

MAMA AS A ROLLING STONE, or,  
The Mbokodification of Black women, or,  
How To Roll Down The Hill Without Gathering Moss

## Abstract

This second seminar paper represents the development of my ongoing research on the construction of Black womanhood<sup>1</sup> in theatre and the potential that code-switching has not only to assert new possibilities for the staging and thus seeing of Black womanhood (Mtshali, 2019) but also to protect Black women from the potentially dangerous effects of post-dramatic stress.

With/in it, I'll further explore the construction of women, only this time through the broader lens of modern drama rather than the English language. I'll look at modernity and metaphysical catastrophe as they set the stage for the perpetual war on colonised bodies and how the performance of this lived experience throughout South African theatre history has produced certain tropes into which Black Women tend to disappear.

With this tragic set of circumstances, I'll unpack how the Black woman performer then experiences a level of violence when performing these characters that she is unable to exit once locked inside of the trope. A possible way out of the bondage of the mimesis imposed by the dramatic form, I'll propose, is through irony, which is produced in the act of *ukweqisela*<sup>2</sup> — a form of code switching through which the speaker moves into their mother tongue as a way of creating aesthetic distance.

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<sup>1</sup> The construction of Black womanhood in theatre is just as problematic as its construction in society. My discussion, in its limited scope, focusses on 'womanhood' as it is constructed through a cis-gendered, largely heteronormative lens and is therefore problematic in that it fails to fully represent a realistic view of all Black womanhood. I use the conventional spelling of 'woman' to signal these vast limitations.

<sup>2</sup> Previously, I've used the term, *ukweqisa* as the isiZulu to describe the instance of speech divergence (Giles et al., 1977) in which the speaker, wishing to exclude or 'go over the head of' an individual or group of listeners, switches away from the lingua franca and into a language not understood by the listener(s). This was incorrect. The verb '*ukweqisa*', in its simplest form, means 'to overdo' (as in, to exaggerate or to overdose on drugs). To capture the idea of 'going over (someone)' in the linguistic sense, the verb must be conjugated to *ukweqisela* - this provides the necessary context of object. I will hereafter refer to the practice as *ukweqisela*.

## Modernity/Coloniality as the Temporal Site of Metaphysical Catastrophe

This paper rests on a number of key presuppositions. The first is that theatre, particularly South African theatre, or that of any formerly colonised place is — and has been — about power. It's about who has it and who doesn't; what kind of power they do or don't have; why they do or don't have whatever kind of power they do or don't have; to what extent they do or don't have whatever power they do or don't have and what they do or don't do with whatever amount of whatever kind of power they do or don't have (for whatever reason they do or don't have it).

I referred frequently in my last seminar paper (Ngcobo, 2019) to the imbalances in social, economic and political power that place Black women in a 'perpetually minor role' (Mtshali, 2019) in the world and, subsequently, on stage. Understanding the ontological problem of the disempowerment of Black women in the world aids in understanding the construction of Black women characters in theatre and therefore also understanding the perilous work of Black women performers whose job is to oscillate between them.

To this end, this first section of the paper aims to set up this ontological problem of disempowerment by teasing apart the concepts of modernity and coloniality, so that it's clear what it means to be in a perpetually 'minor role', and so that the effects of that existence on Black women sits in the appropriate context. Once the ideas of modernity/coloniality have been established, this section will also situate what we call 'modern Drama' and place it beside the African storytelling traditions, showing the ways in which Black women appear (and disappear) in each paradigm.

To frame the concepts of 'metaphysical catastrophe' and modernity as a site of perpetual violence, even war, against Black women, I draw on the work of Maldonado-Torres (2016), who frames modernity as a 'peculiar construction of knowledge, power and being that divides the world into zones of being and not-being human which makes war endless and perpetual.'

*Modernity/coloniality is, in fact, the catastrophic transformation of whatever we can consider as human space, time, structure, culture, subjectivity, objectivity, and methodology, into de-humanizing coordinates or foundations that serve to perpetuate the inferiority of some and the superiority of others. (p.28)*

Maldonado-Torres further explains that the project of Western modernity is inherently a colonial, considering that Europe became modern in the process of conquest and colonial expansion. Modernity/coloniality, therefore represents what he calls a catastrophe, or "down-turn", that sees societies begin to situate themselves according to 'degrees of being human', as opposed to any other arbitrary categorizations. Because this hierarchy of humanness shapes our concepts of thinking and being, this down-turn can be considered metaphysical, creating a world 'to the measure of dehumanization'. (ibid.)

*This means that the extraordinary behavior that takes place in war becomes normal and ordinary in colonial contexts and wherever there are colonial subjects. This paradigm can be in effect in actual wars and genocidal practices as well as in democratic societies. (p. 17)*

I'm interested in the idea that democratic societies begin to look like perpetual war zones when all levels of violence against colonised bodies are normalised. These forms of violence, according to Maldonado-Torres, include (but are not limited to) "profiling, imprisonment, rape, low wages, difficult or no access to adequate housing and health care services, never ending condescension, epistemological and pedagogical disciplining" (ibid.). When looking at these, it's clear to see not only why the Movement for Black Lives calls this the "war on Black people", but also that this war is very much underway in our own democratic society.

With this understanding of modernity/coloniality and how it sets the stage for a war on Black people, I wish to pull out the two appendages of modernity which I propose reproduce coloniality in performance - language and Drama.

When I speak of 'Drama', I'm referring to the mode of performance that is specifically mimetic in nature - that is to say that it mimics real life, as opposed to representing or narrating it, as in diegesis. With the *Poetics*, Aristotle initiated the shift from the diegetic theatre forms that were traditional at the time to the mimetic form that became Drama or 'dramatic theatre'. Aristotle's mentor, Plato, however, was firmly opposed to this practice as he believed mimeses to be unsafe.

As Lehman (2016) explains it, Plato felt that, unlike narration (diegesis), representation (mimesis) placed the performer at risk of losing themselves. Perhaps rightly, I'm beginning to think, Plato feared that performers would not 'keep their distance' from mimesis but be so affected by the act of 'speaking through another' that their own personal identity would be imperilled. (p.24)

Plato's argument was that the mimetic representation of another human being necessarily leads the performer to 'match up' with the object of representation. His most oft-recalled examples included women, people who were considered insane, the ill or those giving birth, as well as people mourning, lamenting, cursing their husbands, and human beings contending with the gods. This 'mimetic behaviour' of representation encouraged the kind of identification with others that Plato felt caused the soul of the performer to become 'detached from the body to which it belongs' (ibid.).

As this idea of bodily detachment comes up, I can't help but recall a quote from my last paper on the act of translation, which Waldorp (in Weschler, 1998:7), likens to "wrenching a soul from its body and luring it into a different one." I argued there, that linguistic transgression in the form of code-switching "allows the Black body to retain its own soul" (Ngcobo, 2019:7). It's interesting to me that the theme of souls being removed from bodies is recurring. Does its recurrence mean that the effect of coloniality, whether it perpetuates itself through language, performance or any other form, is necessarily soul-wrenching? I will address this question in the concluding section of this paper.

Nevertheless, Aristotle got his way and much of his theory on the dramatic form has influenced European performance paradigms to this day. As his principles took hold throughout Europe, the thing we call 'Drama' was born. Dramatic theatre would become 'modern' in the second half of the nineteenth century, owing to the influence of the likes of Henrik Ibsen and his German successor, one Bertolt Brecht.

Suffice it to say that while European theatre was evolving from "the crudest mythological pantomime of primitive man ... to the severest problem-play of the stern Scandinavian" (Matthews, 1903 in Stenudd, 2006), Africa had its own storytelling traditions and performative trajectories which were permanently disrupted and irrevocably changed by the beginning of the colonial project on the continent.

Colonialism, to borrow Adigun's (2016) words, is 'a point of departure between traditional Africa and modern Africa' (p.2). To him, what we call 'traditional' Africa is the Africa before colonialism - dating back the time immemorial and ending immediately after the abolition of the slave trade. Because the abolition of the slave trade in Africa was closely followed by the introduction of Christianity and colonization in the middle of the nineteenth century (Gbilekaa, 2001: 23) if we were to pinpoint a temporal site of violence, I'm inclined to agree with Adigun's assertion that traditional Africa was 'discontinued officially' at the historic 1884-5 Berlin conference. (2016, *ibid.*)

On the discontinuation of traditional Africa, Tshazibane (2016) is of the view that Xhosa women have been robbed of their place in society by the interference of colonial religion with Xhosa traditions.

*If the missionaries had not interfered with intonjane<sup>3</sup>, the chances are that it would still be practised, as male initiation is, and would bring about a certain equality between genders, giving the Xhosa woman the same cultural honour and social status as her male partner. (p.35)*

Tshazibane notes that because the missionaries considered the practice of female initiation, among other traditional Xhosa practices, a threat to the moral fibre of society, many Xhosa women were forced to become (and still are) Christians. The colonial project's disruption of African tradition clearly took a number of forms - those with which I'm particularly concerned are English and its disruption of linguistic and pedagogical practice; and the Dramatic paradigm, with its dislodging of the performance practices already valuable to Black African women.

African oral performances have historically been dismissed as quasi-dramatic phenomena (Chinyowa, 2000, in Tshazibane, p. 5), however, Chinyowa argues that since its functions are central to teaching matters of social, cultural, mental and emotional consequence, African storytelling (and theatre performance) is closely linked to African people's humanistic philosophy. (*ibid.*)

Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) defines storytelling as 'the telling or retelling of a tale or narrative to an individual or group of listeners through voice and gestures' (in Tuwe, 2006: p. 2). He distinguishes storytelling distinctly from reading a story aloud or reciting from memory, since the use and generation of mental metaphors become a method of recording and expressing feelings, attitudes, and responses of one's lived experiences and environment (Gbadegesin, 1984: *ibid.*).

In the oral tradition, most stories are divided into three parts, namely an introduction, a body section and a conclusion (Matateyou 1997, Vambe 2004, in Tuwe, p.4) of which, as Aristotle would've put it, "the beginning is what is "not posterior to another thing," (as in: *kwasukasukela*) while the middle needs to have had something happen before, and something to happen after it, but after the end "there is nothing else" (Stenudd, 2001) (or: *cosi cosi, yaphela*) .

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<sup>3</sup> *Intonjane* is the Xhosa female rite of initiation, equivalent to the male initiation of *ukwaluka*. *Intonjane* is also the term used to refer to a female initiate (Tshazibane, 2016)

In essence, African storytelling is a powerful pedagogical tool and as the storytellers, Black women exist within the paradigm as the holders and imparters of philosophical knowledge that shapes the values, beliefs, text about beliefs and ideas, daily practices, aesthetic forms, systems of communication, institutions of society and political ideas of the community (Falola 2003, in Tshazibane, 2016: p. 1).

In sharp contrast, what Adigun calls 'African drama' thematically depicts colonialism and the conventions of the mimetic form place Black women inside of the experience of colonialism instead of allowing her to drive the story from a safe distance. The dramatic paradigm is therefore an important lens through which to look at the construction and framing of Black African women characters (as well as the performers who play them and certainly the writers who write them) because it was specifically through the colonial project that African performance became dramatic and the conventions of this form have (had) a remarkable impact on the ontology of Black womanhood in the theatre.

In a democratic, post-colonial space where colonised bodies are perpetually in the zone of not-human (enough), dramatic theatre - necessarily re-inscribes trauma to the colonial body/performer in ways that are unique to bodies not protected by the concept of humanness. This is what it means to exist "in the perpetually minor role."

## Umlando - A History

This next section aims to unpack the question of 'which women specifically' are being constructed, deconstructed and analysed within my study. In order to paint the broader picture of case studies, it's necessary at this point to steer the discussion through a quick survey of some of the most significant women characters in the South African literary/dramatic canon. In his study *Women in South African Theatre* (1990), Gray notes that

*the earliest [South African] script traceable is an extremely lengthy ritual play about a Muslim woman named Galiema. ... The plot involves the virtuous young Galiema freshly enslaved from the Far East, and her ruses to resist the nocturnal demands of her European owner. .... The play recounts how the land-owner will ... attempt to seduce Galiema and, when she refuses his hand, consign her to forced ravishment by his bastard son. (p.75)*

While the allegory of Galiema is said to be based on hearsay, since the original text is a closed document, privately owned and not available to researchers, Gray goes on to call *Galiema* the "first recorded South African script, and the eponymous heroine the first in a long line of symbolic female figures of resistance" (ibid.).

In the article *Venus and White Desire* (2008), Osha analyses the central themes in Suzan Lori Park's play *Venus* (1996), namely: the black subject 'in classical coloniality and her conflicting status; the violence and tyranny of possession, fetishisation, commodification, aesthetics, and totalitarian knowledge' (p. 82). Osha looks at how the black subject, Sara 'Saartjie' Baartman, oscillates between humanity and animality since, because her aesthetics do not conform to Western notions of beauty, she's thrust into the realm of animality or non-humanness, to be humanised, briefly and shallowly as and when it serves the erotic desires of whiteness.

It's in line with all of these themes that the first trope, represented by both Saartjie and Galiema can be referred to as the Venus - the exoticised, eroticised, captured Other.

After *Galiema*, a one-man show by Andrew Geddes Bain entitled *Kaatje Kekkelbek* or *Life Among The Hottentots*, first staged in 1838 is what Gray considers to be the first appearance of an indigenous woman character in South African theatre.

*Forced labour, starvation wages, attrition ... Kaatje has many complaints against the colonising process, and Bain intersperses the buoyant song narrating her tribulations with railery and invective. ... Since the part was played by a male for a colonial audience used to profane burlesque, we may assume Bain was satirising the pretensions and vanity of Kaatje, yet the sketch is not at all unsympathetic to the grievances of newly dispossessed people. Indeed, the prattling complainant in the Kaatje mould persisted in English South African popular culture. (p.76)*

Temple Hauptfleisch (2007) in *The Shaping of South African Theatre: An Overview of Major Trends* says of the farcical satire:

*the text dealt with the multicultural and socially diverse society of the time, and introduced a conspicuous figure in Kaatje, the "coloured girl from the Cape" who was to become a widely used stereotype in South African theatre, culminating perhaps in the tragic figure of Athol Fugard's Lena. (p.5)*

Lombardozi's (2005) assertion that critical scholarship has not satisfactorily commented on the portrayal of women in South African theatre by male playwrights is an astute one and there's certainly more to be said about Fugard and his representation of Black women. In the interest of maintaining the chronology of this study, though, we will return to him later.

Kaatje's character, to me, draws on the Venus archetype, only Bain's blackface caricature of the Venus has a specifically minstrelizing effect. In *Inside the Minstrel Mask* (1996), Bean unpacks the minstrel trope that began to emerge in the late 1820s, placing these characters at the intersection of slave culture and earlier blackface stage characters such as the harlequin of the Commedia dell'Arte, the clown of English pantomime and the clown of the American circus, the burlesque tramp, perhaps the "blackman" of English folk drama. (p. 38)

*This portrait is fairly typical of the representation of black women on the minstrel stage. ... White men's fear of female power was dramatized with a suspiciously draconian punitiveness in early minstrelsy, usually in the grotesque transmutations of its female figures. (p. 39)*

In 1935, H.I.E Dhlomo would pen the country's first ever English play written by a Black person - *Nongqawuse: The Girl Who Killed to Save*. Dhlomo is said to have written his *Nongqawuse* in response to the 1926 play *Nonqause* by Mary Waters, which he considered to be the "white people's version" of the story. (ESAT, 2015) According to SA History Online (2011)

*History is not kind to Nongqawuse. ... She enters history either through colonial records or the oral traditions passed down from generations amongst the Xhosa people. ... There is, for instance, this description by a police informant: "A girl of about 16 years of age, has a silly look, and appeared to me as if she was not right in her mind. She was not besmeared with clay, nor did she seem to me to take any pains with her appearance."*

According to Pilgrim (2002), the other side of the 'Venus' or 'Exotic Other' trope is the 'Pathetic Other'. Pathetic Others, constructed to refute the claim that white men find Black women sexually appealing, include those depictions of African women as physically unattractive, unintelligent, and uncivilized. These images suggest that 'African women in particular and Black women in general possess aberrant physical, social, and cultural traits.'

In *The Dead Will Rise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing of 1856-7*, Peires (2003) shares that uNongqawuse was eventually

*handed over to Major Gawler and she stayed at his home for a period. One day Mrs Gawler decided to dress her, along with the Mpongo prophetess Nonkosi, and have their portrait taken by a photographer. This is the widely circulated image of Nongqawuse with which most people are familiar. (p. 355)*

It's clear why Dhlomo, though not a woman, felt it necessary to tell Nongqawuse's story from the perspective of a Black person. Hauptfleisch emphasises that it was Dhlomo

*who seriously attempted – along with Ezekiel Mphahlele, and others – to establish some kind of critical debate about South African culture and more specifically to bridge the gap between African performance and “classical” drama as it was being taught in schools and universities ... and it was Mphahlele who in a sense took up Dhlomo's cause. (2007, p.8)*

In attempting to bridge this chasm between mimesis and diegesis, it can be argued that Dhlomo, Mphahlele and many of their successors - Zakes Mda, for instance - sought to eliminate the colonial difference that placed Black women in the minor roles of their own stories. Then again, the portrayal of women by male playwrights is still a matter of contention.

This brings us neatly, then, to the year 1959, which gives us the only Black woman character that Athol Fugard would ever write - *uNongogo* - about a shebeen proprietress, Queeny, who tries to escape her past as a mineworkers' whore (a 'Nongogo', or a woman for "two" and "six") and lead a 'respectable' life; and her encounter with Johnny, the aspiring township tablecloth-salesman trying to forget his humiliation at having been raped in the mineworkers' compound. (Walder, 1984: p. 34)

Frankly, what's more baffling than the dearth of Black women characters written by Fugard is the fact that a number of publications has been written about women in a number of Fugard's works - just not *Nongogo*. Anywhere that *Nongogo* is mentioned, it appears alongside *No-Good Friday*, so that they are an inextricable package - the Sophiatown plays, the township plays, *Nongogo and No-Good Friday* - never being studied as important Fugardian works in their own right.

I've seen criticisms of Fugard in those publications I've found that do mention Queeny briefly - In *Gender Dynamics in Athol Fugard's Drama* (2014), Mwihi and Mbugua point out the similarities between *No-Good Friday* and *Nongogo*. "They were both set among Sophiatown blacks and they weave together the realism or naturalistic setting of a township. He observes that the characters face the same issue which is the poverty imposed on the blacks of South Africa and that to be black in South Africa is to be poor" (p. 326). Walder agrees that neither play offers much hope - both make it very clear that being black in South Africa is not a situation in which hope comes easily (p. 34).

What the literature lacks in substantial analyses of Fugard's Queeny, it makes up for in passages and chapters about the playwright's mother. It might be that the simple answer to the burning question, '*Why has Fugard never written Black women?*' is simply that he's been preoccupied with trying to immortalise his mother, whom he called, "the archetypal image for all my women" (2002: 69). And indeed, his writing reflects the decisive and sustaining role that his mother played in his life. "In fact that's got a lot to do with my plays; the woman is always the affirmative element". (ibid, pg. 7)

Something else worth critiquing is Fugard's methodology. Kulenkampff notes that in the collaborative making process of both his *Township Plays*, Fugard opted for "more of a method-acting style, a form that was popular in the 1950s, than a direct collaboration. The black actors in the group served as conduits into black life and township experience – material he used in the production of *No-Good Friday* (1958) and *Nongogo* (1959). (ibid, p.48)

It seems that critical writing on *Nongogo* simply hasn't been done. Having directed the work with students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Philisiwe Twijnstra (quoted in Mungroo, 2019) comments that *Nongogo* has "come at just the right time in our country. Women in South Africa are on their bleeding knees. We all know women like Queeny - they are either dead, buried or relentlessly fighting to breathe."

I'd initially intended to argue that the shift from prostitute to 'Shebeen Queen' in itself is to place something of a corrugated glass ceiling over the head of the Black woman character, so that even her most valiant attempts at upward mobility and, perhaps even purity, keep her in the township and in the service of men. On closer consideration, however, I've found that the Shebeen Queen character is, in fact, a revival of the African tradition that assigned the role of alcohol brewing to women and that, in context, she plays an important role in Black community. During the apartheid era, shebeens became a crucial meeting place for activists. Patrons and owners were frequently arrested by police, though the shebeens were often reopened because of their importance in unifying the community and providing a safe place for discussion. (Wikipedia, 2020)

Moreover, Queeny is not the only Shebeen Queen to come out of 1959. After all, Todd Matshikiza, Harry Bloom and Pat Williams gave us *King Kong* that year, and the role that launched a young Miriam Makeba to international stardom was that of Joyce - a Shebeen Queen.

Along with the ubiquitous Jezebel, the 'Shebeen Queen' trope has persisted in mainstream South African drama - the Mfundu Vundla soapie *Generations*, for instance, aired on SABC1 between 1994 and 2014, holding the largest viewership in South African television (7 million viewers every weeknight) for the entirety of its twenty-year run. (Wikipedia, 2020) Central to the soapie's cast for many of those years was Shebeen Queen, Ruby Dikobe, whose role within her community was undoubtedly that of custodian. Perhaps, then, there's more to this particular representation of Black womanhood than meets the eye.

The various permutations of Venus, Jezebel and Shebeen Queen aside, another trope emerged in the 70's through the impact of Elsa Joubert's novel, *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* (1970). The novel was translated into 13 languages, adapted for the stage by Joubert and Sandra Kotzé and produced in no less than six versions; adapted as a musical play called *Poppie Nongena* by Kotzé and Hilary Blecher and filmed twice - the most recent of the films being released this year (ESAT, 2020). The influence of this particular text on the South African literary landscape is undeniable and it was through *Poppie Nongena* that working-class, Black women characters began to take centre stage (Gray, 1990).



In fact, to a large degree, the 1970s were a decade that destabilised many of the hierarchies set up by the dramatic paradigm. With the emergence of workshop theatre, the written text was no longer the theatremaker's blueprint - usurped by a collaborative process that relied on the skills of the performer to improvise toward a jointly-shaped narrative. The role of the playwright then became documenting and archiving the text as it was being 'written' by the performers on the floor. Now, in the place of a director who drove the project emerged a space-holder and co-ordinator of the company's joint research endeavour.

This non-dramatic way of working is entrenched in South African theatre practice by the need expressed by Pratt (1991), who argues that telling our own stories, "bearing witness," or "testifying," acts "as an opportunity for correcting misrepresentations and distortions of a culture by an outsider or an opportunity for people to "describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them" (p. 35)

Gray credits Fatima Dike for what he calls 'the beginnings of a movement of black assertion' (p. 83) since Dike's first work, *The Sacrifice of Krelu* (1976), established almost all of the elements of the "black drama" that was to follow. For the first time since the "tribal drama" of Dhlomo in the 1930s, *Krelu* brought onto the stage an entire recreation of black history, intact, with all its ceremonial pageantry and ritual spectacle (ibid.).

Dike employed an allegorical method of storytelling as described by Tshazibane and Adigun above. This method showed, in fact, the root causes of contemporary popular actions of defiance. The metaphysical problem of the disempowerment of Black people is addressed in most every 'Black drama' that comes after Dike's *Krelu* and, unusually for this kind of work at the time, *Krelu* centres a "wise woman". The character of Khulukazi is described as 'the peasant harvester symbol of mother Africa, adaptable, continuingly and undyingly humane' (p. 84). Nomsa Nene would go on to extend this archetype in the 1980s as *Poppie Nongena*.

Still, another important text by women was produced in 1986 - the play was Gcina Mhlope's *Have You Seen Zandile?*

*Although Zandile is the most oppressed of all South African stage characters - black, female, working-class and a school-child as well - the impact of the play is not based on any demonstration of the disabilities of such a position. On the contrary, Mhlope's script reveals all the hidden strengths of the female's position ... in a word, its solidarity. One shining transaction is enacted during the play - the passing of the gift of storytelling across the generations, from old lady to granddaughter. (p.85)*

In *Harmony of Voice: Women Characters in the Plays of Zakes Mda* (2015), Lombardozi looks at Mda's female characters similarly to the way Gray views *Zandile* - that is, triply oppressed – hav[ing] suffered the triple exploitation of being black, female and working class in an apartheid society. Lombardozi notes that instead of allowing them to succumb to their circumstances, however, Mda's characters reflect 'the hidden strengths of what it means to be female and so celebrate their indomitable spirit that allows them to emerge, if not always unscathed, then most often victorious' (p. 218).

Mapping out this genealogy of significant Black women characters, it's clear that the dramatic paradigm reproduces coloniality by coming to the fore in a manner that side-lines the valuable and effective storytelling traditions of pre-dramatic Africa, while simultaneously refusing to represent Black women as whole beings.

It's not insignificant, for example, that the two ways in which Nongqawuse is known are through colonial records and oral storytelling. Through the former, she exists as Pathetic

Other. Through the latter, a real, complex human being. Her case proves, to me, that when colonial forms - languages, ontologies and pedagogies are allowed to represent Black womanhood, they cannot do so fully. When they *do* represent them, the dramatic then attempts to capture them with tropes that do not reveal their fullness.

On the other hand, it's equally important to critique the ever 'indomitable spirit' and other characteristics with which Black women characters are often imbued by well-meaning Black men, who, too, write from the marginalized perspective of Blackness, but who - by virtue of not being inside the experience of womanhood themselves and perhaps, like Fugard, are informed by Oedipal idealizations of their mothers – cannot fully represent Black women either.

## Mbokodofication - Minding the Pain Gap

In this discussion of representation versus imitation, especially where Black women are concerned, I'm interested in ideas of public and private, specifically since, through linguistic acts like code-switching, we're able create clearer distinctions between how Black women *appear* or *seem* and how they actually *are*.

To this, I'm interested in Fleishman's (2015) article titled *Beyond Capture: The Indifference of Practice as Research*. In it, Fleishman posits that what Alfred Whitehead calls 'public' aspects of knowledge "focus on the ways in which [an] object appears to us and/or the ways in which it behaves in relation to us or other objects." He asks, though, "what about the 'private' or inner experience of that object that escapes the subject because it is not available to us?" (p. 6) He quotes Nagel (1974) as noting that 'there is something that it is like to be an organism – something it is like *for* that organism' (p. 436, in Fleishman, p. 7). So, when an organism (let's say, a Black woman) possesses certain qualities or characteristics, abilities or traits, the experience of which we can't reasonably presume to imagine, this complicates the notion of 'what it is like to be' that woman. (p. 438, *ibid.*)

Being 'restricted to the resources at our disposal', as Fleishman argues – specifically language limitations, in this instance, but possibly all other perceptive faculties – renders us 'unequal to the task' of imagining what it is like to be a Black woman (*ibid.*). He hurries Coleman (2009) along to his conclusion

*(a) that there is a 'what-it-is-likeness' for all things; (b) that this private or inner state exceeds human capacity to imagine or articulate and has an existence independent from it.* (in Fleishman, p.8)

Many of the tropes that have emerged through the history of South African drama have been attempts to capture a sense of the 'what-it-is-likeness' of the Black woman. In all of its attempts to ensnare Black womanhood, the canon has produced a pantheon of cardboard cut-outs that are imitations of women, but not real women. These imitations and representations are dangerous in a number of ways, which I will unpack in detail in this section.

Of all the tropes that have emerged of the history of South African drama, I'm particularly intrigued by the trope established in the '70s through the 'adaptable, continually and undyingly humane' *Poppie Nongena* - this is the trope of the "Strong Black Woman" - the

archetype of the noble, Black, often mother-figure, indomitable in spirit and unbowed by the triumvirate of systems that oppress her.

The struggle song, *Wathint' abafazi, wathint' imbokodo* became an anthem during the Women's March of 1956. Chanting, *Wathint' abafazi, wathint' imbokodo - you strike the women, you've struck a rock*, Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Rahima Moosa and Sophia Williams led more than 20 000 women in a march to Pretoria's Union Buildings to protest the Apartheid government's Urban Areas Act which would require black women to carry passes. The words of this song have, over the last sixty years, become a rallying cry used in women's protest movements, reverberating especially loudly each year in the Month of August - national Women's Month (SA History Online, 2005).

The adage that once represented the boldness, strength and courage of South African women has morphed into something rather sinister. It appears to me that the decades-long repetition of this once empowering phrase has begun to perpetuate the subconscious perception of Black women as fundamentally non-human - as rocks that can and surely must not experience pain.

*The bodies of the colonized, subjected to total and perpetual war, have different meanings than the bodies of those who inhabit the zone of being-human. As much as femininity is conceived in terms of passivity and embodiment, femininity is generally considered to be an abused but also protected zone that limits the exten[t] and degree of violence towards those who are seen as feminine. Therefore, a black woman is, by definition, never considered to be feminine enough, or is outside of the standard norms of the feminine (see Davis 1983; Spillers 1987), which means that whatever safeguards come with being recognized as female do not extend to black women. (ibid, p.21)*

I propose the critical term *mbokodofication*, a neologism comprising 'mbokodo' and the suffix -fication, to denote the production of the 'Strong Black Woman' trope, specifically in the South African context. *Mbokodofication* is the practice of viewing and subsequently treating black women more as rocks than as human beings who are capable of experiencing pain and trauma. *Mbokodofication* is also the performance of Black Womanhood that emphasises the stereotypical hardness and super-resilience over humanness and vulnerability. Seton (quoted in Levine, 1997) notes that trauma, when triggered, is locked in the body and must be accessed through the body in order to be processed. *Mbokodofication* is therefore also the calcification of somatised trauma in the Black woman's body resulting from the repeated experience of trauma and the prolonged state of (dis)stress, whether real or conjured up and magnified by the gaze of the spectator.

In her essay *We Have Suffered Enough* (2019) Melisa Pereyra writes that we, women of colour, are praised when we suffer. "Why do women of color gain space in someone's consciousness only when we show them the depth of our suffering?" She goes on to share that since the beginning of her career in the American regional theatre, "... Beloved female characters have, through my body, been verbally, mentally, and sexually abused; mutilated, murdered, and exiled. I can count on one hand the times my characters weren't harmed."

In *Post-Dramatic Stress: Negotiating Vulnerability for Performance*, Seton (2006) coins the titular term 'post-dramatic stress', evoking the notion of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (P.T.S.D.) to signal the broader complexities of acting practices and their impact on actors' lives. On PTSD itself, Litz and Roemer (1996) explain that

*The effects of exposure to extreme stressors are profound and cut across all areas of functioning – biological (e.g. Friedman at al., 1995), psychological (e.g. Horowitz,*

*1986; Herman, 1992a), and social (e.g. Gist and Lubin, 1989; Kulka et al., 1990). By definition, traumas such as interpersonal violence, sexual assault, life-threat, bodily injury and extreme loss confront the individual or group with demands that overwhelm their coping capacity, and anyone exposed to trauma through direct experience or observation is subject to predictable disruption of functioning. (p.3)*

In a recent study on *Neural and Sociocultural Mediators of Ethnic Differences in Pain*, Losin, Woo, Medina et al. (2020) dispel the common belief within neuroscience that Black people are hyposensitive to pain compared to white people. In fact, the Black subjects of their study reported greater pain in response to a controlled pain stimulation than their white counterparts, with MRI scans showing marked differences in Black people's brain responses to pain - when assessed these brain responses correlated with the subjects' personal histories of experiencing discrimination.

According to Villarosa (2020), these inaccurate racial and ethnic biases about the physiological differences between Blacks and Whites (what Lockward, Vázquez, Díaz Nerio, et. al. call 'invented imperial difference') (in Maldonado-Torres, p. 38) were presented as fact and legitimized in medical journals during the 1820s and 30's, paving the way and providing support for racist ideology and discriminatory public policies.

A survey of 222 white medical students and residents published in *The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2006) showed that half of them endorsed at least one myth about physiological differences between black people and white people, including that black people's nerve endings are less sensitive than white people's.

The lingering myth that Black people don't feel pain has produced race-based disparities in pain care - a phenomenon Losin calls the 'pain gap'. This is as far as I'll wade into unfamiliar scientific territory - only as far as to support my conviction that the existence of a 'pain gap' in neuroscience and physiology proves the same in all other spheres of modern medicine and that mbokodofication is particularly damaging for Black women because it widens the psychological pain gap.

In my introduction, I alluded to the perilous work of oscillating between character, performer and woman-in-the-world. The gaze continues even off-stage - as the Black woman transitions from character to performer, she is observed by the larger professional community. Here, the praise and acclaim that comes with mbokodofication also plays a role.

When the Black woman performer is mbokodofied, it is inevitable that she will eventually experience post-dramatic stress which disrupts her functioning and well-being long after she's supposedly stepped out of whatever role it was that required her to avail her body and mind to mimesis. In addition to this, if she has truly been mbokodofied, instead of receiving the necessary care, she will likely be applauded, awarded and afforded more opportunities as a result of her successful re-enactment of trauma, cementing her as perpetually ready and available to (and even good at) re-enact(ing) her dehumanisation.

This wave of external validation immediately following mbokodofication produces a temporary analgesic effect that might block the performer from truly being aware of her level of traumatisation and the effects of this trope on her self-concept. The performer now not only experiences trauma through the character which is triggered in performance (or rehearsal), but now, it no longer matters what the character is - she might play any other trope of Black womanhood - because something of a feedback loop has been created - the performer herself is now the boulder.

Black women are therefore faced with a unique representational problem, a Sisyphean task, if you will – locked by the dramatic paradigm into the interior world of a trope, she must trudge up the hill with her shoulder pressed against the need, the responsibility, to make her lived experiences visible. To testify and bear witness, to correct misrepresentations and distortions. Down the boulder will roll when, in the repetitive mimetic depictions of her suffering, she will become re-traumatized and more susceptible to the same traumas she's fought so hard to elevate into visibility. Down the boulder will roll when she is applauded for how well she suffers and she begins to identify as the boulder herself.

The point of this paper is not to attempt to eliminate the boulder - the boulder will always be there. The point is to look more holistically at the picture and begin to re-imagine the Black woman's Sisyphean situation – if she's destined by fate (read: coloniality) to become the boulder rolling down the hill, how can she do so without gathering moss? That is, how can she exist within the dramatic paradigm without becoming identified with the dehumanisation she imitates?

## Ukweqisela - Shifting the Room Divider

My first seminar paper (Ngcobo, 2019) posed the 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 the English language as it (con)figures the Black Woman in society, and consequently, on stage?”

At this point in my research, a significant shift has taken place - the English language is no longer the sole antagonist. What this is to say is that the racist and sexist hegemonies against the configurations of Black womanhood are not being perpetuated necessarily *by* the English language per se, but perhaps are being perpetuated by the dramatic paradigm, *through* the English language. This means that the way out of these tropes imposed by drama in its memetic form is through a type of linguistic transgression that allows the performer to ‘keep her distance’ as Plato suggests, so as not to place herself at risk.

In this year's webinar reflection on the process of making and performing *Antigone (Not quite/quiet)* (2019), I proposed ‘aesthetic distance as Deus ex Machina when the performer's trauma is not quite quiet’ (Ngcobo, 2020). As I further explore aesthetic distance, I'm drawn towards the irony that is produced in the act of code-switching and the extent to which Black woman performers can use this irony as a means of transgressing mimesis and thus protect themselves from post-dramatic stress.

The second key presupposition on which this paper rests, then, is that language can be an aesthetic liberator for Black women, since the act of code-switching, specifically switching into the mother tongue, something Mtshali (2019) calls ‘speaking from the breast’... indexes a way in which Black people, women, queer bodies - Others - use language or codes in service of their own agendas (Ngcobo, 2019: p.7). In this section, I'll look at code-switching once again, this time with the aim of clarifying what these agendas might be.

*Code Switching is used as a mechanism for identity negotiation, situational marking, social-group membership, upward mobility, social solidarity, listener accommodation, face management, discursive salience and linguistic economy. (Albirini, 2011: p. 537)*

To this, Bandia (1996) emphasises the specific acts of Focusing and Distancing - the former being the use of language to isolate the addressee as the sole intended listener and the latter having the force of saying to the listener "you are ... outside (excluded)" (p. 144)" *Ukweqisela* is therefore specifically an act of distancing.

*When I speak about [ukweqisela], I like to use the analogy of language as a room divider. To some, a room divider is simply a piece of furniture used to divide a room. Kanti kwabanye bethu i-room divider iyinto ebaluleke ngezindlela ezingachazeki ngesiNgesi. i-Room divider ihlala umabonakude, oku yiwona osixhumanisa nakho konke okwenzeka ngaphandle. i-Room divider ihlala izithombe zabantu abafundile, bagreda, nabashadile, bandisa imizi. i-Room divider ihlala izitsha ezingathintwa 'umuntu. i-Room divider ihlala amabhiskidi kaKhisimusi. i-Room divider is a cultural artefact. Therefore when I choose to use language as a room divider, I am not only physically dividing the room in order to have a little privacy here or there, I am also using it to become visible and invisible in ways that are otherwise not possible. (Ngcobo, 2020: p.3)*

The 'room divider' can be shifted into a number of positions, so that the agenda to which *ulimi lwebele*<sup>4</sup> is called to serve is not just the distancing of the performer from the spectator (thus defenestrating colonial gazes), but also the focusing of the performer on one individual or group of spectators, as well as the self-reflexive distancing of the performer from the character (who, as many modern dramatic characters are, will likely have been written in English and whose very appearance onstage therefore inevitably represents a 'colonisation' of the body of the Black woman performer).

The idea of 'aesthetic distance as Deus ex Machina' is an allusion to the almost farcical nature of the device within tragedy - when the protagonist, stuck between fate and a hard place and facing certain doom, is magically rescued - a deity is lowered onto the stage in an elaborate contraption and the otherwise unsolvable predicament is solved... but not really. It's an easy way out of the conundrum that only serves to resolve it on the surface, while emphasising the fact that, in real life, nobody gets off the hook quite so easily.

Similarly, the creation of distance through linguistic gesture certainly allows the performer briefly to let herself out of the costume, so to speak, both to address the spectator, compelling them to participate in a moment of reflexivity and to address the tropes of modern drama as they perpetuate violence against her. Her doing so doesn't eliminate the trope permanently, though. Deus ex Machina might bring the play to a neat end, but it is, essentially, an empty device leveraged for its emptiness, in order to produce irony and thus encourage self-reflexivity.

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<sup>4</sup> *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'. (Ngcobo, 2019. p. 6)

## The Aesthetics of Irony

*Eironeia is no longer lying or deceit but a complex rhetorical practice whereby one can say one thing ... but mean quite another. ... Both Socrates' questions and the contemporary use of parody and quotation rely on distinguishing between those statements and actions that we genuinely intend and those that we repeat or mime only to expose their emptiness. (Colebrook, 2003: pg. 2)*

How, then, does the Black woman employ irony as a means of resisting the character's, the text's - even the dramatic paradigm's colonisation of her body? How can she *speak from the breast* in such a way as to allow herself enough distance from the character as to be able to expose the trope instead of becoming it?

This section aims to unpack the ways in which irony is produced as I gesture toward my thesis production - a work that will carry forward the thinking conducted over the last two years. A culmination and a demonstration, of sorts. Here, my intention is to ventilate some of the questions my thesis production will endeavour to answer. Chief among these questions is, "*what does/will it look like*" when the aesthetics of irony are applied, in real time, in response to and in expression of the Sisyphean situation I've laid out in the foregoing sections?

There are two important things to bear in mind at this point. The first is that irony essentially comes about in the intentional thwarting of maxims. Second is that code-switching (which, by definition, is the thwarting of certain linguistic maxims) isn't only about language as it is spoken. Since, after all, this paper is about performance and this section of the paper is about a planned performative work, I must broaden my application of aesthetics beyond written (and spoken) text.

A hunch I had earlier but could not prove, was that code-switching connects Black women to the pre-dramatic. It's a lot more difficult to prove this when I insist that it's the mother tongue as it is spoken that specifically connects us to the pre-dramatic, but I can certainly support it more easily by moving away from spoken language to, say, corporeal and embodied language; sonic, musical and instrumental language, as well as design language. So, what other forms can code-switching take besides the spoken-written word and what non- or pre-dramatic techniques can I mobilise to render this switching legible?

As I mentioned earlier in the paper, I'm intrigued by the idea of mimesis and translation being two reproductions of coloniality that are said to 'detach' or 'wrench' a soul from the body to which it belongs. It makes sense that they should be similarly viewed this way, as I could argue that translation is a form of, or at least an attempt at linguistic mimesis. This line of thought, for me, brings to the fore coloniality's propensity for soul-wrenching, begging the questions, "What are the aesthetics of 'soul-wrenching'? How can I lean into oral tradition, for example, to present something like soul-wrenching onstage without asking the performer to go on and imitate some or other sort of spiritual rape or robbery?"

*One of the components of the Xhosa storytelling tradition is uKombhela, and songs were added where the storytelling needed to be dramatized. The songs also played a role as characters in the tale: instead of having a crab, as in Zenani's tale, "wadidiyela uNonkala ngasemlanjeni" was sung. This song connected three theatre*

*elements: direct addressing of an audience member, physical expression in terms of dance and song, and characterization. (Tshazibane, 2012, p.38)*

This idea of 'songs playing characters' is something I'd almost intuitively reached for as I began to conceptualise my thesis production. For instance, I'd hoped to have the Mbongeni Ngema song, 'Sabela' (from the 1987 musical and subsequent 1992 film, *Sarafina!*), sung by a woman, to play the role of the corrupt police officer it describes as I presented a tableau of the Marikana massacre sans the murdering cops. The music itself is perfect in a number of ways, however, its composer is not - bringing me into the kind of ethical predicament I don't have the scope to unpack here, but will inevitably have to face later.

Also integral to the diegetic paradigm are *izibongo* and *izithakazelo*. In the recitation of one's praise or clan names, one engages in the act of narrating the stories of one's ancestors in a way that not only foregrounds her in the present moment but also frames her in context with the past, bringing her historical background into focus. Functionally, to engage in storytelling of this kind, extolling the ancestry and history of a person and their immediate community

*is to mediate and transmit knowledge and information across generations, conveying information to the younger generations about the culture, worldviews, morals and expectations, norms and values (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1982, Asante 1987, Kouyate 1989, Alidou 2002, Chinyowa 2004 in Tuwe, 2016: p.2)*

As my thesis production, *A Girl Named Marikana* is specifically about the tragedy of names and naming, the practice of *ukubonga*<sup>5</sup> is one I intend to explore, not just as a way of 'shifting the room divider', but also as a pedagogical methodology. Again, I'm interested in switching codes here, in order to present *ukubonga* not as a verbal practice, but perhaps as an embodied practice that archives history in the body. The exploration of this leaves room for thinking about the aesthetics of Black feminine corporeality, embodiment and adornment onstage (Mtshali, 2020).

I had proposed a medium project last year, the title of which was *KhuLuLeKa: The Monomyth of NoBaNtu and the Ppl*. The first part of the title '*Khululeka*' specifically referred to a common song sung by young Zulu women during *ingoma yezintombi*<sup>6</sup>.

I'd intended to use *ingoma* as a way of encoding womanhood to be hidden in plain sight and the following is an excerpt from a monologue I wrote for the work:

*"I have sanded away the names of those to be forgotten and etched anew the orders of the revolution... the songs of our revolution - ingoma ye'ntombi - those songs of our girlhood that we sang with a naiveté we have had to outgrow. Those songs that, distracted by supple thighs and bare breasts, amadoda could never decipher. Siyobeqisela ngengoma."* (Ngcobo, 2019)

I had at this point begun to think about the various forms of code-switching that existed beyond the spoken word and was looking specifically at *ingoma yezintombi* as a public forum that allowed young Black women to speak privately as the songs they sung commented on society at large, as well as their lived experiences of womanhood. Often, these songs were sung in isiZulu, but, from my experience, are often not accessible even to those men who are Zulu-speaking, since they are often distracted by the visual displays of

<sup>5</sup> *Ukubonga* or *ukuthakazela* is the oral recitation of one's clan or praise names, which are *izibongo* or *izithakazelo*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ingoma* is equivalent in English to "anthem", although in recent times has referred to the many and varied dance styles that exist within Zulu culture, particularly within the competitive arena.



femininity in the dance. Irony is in full effect in *ingoma yezintombi* as the what-it-is-likeness of Zulu womanhood evades capture into trope when the salacious nature of the male gaze becomes its own obfuscation.

Some critical questions, then, that my thesis production will attempt to answer is, "What other fora exist for Black women? In what other spaces and through what other aesthetics do women create privacy for themselves so as to let themselves out of the costume of boulderdom? If irony is to fly in as the god in the machine, what are the cogs and wheels of the machine?"

I cannot presume to know the answers to these questions now. What I am certain of, however, is that through the 'layered lenses of Practice as Research and Black Feminist Autoethnography' (2019, p. 2) to which I referred in my first seminar paper, the answers might become more clear.

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