance, and I consider it to be a form of decolonizing theatre. Again, it was speaking to the Botswana context where theatre, in the commercial sense, is not yet established and we struggle to find audiences for so-called art theatre. But I noticed that community theatre has a huge following, so for me I thought that one strategy for developing or attracting audiences to our work would be to create works that speak to who we are as a people. Based on Sara Matchett's work, I also don't really believe in the distinction between "applied" and "mainstream" theatre. I believe that theatre and performance in African societies served a purpose, and perhaps art theatre has struggled because of the false division between community theatre and art theatre. I was also responding to the context of Botswana where funding support is mainly targeted towards community theatre because of the pedagogic value (Lebogang, personal interview, 2020 November 21).

Could you please describe the process of writing about your own work? The limitations?

There is a self-consciousness, a worry that perhaps I am being self-centered and self-indulgent. And then there is trying to make things you "just know" coherent in academic language (Lebogang, personal interview, 2020 November 21).

You've spoken about the need to address erasure and the silence of women, do you think it will require us to create, analyse, review, name our intuitive impulses?

Yes! (Lebogang, personal interview, 2020 November 21)

I noticed that in *Towards an adaptive dramaturgy* you were descriptive on the form rather than the performance aspect of it, was that deliberate or easier?

Both. I have not yet been able to stage the play because I couldn't get the rights to the novel, so I focused on what I had done so far. Also, there was a word limit (Lebogang, personal interview, 2020 November 21).

You wear many hats, how do you negotiate which one to foreground as you fight for visibility, because you are confronted with the erasure of women as academics, erasure of women as playwrights, erasure of women as directors?

I struggle. I am trying to learn not to do everything at the same time. I guess that's also why I try to do performance-as-research or practice-based-theatre. I

am interested in what action inquirers call "a living theory". So, I am trying to figure out how to do it rather than just theorizing about it (Lebogang, personal interview, 2020 November 21).

I raise the visibility of these women in order to reflect on the influence of culture and oral tradition in *Xhalanga Blues*. How they describe their work resonates with me, *Xhalanga Blues* feels like an expansion of their aims as creatives, because it is trying to facilitate a difficult conversation with industry professionals who often prefer to focus on the theatre-making rather than the processes required to successfully generate income from the theatre making. Through *Xhalanga Blues* I try to make apparent our working conditions. Like Lilian, oral storytelling was the beginning for me and the core of my theatre-making. Like Hlobisile, I hope my work empowers women, and like Tshepiso, I used common phrases and idioms to communicate some of the challenges. Through the research I am also quickly realising the challenges of self-representation. How do I bring justice to some of the images that I have created? Lesego's theory on materiality is something I understand and resonate with. It is an element evident in all my theatre productions and is particularly expressed in *Xhalanga Blues* through the usage of ice and water. We have all chosen words and hyphenated others to describe the presence of oral storytelling in our work: "Necessary", "Letloko (Lack)", "Reality", "Presently-absent", "cultural-heritage", "poetry", "foundational", "amazing", "new", "Palimpsest".

My argument is that *Xhalanga Blues* deploys the *ntsomi* form of palimpsest. I have woven ten elements from the research of Obiechana, Miri, Dontsa and Balogun, which I call the poetics of African oral storytelling, to trace the palimpsest of the *ntsomi* form in *Xhalanga Blues*. While I have used these poetics to develop *When We Awake* and *Fragments* and have seen a variety of results in my application of those poetics, for the purposes of this research paper, I will only be discussing their use in *Xhalanga Blues*. I have observed in my theatre-making that it is not necessary to use all of them and they do not have to be used in any particular order, giving the *Xhosa* theatre-maker or playwright freedom to explore with form. This chapter analyses the use of these poetics in *Xhalanga Blues* and explains how they can be used in theatre-making and playwriting processes.

Contextually Sensitive Storytelling

The sense of having a mission to teach and to analyse the public concern is one of the features that, in general, the modern African writer has borrowed from the oral tradition (Ogede, 2001:n.p.).

Telling a contextually sensitive story means being influenced by events happening around you before creating the story. We view the story through the frame of a specific event or incident as a way of engaging with that lived experience in order to reflect on it or archive it. I created *Xhalanga Blues* not just to entertain audiences but to provide a narrative account of the challenges faced by young theatre-makers, with the hope of finding proverbs within the *Xhosa* culture that would become solutions to those problems. The story reflected everyday challenges faced by young people pursuing a career in the arts, and the piece can thus be viewed as a contextually sensitive story as it depicts a lived experience of being a theatre-maker. Sometimes the relationship to the context is straightforward and political; plays such as *The Fall* by seven UCT graduates engaging with their experiences in the 2015 *#Rhodes Must Fall* movement and my original piece *23years, a month and 7 days* which I wrote to engage with and reflect on my experience of the movement, are examples of contextually sensitive stories. The phenomenon is an old one in South African theatre with various plays often being influenced by what is happening in the country and much recently also being influenced by social media trends.

Etiological Formula Usage

A historical perception that black youth will always be the victims of exploitation and foul play incites the central premise of *Xhalanga Blues* and becomes a cautionary tale in the play – explaining why black parents do not support their artistic children. Before I map the interplay of oral literature in my theatre-making, I must outline *Xhalanga* as a signifier. The first strands of meaning for this play will be influenced by what an audience member associates with that title.

A *Xhalanga* is a vulture. Anyone who knows this might think the play is about birds or is based on bird mythology. I am from a place called *Xhalanga* district, in a small town

called *Cala*. Perhaps many years ago there were many vultures in this area, or perhaps it was a metaphor referring to the white people who stole the town from the people. Most people who went to *Cala* town came from the neighbouring villages and had to cross the *Tsomo* river using the *Xhalanga* Bridge to get there.

Xhalanga Blues is a calamity that mirrors the tragedy of their local soccer team - *Xhalanga Blues FC* that was cheated out of being part of the National Professional Soccer League by the *Mthatha Bush Bucks FC*. They were victims of foul play, and their misfortune discouraged young boys from playing soccer and the community from supporting it.

The tale passed down is one of a soccer-match between *Xhalanga Blues FC* and *Mthatha bushbucks* that was played in *Cala*. *Xhalanga Blues FC* won, and the town celebrated that evening because the team was going to be in the National Professional Soccer league. However, the following day, news quickly spread that the match had been stopped before its end because the spectators were unruly, this coming as a surprise to the local supporters and the players who now all realised that they had once again become victims of foul play. Several matches were organised between the two clubs, but each was marred by dirty tactics and foul play. Eventually, the players and the supporters gave up on soccer because they did not see the point of playing and the soccer watching culture ceased altogether (CALUSA, 2017)

In *Xhalanga Blues*, the above story becomes an etiological formula explaining why black parents do not support careers in sports and the arts. An Etiological formula in oral literature explains why things are the way they are (Miri, 2004). There are myths about why black parents do not support the arts as a career choice for their children. Figure 2 below outlines how *Xhalanga Blues* uses the poetics of oral storytelling to map the origins of this condition.

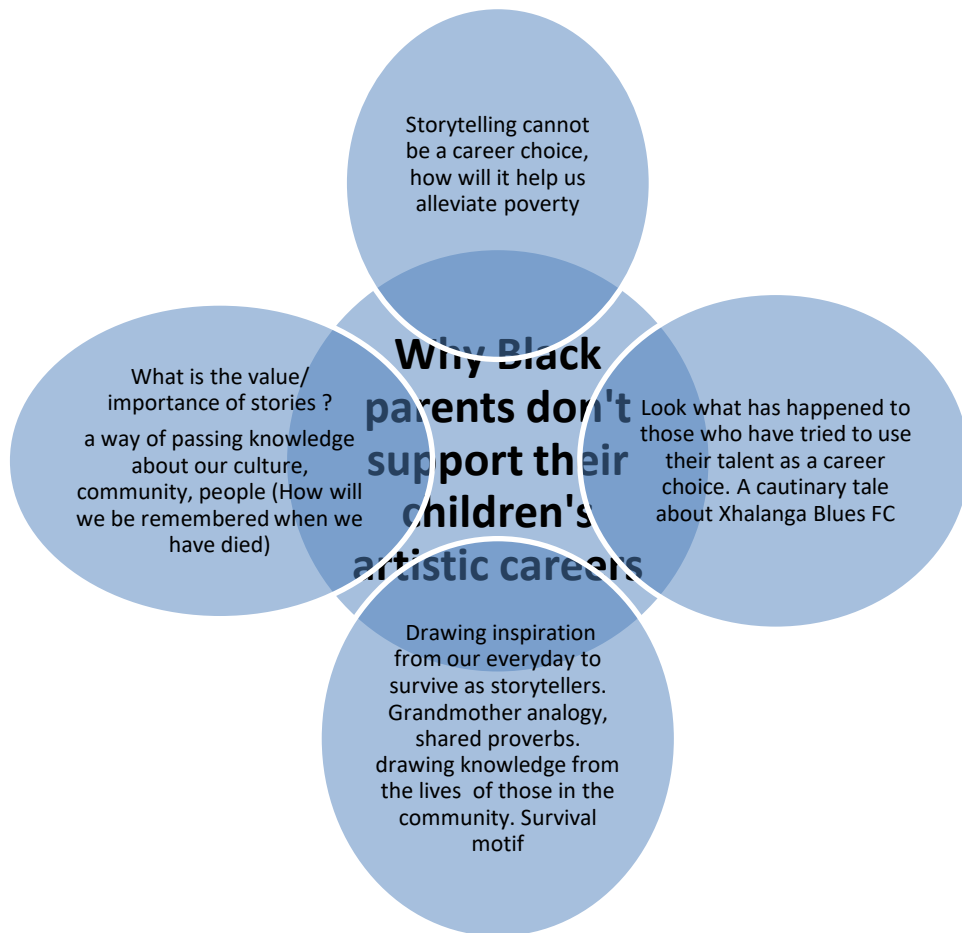


Figure 2: The poetics of oral storytelling map the origins of this condition.

1. The characters question the value of the protagonist's career choice based on its potential to alleviate poverty in the community. (context)
2. Uncle explains that stories will keep them alive in the knowledge transferred through them, that it will keep their culture and traditions. (importance of orature)
3. The community encourages this occurrence because they want to survive and have their stories remembered, but they know the road will not be easy, the protagonist must promise them she will never feel sorry for herself and will never forget her home.
4. As the protagonist starts pursuing her mission, she starts feeling sorry for herself because as much as she creates different plays, she cannot provide for

her necessities (food, shelter, clothes) and if she does not find a way to solve this problem, she will not be able to tell stories.

5. Mother of the protagonist thinks about the different plays as if they are children and uses the knowledge of raising children amidst poverty in order to assess how the protagonist could do the same with her plays. An analogy of being a mother is used. (analogous explanation)

6. Amidst the difficulty, the narrator explains why it is that black parents do not encourage their children to pursue a career in the arts. The etiological formula explains this belief.

7. The protagonist has terrible dreams, and there is always a bird trying to attack her in the dreams. (use of personification)

8. Mother reminds her she was warned by her community never to feel sorry for herself (ring analogy- life and dreams) and explains what the dream means- The parable of the *Xhalanga* (Vulture), is used: the next time it appears try to kill it, if you do not, it will kill you and your stories (survival construct)

9. The mother must leave the protagonist and go back home.

10. The protagonist must think about a trick for defeating the bird. (She defeats bird ... physical theatre)

11. Mother lies to father so that they support the child. They have had to lie to get support. (another trick)

African oral storytelling often explains why things are the way they are. In a *ntsomi* form, the reasons are not always as realistic as the story of *Xhalanga Blues FC* to explain why black parents do not encourage their children to have careers in sport and the arts. An etiological formula can be an invitation to imagine how things arrived at a particular state or form; why birds have wings or why we must go to school and is an opportunity for playwrights to defend their characters by demonstrating how their contexts and experiences influence their participation in the word. It is a phenomenon that encourages us to think about prior events and experiences shaping the present moment. This poetic can be used to explain the world and the people

living in it. The term poetic refers to principles governing a particular work and is not in any way linked to Aristotle's poetics on Western tragedy.

Deviation or Ring Composition

The structure of the piece comprises a narrative matrix told through deviation. In *The survival speech patterns in Modern African literature: The example of Chinua Achebe's Fiction*, Angela Miri explains deviation through Isadore Okpewho who explains the method as a "ring composition" (Okpewho, 1979 in Miri, 2004). The idea is that a deviation from the main narrative is made before meaning can be deduced.

Mama: *Bangaphi ngoku? (how many are they now?)*

Nompumelelo: *This one is the eight one.*

Mama: *My mother, umakhulu wakho, has seven children. Although she was a powerful woman and knew how to do multiple things, but she was not able to raise all of us. Mna and your oldest aunt stayed with her mother. Then the other six stayed together. But still, she wasn't the one looking after everyone. The older ones took care of the little ones. Now for the longest time you were my only child, then came your sister and then your brother. But for the longest time you were my purse, wherever I was, you were there.*

Nompumelelo: *I don't understand how this links to my stories*

Mama: *In a large family, the eldest take care of the youngest.*

Nompumelelo: *you might as well be speaking Spanish.*

Mama laughs and continues clearing the room.

Mama: *You children go to school and graduate with big things, but you don't know the basics of life. How many jobs did your grandmother have?*

Nompumelelo: *I'm not sure ... Well from Monday to Friday she was a vendor, selling fruit at the bus station and then on Saturdays wena and your cousins would go sell while she went to a funeral, there's always a funeral of someone we know on Saturday.*

On Thursdays she left the house at 7 am so that she could go clean kwa Ncaphayi and also do their laundry before going to her stand. In the evenings when she got back home wayethunga (sew) working on people's orders, making their shweshwe's, nemibhaco. Then on the last Sunday of every month she went to Durban to get stock; blankets, curtains, drie feet pots, sweets, material for uthunga (sewing)

Mama: *So how many jobs did your grandmother have?*

Nompumelelo: *I remember when we'd go around Xhalanga ngePeyi and also on the 20th when teachers got paid, collecting payment for umtshazi. Kusekho nomgalelo on top of all these things*

Mama has now finished clearing the room, all the papers are stacked nicely on stage right. She then goes to the table and starts drinking her water while advising her daughter

Mama: *You come from a family of entrepreneurs my child. You have to find a way for these stories to pay the bills. Your way to entrepreneurship can be through theatre but the outcomes don't always have to be theatrical go teach what you know if you have to. Write books about your process. Host workshops. Learn the game of submitting application forms! I never want to witness what I saw this morning again. My parents had many children so that there was breathing room to dream, when you had 7 children, there were seven possibilities for escaping poverty. Your grandmother was the only child and for her mother, there was only one way of escaping poverty and she raised a powerhouse of a women. But 7 is always better than 1 when you do it right. You say you have 8 plays now?*

Nompumelelo: *Ewe mama*

Mama: *How do they support one another?*

Nompumelelo: *Mama they are plays not people.*

Mama: *That's where you are wrong. I can tell you know that the most successful storytellers use profits from a previous project to fund a new project. Successful*

storytellers understand that the last child carries the reputation of the family. I'm no longer Nompumelelo's mother, people from Xhalanga now call me umama ka Ndoda. Perhaps the first time you were known in this, your world, you were the mother of Identirrhaging, but now you are the mother of Xhalanga.

Nompumelelo: *I hear you mama* (Plaatjie, 2018)

In the above scene from *Xhalanga Blues* mama deviates the narrative from Nompumelelo to her grandmother to explain the importance of diversifying income and then brings it back to Nompumelelo making it clear that the digression is there to help her understand ways for navigating the challenges she faces. *Xhalanga Blues* has a matrix of such narratives, each serving a role of helping us understand the world of the protagonist and the context of her theatre-making career.

Opening Formula

Xhalanga Blues does not have an opening formula. In the *ntsomi* form, the storyteller begins the story by saying "*kwathi ke kaloku ngantsomi*/once upon a fantastical time," to which the audience responds "*chosi ndabazolwimi*". I am not sure of the English equivalent for this term, but *chosi ndabazolwini* gives the storyteller permission to begin the story. In the questionnaires that I sent to playwrights, Sophia Mempah from Cameroon mentioned that in their country they do not have one word for oral storytelling, instead they have various sayings that suggest that it is story time.

In my place we have expressions which indicate that this is now story telling time: *Kwa le euh* (said in the north west region where I come from), *Awoula Awoula* (said in the centre region), *Edinguelaye* (said centre, south) (Sophia, questionnaire responses, 2020 November).

The opening formula is the first interaction between the storyteller and the audience. In *Xhalanga Blues*, the performer and the audience first interact as the audience enters the theatre. The protagonist ushers them (audience) inside the theatre while asking for donations. Once seated, the house lights go down signaling to the audience members that the story is about to begin. The opening formula, in this case, is

communicated through the use of lighting. I observed while creating *Fragments* that the opening formula can be useful in framing a play within a play and thus offers a much more authentic experience of the *ntsomi* form.

Orature in the form of Narrative Proverbs, Personal Metaphors, Riddles and Songs

The use of songs, proverbs and personal metaphors is prevalent in South African theatre created by black theatre-makers. The audience may be familiar with the material and may feel encouraged to participate as the material evokes particular emotions and experiences. *Xhalanga Blues* does not shy away from using this poetic; It is as Okpewho observed:

One other way in which the modern African/Nigerian writer tries to return to his roots (the *igbo* culture) is by achieving the musical basis of the traditional art. Many kinds of oral modes use music in one form or another: whether in the actual singing of songs, or in the meaningful control of tonal accents (as we find in the *idoma*, *igbo*, *mernyong*, *Yoruba* etc), or else in the playing of musical instruments to provide background rhythm (Okpewho, 1985 in Miri, 2004).

Xhalanga Blues weaves singing, *umnqokolo* (throat singing) and the *Xhosa uHadi* bow to express some of the messages of the play and to establish an African rhythm.

The proverbs used in the piece are familiar to some *Xhosa* speakers, and they may be able to complete them, assuring them that they know this world, its people and the conversations happening on stage. The play also makes use of places with which the Cape Town audience might be familiar, sharing private jokes with *Xhosa* speakers by translating the names of theatre spaces where the playwright has created plays into *isiXhosa* family names, and mentioning them as absent fathers in the life of the play.

Mama: *Kuhle nontombi, bendisithi anduzukufumana kuba sekuhlwile, heyi, bathetha ngawe aphe Xhalanga mntanam. We have been seeing great things about you in our newspapers. Bathathu abantwana ngoku? (That's good to hear my child, the people of Xhalanga have been talking about you, we saw you in the local newspaper, you have three children, right?)*

Nompumelelo: *happy with the conversation, Ewe mama. Hayi noko. (Yes mom, we are trying with publicity)*

Mama: *Ngabakwabani ke Ntombi? (who helped produce them?)*

Nompumelelo: *Aha! no23 bazalwa kwaZibutha ma, uNative ngowase Caweni (Aha! and 23 were born at Magnet, Native was born at the church)*

Mama: *Ndiyakuva kemantombi, kuhlawulwa nini kengoku? (I hear you my child, did they pay you then?)*

Nompumelelo: *she finds her mother's question funny, Ow Dala undihlekisela ntoni nha. (Oh, mother why are you making me laugh.) They supported me during the pregnancy and helped me birth these beautiful kids.*

Mama: *kaloku mantombi kufuneka ibekhona imali eza aphe'khaya, ubona nje, intombi kamamQithi (a bit of your money needs to come home, mam' Qgithi's daughter) passed away and we need to have money for umkhonto, kanti ke phaeMangxongweni their son is graduating, he's going to be an engineer, ukuba ukhumbula kakuhle they gave you a R1000 when we had your graduation party, ngoku we must return the gift. Your little brother is also going on tour, they are Going to East London Mpumi and he needs money for snacks. Sidinga usincedise mantombi. (Xhalanga Blues, 2018).*

The question of *ukhlawula* - a cultural practice by the Xhosa people where a man is expected to pay for impregnating a girl he is not married to - becomes a private joke when used in this context. Magnet Theatre is translated to (*kwazibutha*) and Theatre Arts Admin (*ecaweni*) adding to private jokes for Xhosa speakers. The importance of making a financial gain from the plays is emphasised. using narrative proverbs, personal metaphors, and riddles. Songs also add poetry to theatre productions and are useful in capturing the rhythm of a piece. The proverbs and personal metaphors heighten the text, making it more expressive and performative and thus making meaning complex.

Analogous explanations

To explain this further, Figure 3 and 4 below, outline the narrative structures used in the matrix of *Xhalanga Blues*. These stories serve the role of narrative proverbs and are ornamental in the way that they are used. They do not necessarily belong to the main storyline but serve as "analogical explanations" which help us understand the protagonist and her world.



Figure 3: Nwabisa Plaatjie Honours Graduation 2016.

The Protagonist's Background

1. Nompumelelo graduates with a BA in Theatre and Performance.
2. Her family performs a graduation ceremony to celebrate her achievement.
3. The community wants to know what she studied, will she become a doctor, a teacher, a lawyer?
4. Nompumelelo's uncle tells them she studied the art of telling stories.
5. The community is disappointed as they do not know how this career choice will help fight poverty.

6. Nompumelelo's uncle explains that she will make sure that the people of the world know about them and their culture. She carries the oral history and teachings of her people, and in order to make sure it never dies, she will embed it in her stories. The world will know about them, their history, their culture, and traditions.
7. The community encourages Nompumelelo in this journey and warns her about the challenges she might face.



Figure 4: Nwabisa's grandmother Nofezile Plaaitjie.

A portion of this storyline was already introduced to explain the "ring composition". However, this narrative structure comprises all the core clichés of the narrative:

1. Mama visits Nompumelelo in the city.
2. She finds Nompumelelo in an awkward space and tries to encourage her to use the place where she comes from and Nompumelelo's grandmother as inspiration.
3. Mama compares Nompumelelo's children to plays and explains the challenges and opportunities of growing up in a large family, in her case, a family of 7.

4. Nompumelelo does not understand how this links to her plays.
5. Mama tells her that in a large family, the oldest takes care of the youngest, but Nompumelelo still does not understand the analogy.
6. Mama comments on how Nompumelelo's generation go to school and graduate with big things but do not know the basic things of life.
7. Mama encourages Nompumelelo to remember how many jobs her grandmother had. Nompumelelo remembers 5 of the Jobs, and mama uses this to show her that she comes from a family of entrepreneurs.
8. *izandla ziyagezana/ ziyahlambana kwaye iminwe le ayilingani*. An analogy of the hand to explain that the plays will not all be successful but need to support one another and that they also will not succeed in the same way because just like people are not the same, plays are not the same and are like 1 fingers in a hand.
9. *Wamhle umthi neziqhamo zawo* - building a legacy.

Beyond providing us with an analogy that can help Nompumelelo navigate the challenges she is facing by drawing knowledge or inspiration from those older than herself, like her grandmother, it becomes a moment for the protagonist and the audience to consider the limitations of their Western education and encourages them to lean towards orature as a feeding source for indigenous knowledge. An analogous explanation can also be a starting point in a theatre-making process through the performative use of an object as is evident in my solo piece *Nomatye*. The piece was conceived through a task set by Professor Mark Fleishman as part of our coursework, where we had to select an object most valuable to us. This object was to contain something fundamental about my identity; who I am, where I come from, what I believe in and my memories, and was to be used to create a 10-15-minute autobiographical piece. I chose stones because they have always fascinated me, and I always gather them when I visit places but did not know what drew me to them so much. The theatre-making process of my solo piece made me realise that for me, stones are an analogon for storytelling. As mentioned in my introduction, *Nomatye* reminded me of how I practised my oral storytelling through '*isiqendu*' and I have

come to understand that I only gather them because they remind me of my experiences in particular places during particular times and are therefore invitations to memory and storytelling. After this process, an audience member advised that I read Sello Duikers *The hidden star*, a novel in which one gets to understand how objects can be an invitation to the imagination and can aid us in telling a story.

Personification

Miri in her analysis of Achebe's fiction, notes how he uses personification by giving natural objects human qualities (Miri, 2004). In oral storytelling, particularly in the *Xhosa intsomi*, it is common to find human qualities in animals, trees, objects, and natural elements like the rain and the wind. Everything communicates and has the potential to transfer knowledge. But personification can mean more than just attributing human characteristics to something non-human. Personification in theatre productions that I create suggests a way that the performers engage with their objects and ideas on stage. The objects, materials, and ideas have the same power and urgency as the performers. They speak, they have feelings, can oppress and be oppressed, and can share knowledge.

While I have mentioned the context in which I created *Xhalanga Blues*, I have not explained how aesthetic transfer in this production has not only been between African oral storytelling and western theatre but also been between various theatre productions that I have directed, making *Xhalanga Blues*, an amalgamation of some of the plays I have directed as a theatre-maker.

Xhalanga Blues is a living archive and a home for my theatre productions. I connected material from two of my plays, *23 years, a month and 7 days* and *Reimagining the native who caused all the trouble* using oral literature to weave the different components together. To give an in-depth account of how this personification works in my plays, I analyse the use of water and ice in *23years, a month and 7 day*.

23 Years, a month and 7 days

The original performance of this production opens with the image of two performers holding a black sheet made from dustbin bags spread out across the stage, covering the entire downstage area. The sheet is back lit to create a shadow play. A live feed of hands playing with water in an enamel bucket is projected.

The opening scene sees the silhouette of a male actor behind the enclosure made from the black plastic, performing a movement piece in which he scoops water from a bucket with his hands and splashes it all around him. The rhythm is quick-though-uniform, with a frenzied playfulness. The action is carried out until it reaches the climax of its fast pace, then dies down gradually until the figure is standing still. He scoops the water with a glass, and walks around his plastic enclosure, pouring the water against the walls. Nontyatyambo, the protagonist, is roused by this. She walks around the enclosure, following the shadowy figure with her hands trying in vain to contain the water dripping from the glass in the shadow's hands on the 'walls' made by the plastic. Her mild frustration at the futility of this act is evident. In the end, she looks at her hands in what appears to be disappointment: not a drop of water!

The play is set in Nontyatyambo's hometown, Potter's Field, and in the scene that follows she kneels in front of a bucket of water and begins to tell a story, using the opening formula as discussed in the fourth poetic.



Figure 5: Zizipho Quluba as Nontyatyambo in 23 years, a month and 7 days tells her siblings a story.

Nontyatyambo listens to the water as it shares a story with her, which she then shares with her siblings who sit in the circular formation which allows for references to the fireside gatherings synonymous with rural African life and at the helm of oral tradition. In *A way of being free*, Ben Okri explains that "Stories are a secret reservoir" and that:

It is through fictions and stories we tell ourselves and others that we live the life, hide from it, harmonise it, canalise it, have a relationship with it, shape it, accept it, are broken by it, redeem it, or flow with the life (Okri, 1997). From such explanations, I conclude that orature can be viewed as a way for the elderly to pass on historical information, values, songs, and folklore alike to their younger kin, it is water that carries this knowledge in this play. Nontyatyambo scoops the water in her hands, cupping it and holding it to her ear and then splashes the water onto her siblings and catches it as it falls from her hands. Nontyatyambo's relationship with water portrays her as a learner and a friend but her mother does not understand her career choice.

Mama: Anduzugezelwa nguwe mna, ndakuthwala iinyanga ezilithoba kodwa namhlanje undixelela ngeetsomi esayekayo nathi ukuzenza kuba ezibalulekanga, futhi zange yayimpangelo leyo, yayiyinto nje yolalisa abantwana/I will not be disrespected by you, I carried you for 9 months, but today you tell me about myths and stories that we also stopped telling because they're irrelevant. Telling stories was never even a career; it was something we used to make the children sleep (Plaatjie, 2016).

Mama does not understand how oral storytelling can become a possible source of income and encourages her daughter to find another career path. The scene highlights the ignorance of Nontyatyambo's mother and is not an indication of all black mothers. She is a mother desperate to get out of poverty and fails to comprehend the importance of orature in the African context. Her only desire is that her daughter finds a job that will feed the family and having no reference to people who have pursued storytelling as a career path, she encourages her daughter against it. She has also forgotten the role that stories used to play in her childhood and remembers them only as a tool she used "to make children sleep."

In the play, Nontyatyambo consents to her parents' wishes, her siblings 'pack' her backpack by emptying their glasses of murky water into it while singing her name. The water becomes representative of their aspirations and well wishes, which she carries on her back when she embarks to the unknown world of university.



Figure 6: Livie Ncanywa as Sibling in 23 years, a month and 7 days offers the gift of water.

Her mother gives her a breathing block of ice, Nontyatyambo is hesitant to accept until her siblings corner her. The performers make the ice breathe with their bodies, similar to the way puppeteers make their puppets breathe by focusing all their attention on them, allowing for a rhythmic change. Nontyatyambo's mother holds the breathing block of ice in her hand. Her hands tremble. She feels the weight of the ice in her hands. She looks at Nontyatyambo, who shakes her head. She walks towards Nontyatyambo, her hands outstretched, the block of ice sitting in her palms. Nontyatyambo turns her back on her mother and refuses to take the ice. She shakes both of her hands vigorously as if she were scared, and her mother slowly brings the block of ice towards her chest. Nontyatyambo turns around and mirrors her mother.

The mother slowly lifts the ice to her right ear. She leans over the ice. She appears to be listening to something. She then moves the block of ice to her left ear. Nontyatyambo's mother then attempts to give the block of ice to her daughter again. Both have their arms outstretched; their hands are shaking. The mother drops the ice

onto the ground. Both mother and daughter shake their hands vigorously, turn around in a circle, hands still shaking, and then wipe their hands on their thighs.

The mother then picks up the block of ice and once again tries to hand it over to Nontyatyambo. The two share a choreographed exchange of gestures. Both shake their hands as they struggle to hold the ice. When one holds the ice, the other mirrors the movements.

As Nontyatyambo travels away from home, the ice begins to melt, wetting her legs. We can view this as signifying her fears and insecurities at venturing into a world she will be the first from her family to inhabit. An apt metaphor is one of cold feet but there is also a little bit of excitement at venturing into the unknown.

In the penultimate scene of the play, Nontyatyambo melts the ice she was given by her mother in a metal tub, kneeling before the tub, covering herself with a towel and lowering her face and upper body into the tub as if she is steaming. She is finally allowing herself to take in the stimuli provided by her experiences, eject all toxic thoughts and ideologies and let the process transform her from the inside out!

Through personifying water, the story becomes about finding one's voices told through the material of water and listening to it in its various forms, liquid, ice, steam.

Xhalanga Blues

The use of personification in *Xhalanga Blues* is evident in five aspects of the piece. Firstly, we can trace personification throughout the play in the way that the performers engage with objects in the space, mainly the tinned fish which is first used as a metaphor for a cell phone and then develops into a source of sustenance for the main character. For Nompumelelo, the tinned fish is a phone call to her mother, a companion at times and a vehicle that transports her to her mother's heart. The way the performers engage with their tinned fish signals a personal relationship.

Hope: *We have lost Kaya Mjongeni, she studied at the Educational Art Centre, obtained an acting degree at the University of Arts, she now teaches English in China.*

We have lost Lerato Setshaba; she was trained as a physical theatre performer at the National youth Arts Centre, she now works in the textile industry.

We have lost Lindiwe Mzayedwa, she trained at the university of Arts, she traveled extensively in the early days of her career, but she is now an ambulance driver (Xhalanga Blues, 2018).

Life events in *Xhalanga Blues* are also personified. The character Hope laments the artistic deaths of various artists, making their decision to pursue a career outside the arts a painful event requiring a mourning period. The decision to pursue a career in the arts becomes a life form while deciding to do something else marks death.

Mama: *Kuhle nontombi, bendisithi anduzukufumana kuba sekuhlwile, heyi, bathetha ngawe aphe Xhalanga mntanam. We have seen great things about you in our newspapers. Bathathu abantwana ngoku? (That's good to hear my child, the people of Xhalanga have been talking about you, we saw you in the local newspaper, you have three children, right? (Xhalanga Blues, 2018).*

The protagonist's theatre productions are treated as if they were babies and are given human attributes. The audience is invited to imagine them as children who will need to be fed and taken care of with the hope that when they have grown, they can also take care of their mother, in this case, Nompumelelo.

Mama: *Ngabakwabani ke Ntombi? (who helped produce them?)*

Nompumelelo: *Aha! no23 bazalwa kwaZibutha ma, uNative ngowase Caweni (Aha! and 23 were born at Magnet, Native was born at the church) (Xhalanga Blues, 2018)*

Theatres in which the protagonist developed her plays are also personified and given family names. *Xhalanga Blues* invites the audience to recognise Magnet Theatre and The Theatre Arts Admin not as theatre buildings in Cape Town but as people. The spaces begin to function as human beings who have demonstrated love and support for the protagonist.

Personification in *Xhalanga Blues* is effected by assigning human attributes to objects, spaces, and ideas. This notion is difficult to explain clearly as the meaning is mostly carried in performance and is achieved through the use of breath and choreography. The core objective is that everything on stage must be birthed; the characters, the objects, the story, and because of that birth, everything has the potential to die. Throughout the performance, the performers must keep the space, their characters, objects, and ideas alive. Personification invites us to explore the challenges of living and forces us to decide what gets to live.

I tested the notion of personification in *Fragments* by prompting the rain and the wind characters to engage with the protagonist of the piece through dialogue. Perhaps this element is the life force of my theatre-making, and I am still exploring its expanding identity. In *Nomatye*, stones were my friends and helped me decide which game to play next.

Image-repertoire

The best way to describe this poetic is through a question: what do you see when I say African theatre? For many, the image will be dominated by black performers, singing and dancing.

When we engage with image, we begin to manage how we see ourselves, what we believe others believe of us, and how these things wound us (Barthes, 1984). Any theatre-maker engaging with image-repertoire is retrospectively reflecting on the narrative choices and theatre-making styles that black theatre-makers have utilised to portray the living experiences of black people and how they, in turn, are wounded by these choices/styles. Image in this context directly speaks to style. When we think of all the theatre productions that have been created about black people or for black people, we engage with images of African people in pre-colonial and post-colonial settings (Tembo, 2017) and with every production the theatre-maker must decide how they will reference or challenge or destroy the repertoire. South African theatre has often brought us "images of people who are constantly fighting against

oppression" (Dontsa, 1990). I have found that it is often easy to assume that young black theatre-makers are trying to find their roots, restore their culture and traditions or create protest theatre. This may make it easy to package black theatre-makers in a way that sells and romanticises the experience of being African. Young theatre-maker often find themselves in a tug of war; on one hand they want to celebrate their Africanness but on the other, they must also engage with the repertoire by deciding which narratives about black life and experience to share because they influence how the black community sees itself and how they are seen by those outside this community.

One has to take into account the political history of South Africa, particularly insofar as the conquering socio-cultural group, the whites, imposed their standards on the blacks. We have talked about deculturation and the alienation of a people., about people getting alienated, etc. Now put yourself in a situation where the government comes along and says, "we're going to Africanise you, we're going to Bantuise you." You immediately get turned off from that because you wonder what this person is talking about. You never doubted that you were an African, but now he is going to Africanize you. Then you realize that in fact what he's after is simply to place you in a position where he can exploit you all the more, and you refuse to be Africanized or Bantuized (Kunene D in Kunene M, 1976:11).

I consider Daniel Kunene's words even as I try to trace the influence of African oral storytelling in *Xhalanga Blues* because the suggestion that the work is similar to the *ntsomi* form has the potential to imply institutional racism. Image-repertoire is a moment of personal reflection about your role and responsibility as a black theatre-maker using narratives/theatre-productions created by others about black people or for black people as a guideline for your style. It is the theatre-maker engaging with the question: 'what do I see when I hear African Theatre' and from there correcting or celebrating that image or merely continuing conversations that were started by other black writers.

The image I see when I hear "African Theatre" has made me realise my theatre productions continue conversations that were started by writers before me. The theatre piece that I created in 2015 titled *Identirrhaging* viewed language as the first betrayal a person commits in pursuits of a Western education (Plaatjie, 2015). The

play continues conversations that were begun by writers such as; Wa Thiong'o in *Weep, not Child* and *The River between*, Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut* and the theatre play *I see you* by Mongiwekhaya. When I wrote *23Years, a month and 7 days* in 2016 I continued the conversations that were started by Mbongeni Ngema in his *Sarafina*, really looking at the nature of student protests in contemporary South Africa.

Extensive use of Long Speeches or Monologues

Playwrights do not necessarily adopt Western theatrical devices to depict the situation in South Africa. But they include long speeches that dramatise the set-up and an actor-to-audience address, a typical feature of *intsomi* (folk tale) performance (Dontsa, 1990).

Rev Mnqwazi: preaching

Unabantu bakho Thixo. Unabantu bakho Thixo. Unabantu bakho Thixo. I was privileged to listen to Rev Gxamza last weekend. And as I sat down this morning, thinking about intshumayelo yanamhlanje, I suddenly remembered his words. Uthi uRev, uthi uKarl Marx, Religion most of the time, is an opium of the poor. When they want to keep controlling you, they put you in your place. Kaloku history has remembered us as people who are good for nothing; our mothers are only good for producing children. Kuthiwe ke xa uzakonzakaliswa: yazi indawo yakho, hlala uzole. The dangerous thing about these our children of today is that they ask questions, they challenge authority. The time for Jerusalem, Jerusalem ikhaya lam is over, now we say makwenziwe emhlabeni njengoko kusenziwa ezulwini. How can we be expected to walk on streets made of gold, sit in huge theatres with comfortable chairs while we stay emikhukhwini? Uthi uSteve Biko, religion worries me in Africa for it has become a well of poison. Abantu xa befuna usela ityefu babheka kwi religion - why is it that the theatre industry that has over 200 years of existence in the South African soil does not have more than 20 black female published playwrights? Why is it that in set works prescribed by the department of education there isn't a single play by a black female playwright, why is it that when you go to the taxi rank and walk down gardens, you see scores of artists performing for a few cents in the land of their birth? Let your will be done on earth as it is done in heaven. Vukani maAfrika! Afrika must rise - We should

never be street corner performers- sitting imini, nobusuku- waiting for tourists to give us R10 for our skills kwi lizwe lokuzalwa kwethu! LiTHUBA ma Africa amahle for economic freedom in our lifetime.

Ezekiel 37 Dry Bones Live Again, sithi esisibhalo ngokubhaliweyo

Verse 1: Sometime later, I felt the Lord's power take control of me, and his Spirit carried me to a valley full of bones.

Verse 2: The Lord showed me all around, and everywhere I looked I saw bones that were dried out.

Verse 3: He said, "Ezekiel, son of man, can these bones come back to life?"

Is it possible for artists to live off their art alone? Is it possible for plays by black female playwrights to be prescribed in school, is it possible to have black-owned theatres? Is it possible to have wealthy theatre playwrights and directors? ... I replied, "Lord God, only you can answer that."

Verse 4: He then told me to say: "Dry bones, listen to what the Lord is saying to you."

Verse 5: "I, the Lord God, will put breath in you, and once again you will live".

Verse 6: "I will wrap you with muscles and skin and breathe life into you. Then you will know that I am the Lord."

Verse 7: I did what the Lord said, but before I finished speaking, I heard a rattling noise. The bones were coming together!

Verse 8: I saw muscles and skin cover the bones, but they had no life in them.

Verse 9: The Lord said: "Ezekiel, now say to the wind, "The Lord God commands you to blow from every direction and to breathe life into these dead bodies, so they can live again."

Verse 10: As soon as I said this, the wind blew among the bodies, and they came back to life! They all stood up, and there were enough to make a large army.

Unabantu Bakho Thixo, Dry bones will live again. Perhaps ubusowuphelelwe lithemba. Dry bones will live again. There is a place for storytellers kwelilethu ilizwe. There is a place for black female playwrights. There is a place for black female playwrights; there is a place for black female playwrights Unabantu bakho Thixo. Unabantu bakho Thixo. (Plaatjie, 2018)

Long speeches have become popular in my works, but until this research, I had never thought of them as something that marks the influence of the *ntsomi* form.

Survival Construct

The last poetic unique to traditional oral storytelling in the theatre production *Xhalanga Blues* is the survival construct. The characters in a *ntsomi* are always engaging with survival. In *Xhalanga Blues*, we engage with Nompumelelo as she tries to survive as an artist when so many around her are considering alternative career possibilities. There are two parts which I would like to foreground in order to engage with this last poetic; The first emphasises courage in the quest for survival:

Mama: *Where are you from?*

Nompumelelo: *Xhalanga*

Mama: *And what were you taught about vultures?*

Nompumelelo: *... wild things never feel sorry for themselves (Xhalanga Blues, 2018)*

And the second, is that survival as a theatre-maker goes beyond the ability to take care of your necessities.

Uncle Nyathaza: *But our sister is different! Our sister will make sure that the people of the world know about us, about iXhalanga, uMbenge, iCala, iTsomo, namabali ethu. Our Sister compares creating stories to being a mother, uthi namtwala, namzala, namkhathalela, namfundisa indlela elungileyo kwe lahlekisayo now she wants to do the same through stories, she carries your teachings and our culture but in order to*

make sure that they never die she must birth them in the form of stories (Xhalanga Blues, 2018).

Survival in Uncle Nyathaza's speech addresses the importance of preserving the *ntsomi* form and our different cultures and traditions. *Xhalanga Blues* and this research has made me realise that in order for artists to survive, we need to embrace a dramaturgy of sustainability or we will be co-opted by our administrative or academic jobs.

How to watch Xhalanga Blues

- *Intsomi* is not a genre so it would be limiting to watch *Xhalanga Blues* as a *ntsomi* form even though I have discussed aspects which suggest similarities.
- Try by all means to remember that *Intsomi* is a form of theatre and that perspective will limit the chances of othering it. If that fails tell yourself that *ntsomi* in *Xhalanga Blues* is a function, not a form.
- Remember the storyteller is not trying to (de)construct or Africanise anything, she is just telling a story and this research was merely attempting to engage with the lens through which some audiences (mostly white and/or international) might perceive my work. I have written a story - it does not matter if it is a well written story or not – what is important is that its value must not depend on my ethnicity. My identity is an intersectional point in my theatre-making and not the ‘signifier to look out for when viewing *Xhalanga Blues*. It is an archive of stories and histories, and I am pulling from what the body remembers, using my lived experience as a knowledge point from which to draw.
- I encourage the audience member to engage with the story, the *mise en scene*, the directorial choices, the feminism, or the issue of unemployment facing many young artists. There are multiple discourses in *Xhalanga Blues*, be careful not to erase them by focusing on my black identity.

CONCLUSION

The research offers a detailed dissection of African oral literature in *Xhalanga Blues*, but I have spent considerable time attempting to widen the scope of why *Xhalanga Blues* may be considered a *ntsomi* form. While I have identified ten poetics that can be useful in playwrighting and theatre-making, I acknowledge that various forms influence my theatre productions. I do not always know what I am pulling from - but unfortunately in the struggle to understand the feedback I had received, I have attempted to shape *Xhalanga Blues* as a *ntsomi* form. My research, therefore, became about using the frame of *ntsomi* to analyse, interpret, and make theatre. By positioning my gaze on *ntsomi* components within the production, I failed to engage with the images, symbols, and materials used and directorial choices in the production.

The academy has not created terms to describe work by contemporary black theatre-makers, and so the term '*ntsomi*' continues to be used to describe such work. The problem is one faced by many artists. Beyond the field of artistic productions, mapping the influence of *intsomi* in *Xhalanga Blues* through *Xhosa* linguists and operating as a linguist in this research might have led to other exciting findings which would dismantle the classical archive of *intsomi*. I therefore recommend that:

1. We find terms to describe work by black theatre-makers with less focus on ethnicity as they have more to offer on stage than simply identity politics or protest.
2. Consider looking at artistic identity from a linguist point of view, how is language changing and how does that impact our theatre-making.

Black and perhaps more acutely *Xhosa* theatre-makers are tugging at a metaphorical string, albeit at different points of the string - and each point emerging produces a different effect. How I pull becomes more critical, it is like composing a song. The comparison of theatre productions by *Xhosa* theatre-makers to the *ntsomi* form recognises the traces of traditional storytelling forms even in contemporary work. However, it is also limiting because that gaze is often influenced by institutional

racism that assumes, stereotypes and boxes black theatre-makers in very particularised forms of expression while leaving white theatre-makers with a universal license to explore any subject without preconceived notions based on their identity. I do not expect anyone who has not experienced institutional racism to understand what my problem in this research paper is about. This process has taught me that being a black theatre-maker or playwright means walking towards your culture and your traditions and at the same time, walking away from everything that is identified as your culture and tradition.

Xhalanga Blues, *Fragments* and *When We Awake* are plays that I wrote during the course of my Master's study in an attempt to determine the various ways that I might use what is available for me as material. The stories recall my family and my community and revisit storytellers that have come before me. They look at how I can consciously use my experience of oral storytelling in my process of theatre-making and in sustaining my career.

I can look back at previous plays and map resemblances of the oral storytelling in my theatre-making form, but it is always a palimpsest and never a clear portrait. However, in *Fragments* and *When We Awake*, the palimpsest becomes a portrait because I consciously used the poetics discussed in this paper to write the plays.

Xhalanga Blues, however, was written before I embarked on the research, therefore some of the poetics had yet to be traced and firmly established. The close comparative reading in the work to juxtapose the elements of storytelling vis-à-vis *Xhalanga Blues* has yielded mixed results. While the reception of *Xhalanga Blues* as *ntsomi* can be understood because of the traces, it remains a mischaracterisation of the work to only see it as such. In the exercise of the dissertation, I have demonstrated in specific samples of *Xhalanga Blues* that the piece both affirms and defies the character of the *ntsomi* form. Further, the readings of works like *Xhalanga Blues* are complicated by the presuppositions that being a *Xhosa* woman conjures up in theatre-making and I have tried to make a case here about the importance of tradition in influencing current work while it is important to note the presence or even afro-

speculative nature of works like *Xhalanga Blues*. Further still, the complication of the lived experience as an instructive source of knowledge of a given phenomenon makes matters difficult as one is confronted with having to articulate that which is intrinsic.

This dissertation is in no way an exhaustive treatment of this multilayered and multigenerational question. It seeks to enrich the debate, to serve as an invitation to new lines of inquiry for current and future theatre-makers. It is important to note the storytelling practices and their mapping in postcolonial, post-apartheid South Africa as they grapple with new content and the implications of the past in the reading of modern works such as *Xhalanga Blues*. My development as a content creator in the performing arts is ongoing and so experimentation and temporality are ever-present. The commitment to truly represent the diversity of black life in my work remains unchanging. Finally, I end as I started by invoking poet Julie Nxadi in that this work, though personal and reflective, may read as narcissistic, because the primary reading, tension, and struggle for the articulation of this work has been me.

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