

***Ukweqisa NgoLimi Lwebele; or 'Acts of Refusal'***

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*Figure 1: A Tragic Character. Image by J. Shipley, 2019.*

**Thesis Statement:**

A Performative Enquiry into Code-Switching as an Act of Refusal of Colonial Framings of Tragedy

**Theoretical framework:**

Tragedy, Performative Linguistics, Practice as Research, Black Feminist Autoethnography

**ABSTRACT**

“As an aesthetic gesture and linguistic performance, what can code-switching offer the process of destabilizing the racist and sexist hegemonies that perpetuate themselves within the English language as it (con)figures the Black Woman in society, and consequently, on stage?”

In my initial research-day presentation (Ngcobo, 2019a) I proposed, as a method of thinking around my research question, “the performative deconstruction of language as a metaphor for the dismantling of the culture, politics and economics that entrench certain dominant perspectives that figure Black

Women as tragic characters.” Though the research enquiry has become somewhat more sophisticated since then, it undoubtedly still rests along this idea.

This seminar paper itself is a reading of the praxis. Thobejane (2017:59) notes that a key component of credibility is not only what is defined as knowledge but also which methods are used to obtain, discover or create knowledge. My artistic practice as a theatre-maker and performer was chosen as my primary method of obtaining, discovering and creating knowledge.

From behind the layered lenses of Practice as Research (PaR) and Black Feminist Autoethnography (BFA), this paper centers and reflects on my artistic practice as a theatre-maker, actor and voice artist as I endeavour to answer questions around the figuring of Black Women in theatre. I argue for the reclaiming of the pre/colonial genre of Tragedy as a mode of representation for the post/de-colonial re-figuring of Black women characters onstage and in society, calling on sociolinguistic theory to propose the use of performative linguistics and linguistic behaviours as aesthetic liberators.

On the subject of linguistic behaviours, it would be my dream to expand this discussion beyond sociolinguistics into pragmalinguistics, sociopragmatics as well as raciolinguistics. All of these fields intersect in critically significant and generative ways at the points I make regarding the linguistic behaviours I mobilize within the work. Unfortunately, as many are wont to remind me, this paper (and certainly this degree) is not my life’s work. There is simply not the time or the scope to explore fully all of the fascinating directions in which performative and generative speech and language can expand and extend the efficacy of theatre. So, I will content myself with mentioning them briefly and fleetingly as areas which have informed my research but from which I have had to reign my discussion in. I will focus, then - just deeply enough to make my point – on the act of translation and its recalcitrant ‘*cousin-sister*’, code-switching.

## **OKOKUQALA; OR ‘AN INTRODUCTION’**

“The most difficult thing about Women's theatre is that it is difficult to watch. It is painful. It is traumatic. As a spectator, it causes one to recoil. While I understand that, as a man, I’ve no place to speak on the validity of women's lived experiences and how they are represented, the scenes of rape and abuse were particularly hard to watch or take in without recoiling. This makes it difficult to engage with the content of the stories, as they become stories that represent or present a reality of doom and gloom.” (Motshabi, personal communication, September 2018)

The above quote by director and publisher Monageng ‘Vice’ Motshabi came from a personal conversation I had with him regarding the Kuwamba Women’s Theatre Festival and the prospects of publishing women’s work. Motshabi went on to point out that there is something of a consensus among members of his fraternities about women’s theatre being “too painful to watch”. The significance of this particular interaction to me as a woman, a theatre-maker and a researcher is that it raised the question of how stories that centre women (women's theatre) can best - or more effectively - be told.

“To be black is to be burdened with the automatic, relentless work of saving black people. A black person can’t simply tell a story out of their love for stories – that story must carry with it some ‘conscious’ message, preferably political. At the very least, it is expected of black art that it should have the potential to offer solutions to the problems we face.” (Ndabeni 2018: 1)

This statement by Esinako Ndabeni (2018), articulates what I believe to be the artistic manifestation of Black Tax. While not an economic burden, this phenomenon is a Black Tax since, as Mangoma & Wilson-Prangley (2019) note, the term ‘Tax’ denotes a negative pressure and expectation and the use of ‘Black’ suggests it is perceived as an experience related to being a Black South African. This is an experience, not only of Blackness, but also of Africanness, of womanhood, and certainly of many other ‘ness-es’, ‘isms’ and ‘hoods’ that represent social minorities. This minority tax is an experience which underpins much of my own worldview and artistic practice. As a black, African woman, I create with an acute awareness of a responsibility to make work that offers solutions to the problems faced by black, and/or African and/or female bodies.

This is the reason behind my interest in tragedy as a mode of representation and as a possible solution to the abovementioned problem. To be clear, the problem is not that a man does not like to watch women’s theatre because it makes him sad and men don’t like to feel sad. The problem is that women’s theatre, as it is currently being made, may not be as *effective* in offering solutions to the problems that women face because men (i.e. those who hold the majority of social, economic, political and cultural power) are not being engaged by theatre as a medium in ways that can influence a shift in the power imbalances that exist and which place women in the perpetually minor role, both in the world and on stage.

### **The Aesthetics of Terror**

Upon reading Hans Thies Lehmann’s *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre* (2016), it became apparent to me that there are certain features of tragedy which are well suited to the telling of women’s stories. These features, which I will mobilize in my argument are Aristotle’s *mathesis*, Lehmann’s/Hegel’s/Kant’s aesthetic distance, Lessing’s fruitful moment and Schiller’s notion of splendid isolation.

Writes Lehmann (2016):

In the *Poetics*, the theory of dramatic sequence (of action) serves logical progression toward generality. Tragic narration stands under the law of law. It is subject to the law of crafting a logical structure that gradually proves recognizable. According to Aristotle’s reasoning, tragedy brings out a hidden order of things – a *logos* – according to necessity or probability. That is why tragedy is “more philosophical” than history. Its core energy is “learning”. Through reporting, information or the narration of events alone – that is, through mythological storytelling (even though what is recounted is also constituted a-logically) – this *logos* cannot come to light properly. What is required is logically ordered composition and dramaturgy – as Aristotle puts it, the *mythos* of tragedy. By this term, he understands an effective and, above all, a logically compelling arrangement of events: the “plot”. To formulate matters more precisely, the *Poetics* conceives tragedy as if it were constituted in the manner of theory at the core. Tragedy articulates an order for thinking; in this sense, it represents an occasion for – indeed, it already is a formulation of – *mathesis*, “learning”. ... Tragedy offers the masses medicine for insight –

appetizingly prepared, as it were. ... The higher goal is insight and knowledge *mathesis* – which tragedy is meant to achieve for the spectator.” (Lehmann, 2016:19 -21)

Here, Lehmann argues, on behalf of Aristotle, that the value of tragedy is in its ability to teach – that the goal of tragedy and what makes the genre highly philosophical is that through it, the spectator should attain insight and knowledge. Lehmann goes on to discuss the necessity of terror to the tragic experience (or experience of the tragic). According to him, the experience of terror is crucial to tragedy as it induces catharsis, and the overcoming of apathy. Sarah Kofman notes that there is an ‘a/pathy’ on the part of the spectator that corresponds to the absence of meaning in an image (Lehmann, *ibid*:56). Simply put, when images represented on stage do not hold meaning for the spectator, the spectator simply responds with apathy and the medium is ineffective in achieving either catharsis or *mathesis*.

This is precisely what necessitates the tying of terror to an image to be experienced. The caveat, Lehmann warns, is Hegel’s notion of ‘beautiful form’ – the image to which the terror is tied must be beautiful in order to be bearable to the human spirit. There must be ‘aesthetic distance’ between the spectator and what is being represented on stage. If all is represented to them in full, gory detail, there is nothing left for the spectator but to recoil.

"[Hegel] thought that the idealizing instance of 'beautiful form' provided the necessary condition for lingering in contemplation instead of simply recoiling in terror; this is what enables intensive yet reflective engagement with the terror that the tragic spectacle shows in the first place. In the same way, Schiller would have readily subscribed to Lessing's notion of the 'fruitful moment', which forbids the artist from representing the utmost degree of terror and, instead, calls for the level of affect to be lowered, in purposeful falsification, in order to reinforce the active fantasy of the observer; through the dampening effect of classical moderation, s/he is given the opportunity to elaborate, by means of [their] own imagination, what otherwise is only suggested. (Lehmann: *ibid*: 55)

Finally, Lehmann speaks to splendid isolation, saying that contemporary theatre tends to rob the spectator of the opportunity to experience and make sense of the work by confronting them with it:

... Art walks a fine line when it deprives observers of their noninvolvement, plunging them into an atmospheric environment without the chance of taking critical distance: insulting them spiritually, attacking them physically, or locking them up and shaming them. From the perspective of performance and theatre such means and ends are, to a certain degree, aesthetically legitimate - if also contestable, especially in a moral sense. Yet if aesthetic distance goes missing entirely, then the claim to an aesthetic - and also to a tragic - experience of transgression collapses. (Lehmann: *ibid*: 56)

In mobilizing these features of the genre it becomes clear that tragedy, well utilized, can be a mode of representation - a mode of *experiencing* which facilitates insight and knowledge, as well as reflective critical engagement with the lived experience of Black womanhood.

While tragedy might indeed be a useful dramaturgical frame for womanist theatre, it does have a fundamental flaw. Historically, approaches to tragedy have been grounded in colonial ontologies and epistemologies. As a result, tragedy is also, to this day, articulated largely through *isiNgisi* - the English language. As a result of the imperial colonial project, *isiNgisi* - as a codified way of viewing the world -

has imposed ways of engaging with the tragic that have become the definitive centers of our understanding of tragedy.

Davis (1999:152) says, "Black women have been invisible to the dominant culture; their unique ways of knowing and understanding the world have not been known'. The inability of the dominant culture of South Africa fully to see and know the Black woman is due, to a great extent, to language - a medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order' and 'reality' become established (Mkize, 2001:34).

How, then, does the African woman theatre-maker (re)claim tragedy as a mode of representation when it categorically fails to represent her as a cultural being? How does the African woman find herself inside of a dramaturgical tradition that has historically erased her on the basis of gender as well as race and culture, and use it as a means of telling her particular gendered experiences?

The problem lies in language and so we must turn our attention to language in order to open a path forward. In my view, for many black South Africans, the paralysis in large measure has to do with negotiating what it means to be African and modern, with cultural and religious inheritances that have been so mangled by colonial discourses and practices that we do not yet know whether and/or how to own them. (Buthelezi, 2016: 590)

In *We Need New Names Too*, Buthelezi (2016) lays out the dualistic existence of the Black South African negotiating notions of 'Africanness' and 'modernity' in inherited languages. Adade-Yeboah & Owusu (2013:44) describe the modern African tragic character as one who "conforms to a dualistic pattern of life which creates a conflict in him and this serves as his tragic situation." Following these converging trains of thought, it appears the Black African woman is something of a modern African tragic character - she exists in the tragic situation of 'modern and African'. The act of aesthetically heightening and linguistically reframing this tragic character is the only way I imagine Black Womanhood can coexist with Tragedy.



My minor project, which I titled *Tragic Flaw* and on which I will reflect fully in the latter part of the paper, will serve as a case-study in the use of aesthetics to explore certain possibilities within the realm of tragedy. For now, I'll foreground just one of the highly generative aesthetics used in the piece: the sonic and visual image of dripping. An incessant dripping sound prevails throughout the duration of *Tragic Flaw* and a pail, a pot and a kettle are seen placed in strategic parts of the floor in the hopes of catching the drops which appear to seep through the ceiling. What drips from the ceiling is not water, though – these are drops of breastmilk.

### ***Ulimi lwebele* in the refusal of Western ontologies, epistemologies and sensibilities**

The breastmilk metaphor was arrived at through the isiZulu term 'ulimi lwebele'. Literally, *ulimi* (the tongue/language) *lwebele* (of the breast) is the language an infant suckles (and so inherits) from its mother's breast during nursing. The term is semantically equivalent to the English, 'mother tongue'.

In pushing back against readings of Blackness and Womanhood from White places of knowing, the sonic image of the 'drip' or 'spillage' serves to break/rupture the illusion of the water-tightness of Western thought. Already, the metalinguistic use of isiZulu, my mother tongue – as aesthetic signifier and signified is an act of ideological and aesthetic recalcitrance that allows me a certain level of visibility as a Black woman, for my unique ways of knowing and understanding the world become more visible through it. Thinking through Black womanhood in a language other than English therefore makes room for the assertion of new possibilities in staging and thus seeing the Black woman. (Mtshali, 2019)

In both exploring and using *ulimi lwebele*, the minor project poses questions about particular linguistic behaviours which carry with them ideas of ethnic and cultural visibility, legibility and intelligibility – all of which, in Post-colonial South Africa, are still hinged on the presupposition of a 'white-' or 'colonial gaze'.

Is the necessity to be legible to the dominant culture due to the lingering colonial belief that *abelungu must* be allowed and enabled to read and understand Blackness? When brought to the fore as aesthetic tools, certain linguistic gestures problematize the privilege of Whiteness to demand of the Black body, 'make yourself understandable to me. My scope is limited to that which is available in the dominant language and you must translate yourself so that I can read you. So that I can consume you.' This is a demand made on all marginal or Othered bodies, when faced with aspects of the dominant culture: women are expected in the same way to translate and thus render themselves legible and palatable to the patriarchy; queer bodies to cis-heteronormative society; immigrants to those who might self-identify as 'natural citizens', and so on.

In *The Translator's Endless Toil*, Kasperek (1983) explains that the English word "translation" derives from the Latin word *translatio*, which comes from *trans*, "across" + *ferre*, "to carry" or "to bring" (-latio in turn coming from *latus*, the past participle of *ferre*). Thus *translatio* is "a carrying across" or "a bringing across": in this case, of a text from one language to another. (Kasperek, 1983:83)

The fundamental distinction between translation and code-switching is pragmatic. That is to say, the social performances of the tasks are different. Technically, translation relies on semantic competence, or knowledge of *what words mean*. Code-switching, on the other hand, can occur within the same languages, across dialects, styles of speech and even accents. In order to perform certain generative

tasks within the figuring of identities, the deliberate act of switching from one code to another relies on the ability to use language appropriately in a social context. Two types of pragmatic competences are at play here: the knowledge of forms and strategies to convey particular illocutions (i.e. pragmalinguistic competence) and knowledge of the use of these forms and strategies in an appropriate context (i.e. sociopragmatic competence). (Dippold, 2008 quoted in Mirzaei et al., 2012:80)

I would argue that in the carrying across of one unit of meaning in one to a corresponding unit of meaning in another verbal or written language, within the context of a post-colonial society, translation performs the social act of assimilating or attempting to neutralize difference. Instead of challenging it, translating possibly allows for the proliferation of the hegemonic way of thinking that places upon minorities the onus to make themselves legible to a dominant culture. I'm intrigued by translator Rosemarie Waldorp who, in Weschler's *Performing without a Stage* (1998), likens translation to "wrenching a soul from its body and luring it into a different one." (Weschler, 1998:07)

With the picture of the linguistic framework perhaps a little vividly painted, we can return to the initial question. "As an aesthetic gesture and linguistic performance, what can code-switching offer the process of destabilizing the racist and sexist hegemonies that perpetuate themselves within *isiNgisi* as it (con)figures the Black Woman in society, and consequently, on stage?"

For one, code-switching allows the black body to retain its own soul. On many levels, code-switching is the refusal to be carried across in, or by, translation. It lands us squarely in the space between one and the other and compels us to meet in the middle. On the pragmatic functions of code-switching, Paul Bandia (1996) mentions identity, focusing and distancing as only a few examples:

Identity is used here to mean the use of language as a means of solidarity, kinship and other types of group membership. Focusing, on the other hand, is the use of language to isolate the addressee as the sole intended listener to the utterance in question. Distancing has the force of saying to the listener "you are outside (excluded), or venerable, or young, or old, etc." (Bandia, 1996:144)

The act of switching into *ulimi lwebele*, or what Mbongeni Mtshali (2019) quite wonderfully calls 'speaking from the breast', is an aesthetic way of entering into the conversation on recalcitrance and refusal. It becomes embedded in the performance of Black Feminist Autoethnography, as it indexes a particular way in which black people, women, queer bodies, Others use language or codes in service of their own agendas. The agenda to which this practice is called into service involves creating ways of thinking about Tragedy that are not Eurocentric and thus not violent to those who exist outside of the frame of Whiteness.

# *Isibonelo*, or a Case Study: The Minor Project

In addition to the Sociolinguistic framework on which the work rests, I have leant into Practice as Research (PaR), as well as what Rachel Griffin (2012) terms 'Black Feminist Autoethnography' (BFA) as a means of reflecting on and speaking to my own work as both research methodology and subject of enquiry.

As a methodology positioned to embrace subjectivity, engage critical self-reflexivity, speak rather than being spoken for, interrogate power, and resist oppression (Calafell & Moreman, 2009; Denzin, 1997; Jones, 2005; Warren, 2001), autoethnography can be productively coupled with Black feminist thought for Black female scholars to "look in (at themselves) and out (at the world) connecting the personal to the cultural" (Boylorn, 2008, quoted in Griffin, *ibid*: 143).

What follows is a detailed reflection on my minor project that makes the case for PaR and BFA. In it, I present a semiotic analysis of the aesthetic treatment of the work – how I went about creating, testing and rupturing aesthetic distance, as well as a critical reflection on the process of making itself. Here, I reflect on my personal process as a theater-maker, making theatre of/for/about black women as a primary source. Through autoethnographic reflexivity, I connect the personal to the cultural.

"Reflexivity requires the researcher to interrogate his/her research, its context and the manner in which the research is conducted. It is always essential to reflect on the relationship between ontology and epistemology, by asking how the understanding of the world shapes and influences the understanding of knowledge for the researcher." (Ackerly et al. 2006 quoted in Thobejane, *ibid*:2).

Fleishman (2019) believes that the performance is "the publishing, if you will, of the research carried out in the making." If, indeed, the research is carried out in the making and the performance is the publishing or 'making available' of these findings, it should follow that the research paper or exegesis is therefore the ephemeral performance 'remaining differently' (Schneider, 2001:101).

The value of Practice as Research is in the formation of theory, knowledge or 'knowingness' from the inside out, rather than imposing it from the outside. This methodology requires a paying attention, sitting with the findings and a use of intuition and corporeal knowledge or intrinsic ways of knowing.

## **PRE-MINOR, OR, THE SET-UP**

I began the year with my research question being something along the lines of "How does society turn women into/view/(con)figure women as tragic characters, and to what extent is language complicit in this?" A month-long studio process of embodying the research through performance presented a means



of taking the research from theoretical to corporeal and each session served as a step through the task-based exploration of object theatre, embodiment, design, architecture, temporality and space.

The culmination of this process was a larger task which required the creation of a five-minute performance piece that articulated the research question. The product of this was my first shot at the performative exploration of the research enquiry.

My approach of the task was to employ what Mills (1999) calls 'sonic text as action'. I created a sonic text which would form the base of the performance, and which I will analyze for its significance not only as a text but also as an action within the larger scheme of enquiry.

The text was a five-minute-long voice track titled, '*Isu Lokwakha Umlingiswa Wembangalusizi Ongowesifazane*'; or '*The Recipe for Creating the Woman Tragic Character*' (Ngcobo, 2019b). The track was as much the performance as was the physical movement which accompanied it onstage. Setting up the construction of women characters as a metaphor for society's treatment of women, I recorded *The Recipe* in the style of a mid-century homemaker's instructional tape and set it to theme music from the life-simulation video game *The Sims* (Russo, 2007). *The Recipe* was recorded entirely in isiZulu, with the full understanding that, being in an academic institution in the Western Cape, only a certain percentage of my audience would be able to understand the text. In her thesis, *Theatre Voice as Metaphor* (1999), Liz Mills notes that the choice to place an audience in a position of non-comprehension signals the use of language as a sonic image. It was in my beginning to play with pragmatolinguistic focusing, as Bandia (1996) describes, as well as employing *ulimi lwebele* as an act of recalcitrance.

Theatre as a visual-aural-kinesthetic medium does not explain or make all of its aesthetic choices indisputably clear to its audience. Equally, the language or languages used in a production do not need to be understood by all or any of the audience. The choices around language and accent should ultimately be a reflection of conscious theatrical choices. (Mills, 1999: 13)

Non-Nguni-speaking spectators who witnessed the performance reported that although the semantic content of the tape was unavailable to them, its symbolic value was nevertheless accessible – they were able to read the sonic image. For this reason, no attempts were made on my part to translate or explicate the text at the time, however for the purpose of textual analysis within this paper, a translated transcription of the recording follows. With the sonic image in the foreground, my physical performance places the black female body in a minor role - that is, in service of the text, as I perform the role of The Character, who only responds to the prompts given by the pre-recorded voice.

***A black, female body lays on a kitchen counter. An upbeat jazz song begins to play – Marc Russo's Now Entering (The Sims 2, 2007).***

**Narrator:** A recipe for creating a woman tragic character. You will need: a body, some clothing, a stage or performance space, and a script.

***(The character awakes and sits upright on the counter)***

Step One: place the body you have found on the stage. This is your character. You may give her a name. \*emphasis\* *You may give her a name.*

**The Character:** *(realizes that the narrator expects her to state her name. She looks around and, based on what she sees, invents a name for herself)* No..bantu. Zwane. Nobantu Zwane.

**Narrator:** Step Two: take your character and dress her in a skirt. If she is married, you may cover her head with a scarf.

***(The Character begins to pick up the clothing items strewn around the performance space and dresses herself accordingly.)***

Step Three: move your character around, so that she may become accustomed to the stage. With great discretion, choose for her how she will move, how much she will move, as well as how much space she will take up, on what part of the stage.

***(The Character moves around, negotiating the space as she goes. She sits on the floor in a subservient manner, stands and walks briskly around, before climbing atop the kitchen table, looking down at the audience)***

Step Four: ***(The Character begins to speak)*** “Give her a voice so that she may speak for hers—“

***(The Narrator interrupts)*** Beware, though, that she doesn't speak *too* much! *(The Character's hands fly up to her mouth, involuntarily covering it)* A woman character who speaks too much is undesirable. Through your script of written words, you will determine what she will say, how much she will say, to whom she will say it and in what language she will speak. ***(At this point, the Narrator switches to English and the Character becomes irritated by something apparently lodged in her nose. She blows and sniffs repeatedly)*** If you would like her to speak in English, be aware of the implications of the language on her relationship with the audience, and other characters on stage. The use of English might reflect her class, level of education and infer a host of other socio-linguistic information about the character. If she is able to code-switch, she will navigate both worlds with relative ease for a person of colour. ***(Narrator switches back to isiZulu)*** Regardless of the language she speaks, a woman character is known to be weak. She will therefore require a man, such as a father, a brother or a husband, who will protect and provide for her, yet love her conditionally. Like all women, your character will undoubtedly face many of life's difficulties. In Tragedy, women characters are often the victims of rape, miscarriage or the death of a child, domestic abuse; the death of a husband as well as facing blame for the death of said husband. All of these experiences and their effects will cause the woman character to become emotionally and psychologically traumatized. It is up to you to decide what your character becomes as a result of this trauma – some characters have become murderers, criminals or witches. Others may become whores and seductresses, while others yet simply descend into madness. There you have it; you have now created your Woman Tragic Character!

**\*Jazzy music stops\***

(Ngcobo, 2019b)

### ***Indawo, or 'Heterotopia and Spatial Politics'***

To frame my analysis of the performance space itself, I mobilize Joane Tompkins' (2014) idea of *heterotopia*, which she defines as a location that, when apparent in a performance, reflects or comments on a site in the actual world, a relationship that may continue when audiences leave a theatre (Tompkins, 2014:1).

By pure happenstance, my chosen performance venue – a conventional theatre space – was unexpectedly occupied minutes before the performance was due to take place. As a result, my performance was presented in the campus canteen – a 'kitchen' space with pastel green wax tablecloths and matching curtains. This turned out to be the perfect setback, as I was forced to do and commit to what I had initially dismissed as semiotically uninspired, stereotypical and 'on the nose' – a performance of womanist work, located in a kitchen. In retrospect, the space was, indeed, heterotopic in that it contributed to the discussion around the underlying question which my research aimed to address - how women (characters) are placed in society and onstage. In line with heterotopic discourse, the kitchen space so resonated with the 'outside' world that its use revealed an otherwise hidden power structure in the spatial production of cultural and political meaning. (Tompkins, *ibid.*) After all, if one were to create a woman character from scratch, would one not cook 'cook her up' in a kitchen and serve her with a side of sarcasm?

This circumstance proved to be an enlightening moment as I was called upon as a maker to lean in, not only to the act of subversion, but also to improvisation. The topography of the kitchen space was subverted in the physical performance – established rules on the 'appropriate' use of the kitchen were thwarted by the character/performer standing and lying on the counter and table tops. The act of subversion a refusal of the norms and imposed notions of respectability on women characters and bodies. Because the situation did not allow for any preparation beforehand, much of this was found in improvisation within the intuitive moment of performance itself. The work of improvisation therefore became a generative means for exploring and articulating.

In *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Enquiry* (2017), Barrett & Bold write extensively on the use of improvisation as a methodological vehicle of investigation. For them, it

...provides interesting illustration and extension of Bourdieu's ideas concerning the relationship between institutional structures, intuition, knowledge and research. ...The significance of improvisation lies in its capacity for effecting an ongoing dialogue between the objective and the phenomenal, and mirroring the relationship between theory and practice. (Barrett & Bold, 2017: 11)

What liberated the moment of performance from a set structure to intuitive response and improvisation was the sonic image and its role in leading the physical image. The physical performance was led by the verbal performance: much like in the real world, words and language are generative – they create the physical world as much as they point to it. Through this, I intended to speak to the question of how women and women characters are figured through language. I therefore set up the act of responding to and following the instructions of a recipe as a metaphor for the ongoing act of assimilation of the queer, Black, female body into a hetero-patriarchal, white-supremacist world which constantly feeds her

messages of Otherness. My body was the site of construction, as well as the tool. The subject and the object, or the signifier and the signified.

### ***Hong! Hong! Or, 'Code-Switching and Social Distance'***

As previously mentioned, the pre-recorded voice track was set to theme music from *The Sims*, a life simulation video game described by its creator as an “interactive doll’s house” (Seabrook, 2006). In the game, players can create their own characters, build homes and environments in which to place them; and then, based on an algorithm modelled on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, they tend to the desires and requirements of their Sims. The song, titled *Now Entering* (Russo, 2007) which plays during through the ‘Create-A-Sim’ portion of the game, was chosen not only as an aesthetic reference to the crafting of a character, but also to further distance the world of the character from the real world and speak to notions of reality and the ideal.

In terms of the content of the track, the instructions laid out in *The Recipe* are representative of society’s imposed norms and expectations – ideas, which, through language, are used to create people. These ideas, modelled on traditional Zulu ideas of womanhood, dictate how women/women characters are expected to be dressed, how they move or take up space, how they speak, as well as how they behave and respond to trauma. The refusal of a voice for the character is a manifestation of the silencing effects of these realities on the Black woman.

Much like in the case of the video game ‘Sims’, being created or figured in front of an audience and being expected to perform womanhood, the Character is robbed of a sense of privacy or selfhood. In the initial moment, in which the Character is expected to name herself, she invents a name based on what she sees in front of her – other people. The name, ‘Nobantu’, literally means, ‘mother of (the) people’. In naming herself thus, the character concedes that she does not belong to herself, but rather to those who observe and consume her. She is immediately aware of the gaze of others and of the fact that her existence is validated by the presence of a spectator. I make use of this device as a comment on the generative potential of Zulu nomenclature.

To return to the idea of privacy in a public setting, two incidences of code-switching occur within the performance. As we’ve established, code-switching can manifest along the lines of all kinds of speech that can be coded – this can include shifts within the same language, across dialects, accents, class- and even vocational codes. These instances happened to be translingual – the shift into isiNgesi, and again out of isiNgesi and back into isiZulu. These are instances of speech convergence (where the text or speaker shifts into a language or code known to the reader or listener) and divergence (where the movement is away from the listener/reader). Giles et al. (1977) posit that speech divergence occurs when speakers wish to increase the social distance between themselves and the communication partner, and furthermore when they want to emphasize their distinctiveness. (in Rudwick, 2006: 236)

This increasing of social distance is what I propose creates private space within public settings. In the *Handbook of Linguistic Code-Switching*, Gumperz and Hernández (1971) write that code switching

occurs whenever minority language groups come into close contact with majority language groups under conditions of rapid social change. (in Bullock & Toribio, 2009:99)

Accordingly, bilingual and multilingual speakers who engage in codeswitching also switch identities while they do so. This occurs sometimes subconsciously, other times, however, the speaker has a specific goal in mind. An isiZulu-speaker may, for instance, choose to speak English in a particular situation in order to demonstrate his/her identity as an educated South African. In another situation, however, s/he may consciously choose to speak isiZulu in order to 'connect' with people. (Rudwick, *ibid*:237)

After the initial shift from isiZulu into isiNgesi, the Character is seen blowing and sniffing repeatedly through her nose. This signifies a moment of internal conflict well-articulated by Buthelezi (*ibid*: 594):

How does one become African and modern without falling into the trap of being a 'clever black' when asking critical questions that trouble the easy dichotomies being handed down from above?

It is commonly said, when a black South African is heard speaking 'good English', or articulating themselves well that they are speaking the language 'through/out of their nose'. This is a form of accent and language policing – a sociolinguistic 'tall-poppy' phenomenon which I wished aesthetically to recognize and interrogate. In his article, *Deconstructing Hong! Hong! Hong!* Eusebius McKaiser (2015) calls accent policing a cruel business:

It represents the worst attempt to deflect attention away from argument and onto the person who is making the argument. It's simply an obsession with playing the person as substitute for evidence-based reasoning and logical deconstruction of what they have to say. It aims to demean, to delegitimize and to silence. It is cruel and ungenerous and contributes to an impoverished public discourse. (McKaiser, 2015)

The Character in this moment of performance becomes uncomfortable at the prospect of speaking English because the notion of being a 'clever black' is often used to silence any person of colour who does not conform to the expected performance of Blackness. Being that the linguistic performances of Blackness and femininity are of particular interest to me, I chose to carry these aesthetics forward into the creation of the larger project as a way of self-criticizing and hedging questions on what it means to be a Black woman in an academic environment, forming an enquiry about Black womanhood in a language other than my mother tongue.

I also acknowledge the social distance created within same ethnolinguistic communities – a black woman who speaks 'through the nose' rather than 'from the breast' (whether that is by way of accent or actual language) alienates herself from other black women in the same way that a black woman who chooses a heightened register over a colloquial mode might invite the ire of her... well, she might be given a hard time. From an autoethnographic standpoint, '*Hong! Hong!*' is important in exposing personal experiences as well as ventilating questions around where language intersects with class, 'tribe' and gender, among others.

The heightening of the performance through this sonic text (and the performance which corresponded to it) created an aesthetic distance which allowed me to unpack the complexities of performing Black womanhood in detail, whilst also creating a compelling narrative.

From a modern or postmodern standpoint, it is easy to see that the Poetics, by deeming tragedy a medium of insight and a process of learning, in many ways amounts to a Trojan horse that Aristotle gave to art – and to the theatre, in particular. (Lehman, *ibid*:21)

The success of this task was the first idea I had that this element of tragedy was indeed effective. It was based on this initial offering that I continued the enquiry and endeavoured further to sneak this Trojan horse into a ten-minute solo performance which became the minor project.

### TRAGIC FLAW, or, 'THE MINOR PROJECT'



Figure 2: J. Shipley, 2019

#### ***Audible dripping.***

***The character, unclothed, is found seated on a stool facing a full-length mirror. On the edge of the mirror, a goatskin is draped. Behind the character is a rail of clothing ranging from skirts, tunics, and even a Tudor gown. On the floor are shoes. As the voice track begins, the character begins to move, going over to the pile of books on the floor beside her. She opens them and begins to read.***

**Scholar:** "A Shakespearean tragedy is a specific type of tragedy - a written work with a sad ending where the hero either dies or ends up mentally, emotionally or spiritually devastated beyond recovery. That also includes all of the additional elements discussed in this article."

***Dripping intensifies. The character abandons the books and goes over to the clothing rail. She pulls a white tulle skirt resembling a tutu and a pair of Ballet slippers – pointe shoes.***

"The representation of women in Athenian tragedy was performed exclusively by men and it is likely -although the evidence is not conclusive - that it was performed solely for men as well."

***She returns to the mirror and puts on the skirt before attempting to put on the Ballet slippers. They are too small. Her feet appear chunky and unsophisticated. She forces the slippers on and begins trying to stand on her toes, supported by the stool.***

"I would argue that in Greek tragedy the cross-dressed actor was crucial, a sign of the conventional nature of the drama. Male playing female is inevitably distanced from the role and makes it clear that the role of the woman is an idealization, not a realization."

***Frustrated, the character removes and discards the skirt and shoes. As the dripping continues, she shifts the pail and pot into better positions to catch the drops seeping through the ceiling. She returns to the rail to select another garment. She returns to the mirror with a Greek tunic.***

"These matters are not without political ramifications. It is possible for a pessimistic critic looking at tragedy to see misogyny; the male actors speak for a male playwright and a male city; tragedy is revealed to be an ideological apparatus of masculine political power predicated on the silence and invisibility of women. Sue-Ellen Case (318) states this very clearly: "'Woman' was played by male actors in drag, while actual women were banned from the stage. . . . The classical plays and theatrical conventions can now be regarded as allies in the project of suppressing actual women and replacing them with the masks of patriarchal production' (cf. Ferris 30)."

***The Character decides the tunic is ugly and returns it to the rail.***

"In the surviving plays, women become tragic figures by men's absence or mismanagement."

***She pulls a Tudor gown from the rail and takes it to the mirror. She climbs into the heavy gown and struggles to put it on.***

"The particular kind of tragedy Shakespeare writes differs from Greek tragedy. Both assume that the tragic figure is a great or good man, suffering from a flaw that brings him to destruction - hamartia. If one asks, what is the matter with the Greek character? The answer is the Greek word, 'hybris', which, incidentally, is not translatable by our English word, 'pride'."

***Dripping intensifies and The Character shifts a kettle in line with the crack in the ceiling. She goes to kneel in front of the books, looking through them as though for answers. The voice-over switches into the voice of The Character. She is thinking to herself.***

**Character:** ... a tragic... flaw... a tragic fl- yini itragic flaw ngesiZulu? Yisici. isici? Hhayi. Isici esi... hhe-eh. yisono! hhe-eh. Isono? No. Yeah, hamartia! Hamartia - isici - isono - a sin.

***The track returns to the voice of the Scholar:***

**Scholar:** “In tragedy, hamartia is commonly understood to refer to the protagonist's error or tragic flaw that leads to a chain of plot actions culminating in a reversal of from felicity to disaster.”

***The Character looks up from the book.***

**Character:** Tragic flaw! Isici - isono - a sin! ...Original sin? The fall of man. \*gasp\*

**Scholar:** “... Hamartiology: a branch of Christian theology, is the study of sin.”

**The Character, in a pious voice:** uZakariah 5:5 – “Yayisiphuma ingelosi eyayikhuluma nami, yathi kimi: “Ake uphakamise amehlo akho, ubone ukuthi kuyini lokhu okuphumayo.” Ngathi: “Kuyini?” Yathi: “Lokhu kuyi-efa eliphumayo.” Yabuye yathi: “Lokhu kungububi babo ezweni lonke.” Bheka, isisibekelo somthofu saziphakamisa, kwakungowesifazane owahlala phakathi kwe-efa. Yathi: “Lokhu kungukukhohlakala.” Wamphonsa phakathi kwe-efa, waphonsa isisindo somthofu emlonyeni walo.”

***\*Jazzy Jingle: Now Entering (The Sims)\****

***The Narrator: Tragic Flaw - Iphutha elibulalayo!***

**The Character:** uCordelia, uEva, uJuliet, uWinnie, uElectra, uAntigone, uNongqawuse, uMedea, uMkabayi, uClytemnestra, uLady Macbeth... ‘Lot's Wife.’

(Ngcobo, 2019c)

This performance was an attempt at an overlaying of the tapestry of tragedy onto Black African Womanhood - the prominent image being that of ill-fitting clothing, and a metaphor for isiNgesi and thus Western tradition on the Black body. In it, I perform the ritual of dressing – putting on and taking off clothing, examining one’s appearance and ultimately projecting onto oneself received and perceived standards of beauty, propriety and respectability.

### **The Sonic Image, or *Talking Back***

Again, in the minor project, I worked with a sonic image. A voice track which began with the closing line and music from the first performance denoted the continuation of the narrative or line of enquiry begun in the previous work. This time, I leaned in to leveraging the sonic image, endowing it with even more critical significance than before, mobilizing it as a way of ‘talking back’. On the subject of talking back, bell hooks’ (1989) explanation, is quoted in Griffin (2012) thus:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back,” that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject— the liberated voice. (hooks, in Griffin, 2012:143)



This 'movement from object to subject', this act and gesture of liberation is the underpinning of the sonic image. In order to move the Black woman character from the perpetually minor role, it is imperative that the work in which she appears 'talks back'.

In the minor project, *The Character/I* begin(s) by performing reading – I/she perform(s) research. This time, instead of a self-written text, the soundscape comprises quotations taken from the literature of Western scholars of Tragedy which represent colonial epistemology.

The current postcolonial demand to problematize the production of (Western) episteme is not without its dependence on the colonial archive as a site of knowledge production despite its dynamic interventionist framework. (Maledu, 2018:14)

This moment is significant in its questioning of the above quote. In much of the de-colonial pursuits of the postcolonial generation of thinkers and makers, the impulse is to reject entirely the colonial archive. The irony here, is that the Colonial body is actually dependent on the colonial archive in order to self-determine.



*Figure 3: Performing Research. Image by J. Shipley, 2019*

These inform the process of the black body reading from what could be called a foreign body of knowledge which purports to define the lens through which she is seen and consumed. In addition to the content of the sonic image, I adopt a quality of voice that assumes a particular role. The distinct voice of the Scholar is presented speaking in a British colonial accent - a Received Pronunciation which further creates distance between the scholarship or episteme and the Black body.

As previously mentioned, the dripping aesthetic interrupts the moments of scholarly thought as a means of rupturing the notion that Western definitions of tragedy and characters are water-tight. The use of

the mother tongue opens up and makes visible ways of knowing and understanding which are not visible in the use of isiNgesi. I hold that this is the flaw of the English language or colonial episteme.

### *Isibuko/Mirroring, or 'Nobantu and the Gaze'*



The minor project itself was set in the relative darkness of the P3 studio – chosen specifically for its mirrored wall. Taking further this notion of mirroring, I performed and was reflected endlessly between the mirrored studio walls and the full-length mirror set in the center of the performance space.

The notion of mirroring became an aesthetic tool through which I looked at the idea of reflection, the gaze, as well as this notion of the noninvolvement of the observer. Being that the minor project picks up where the previous work left off, I continued the narrative of Nobantu and the gaze, only this time, the character looks back.

The line between a full-length mirror and the mirrored wall created two worlds in which the Character exists: one in which the body is a character in a story, removed and separated from the audience/observer through a fourth wall created by the conventions of performance, and another through which the actor, the black body, includes the audience in the performance – here, the spectator becoming a part of the mise-en-scene when they are caught in the act of consuming the performance and the body in the space.

The notions of co-presence and co-performativity thwart the notion of distancing. The Character is watching herself in the mirror. Simultaneously, she is watching her audience watch her watch herself, while also watching her audience catch itself in the act of watching her watch herself. This is not an instance of some Brett Bailey-esque narcissism related to a 'returning of the gaze' in order to absolve the creator of an objectification of the black body, but rather a rupturing and thus a questioning of the notions of gaze, noninvolvement and public privacy.

Is this a private moment, when the character is alone, or does the fact of a spectator turn this into a public moment? Is the fact that the character seems unaware of her audience sufficient in creating privacy for her? Can this therefore be called a publicly private moment in the same way that a person who exists in

a language or not understood by all present can exist privately while still, quite publicly, being present? This has been the focus of the research I have thus far carried out in my practice – the creating, testing and rupturing of aesthetic distance through linguistic action, in service of the exploration and representation of the Black womanist lived experience.

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