

Manuscript version: Author's Accepted Manuscript

The version presented in WRAP is the author's accepted manuscript and may differ from the published version or Version of Record.

Persistent WRAP URL:

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/98709>

How to cite:

Please refer to published version for the most recent bibliographic citation information. If a published version is known of, the repository item page linked to above, will contain details on accessing it.

Copyright and reuse:

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions.

Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Publisher's statement:

Please refer to the repository item page, publisher's statement section, for further information.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: wrap@warwick.ac.uk.

*Aesthetics of South African women's embodied activism: Staging complicity*¹

Yvette Hutchison, Warwick University

Feminism is a complex subject in Africa, and the relationship between gender studies scholars based in Africa and those based in North America and Europe has been strained because of 'the differences in political environments and experiences of racism, as well as interpretations of feminist ideologies and different political alliances and coalitions.'² Many African women prefer to speak of 'African feminism'³ or 'Africana womanism',⁴ which highlights the specific legacies of colonialism in the current oppressions experienced by Africana women.⁵

However, Gwendolyn Mikell⁶ identifies the following issues as being of particular concern to women in Africa: political sovereignty, their nation's economies and domestic cultures, production and reproduction, motherhood, child mortality, marriage and bride-price, female circumcision, polygamy, access to education and the clash between local and global values and identities. Like any ideology, African feminism is nuanced according to how it is formulated and negotiated within the details of a particular environment. As there are 58 countries, over 2000 languages and many more cultures, approaches to African feminisms differ according to context. For the purposes of this article, I am going to focus on how two South African women artists post-1994 are negotiating their understandings of their own

¹ This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK, reference: AH/M008096/1, African Women's Playwright Network.

² Catherine Cole, Catherine Takyiwaamanuh and Stephan F. Miescher (eds.), Introduction, 'When was gender?', in *Africa after Gender?* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), pp. 1-14 (p.1).

³ See for example Ama Ata Aidoo, 'The African Woman Today' in *Sisterhood – Feminisms & Power from Africa to the Diaspora*, ed. by Nnaemeka Obioma (Trenton, NJ & Asmara: Africa world Press, 1988), pp. 39-50.

⁴ Clenora Hudson-Wheems, 'Africana feminism', *Ibid*, 149-162. Africana here refers to African women both on the continent and in the diaspora.

⁵ For an overview of the theories and positions, see Pinkie Mekgwe, 'Theorizing African feminism(s) – the Colonial Question'. *Texts, Tasks, and Theories: Versions and Subversions in African Literatures*, Vol 3. ed. by Tobias Robert Klein, Ulrike Auga and Viola Prüschenk (Matatu 35, Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 165-214.

⁶ Gwendolyn Mikell, Introduction to *African Feminism*. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), pp. 1-50.

sexualities, cultures and identities in order to transcend what Jane Bennett and Charmaine Pereira call 'the beleaguered, and ever narrowing, spaces ... of "gender and development" or "empowerment"'.⁷

I begin by contextualising South African women practitioners in South Africa, and this moment in feminist practice. During apartheid, Temple Hauptfleisch argues, 'most ... women operated mainly in the private and commercial world, for ... the state-funded theatre organizations have hardly ever allowed women into prominent positions of power. Thus, these women were used, their creativity tapped—but their control of the system was limited.'⁸ To some extent, this situation occurred because theatre was perceived as a public or political space in which generally men spoke and protested apartheid, which took precedence against other issues like gender. The plays of this period tended to explore male experiences of apartheid in mines, gangs or prison, with women being represented in *absentia*, through male memory or fantasy narratives. Very few South African women playwrights were published during apartheid, with Fatima Dike and Gcina Mhlope being two rare exceptions. Miki Flockemann argues that, '[w]hen women are thus represented in their absence, what is replicated is a set of female "types" and stereotypes.'⁹

With the transition to a democratic South Africa, women have entered parliament in large numbers and played important roles in defining one of the most liberal constitutions in the world. They have been involved in large-scale law reform that 'has managed to create very woman friendly legislation to promote gender equality'.¹⁰ However, much of this reform has been slow to reach people on the ground. South Africa still faces the legacies of apartheid, including racial divisions

⁷ Jane Bennett and Charmaine Pereira, 'Introduction: Sexualities and gender – research methodologies and the questions which compel us', in *Jacketed Women – Qualitative Research Methodologies on Sexualities and Gender in Africa*, ed. by Jane Bennett and Charmaine Pereira (Claremont: University of Cape Town Press, 2013), pp. 1-19 (p. 1).

⁸ Temple Hauptfleisch, Anja Huismans & Juanita Finestone. Unwilling champion — An interview with Reza de Wet, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 9.1 (1999), pp. 53-63 (p. 55).

⁹ Miki Flockemann, 'Getting harder? From Post-Soweto to post-election: South African theatre and the politics of gender', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 9.3 (1999), 37-53, (43).

¹⁰ Amanda Gouws, *(Un)thinking Citizenship: Feminist Debates in Contemporary South Africa* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 1.

and high levels of gender violence: it is estimated that a woman is raped every 17 seconds, with lesbian women being raped to 'cure' them of their sexual orientation. It has one of the highest increases of HIV/AIDS infections in the world, with around 36 percent of the population living on less than \$1.25 a day.¹¹ Sadly, the most iconic image of black women in South African is not that of a woman like Nonkosi Zoliswa Mhlantla, a judge of the South African Constitutional Court, but rather of the ubiquitous domestic worker, who is rendered as being in the world to serve others.¹² And this paradox is complex and relational, as argued by Moffatt.¹³

Despite these conditions, contemporary South African women artists are challenging the dominant expectations regarding women's roles and representations. A new generation of South African female visual and performance artists have emerged, including Mary Sibande, Mwenya Kabwe, Faniswa Yisa, Tracey Rose, Ladyskollie, and Sethembile Msezane, and they are engaging overtly with disavowed gender issues and the legacies of colonialism and apartheid by situating their work in their corporeality. They use their bodies, skin and clothing as sites to contextualise histories and challenge racial and patriarchal narratives, largely outside of language. These women meet and connect through university drama departments, at festivals like the annual National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, the Johannesburg Dance Umbrella or Jomba! in Durban. They share work and set up collaborations through platforms like the African Women Playwrights' Network (AWPN.org), facebook and Instagram.

I have chosen to focus on works by Chuma Sopotela and Mamela Nyamza who are both from Cape Town, and who have collaborated together. I am interested in the

¹¹ 6 Facts about Poverty in South Africa (Aug 2016), <<https://borgenproject.org/6-facts-about-poverty-in-south-africa/>> [accessed 6 March 2017].

¹² This work engages contemporary feminist debates on domestic labour, see Victoria Haskins and Claire Lowrie (eds.) *Colonization and Domestic Service*. (New York & Abingdon: Routledge, 2015)

¹³ Helen Moffatt. "These Women, They Force Us to Rape Them": Rape as Narrative of Social Control in Post-Apartheid South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 3.1, Women and the Politics of Gender in Southern Africa (Mar., 2006), 129-144.

ways in which they use specific aesthetics that overtly engage with abjection or beauty as artistic strategies to interrogate various ways in which individuals and society at large may be complicit in the subjugation of women in contemporary South African societies. I use the term 'aesthetics' here not in the broader Kantian sense of a theory of judgement that combines pleasure with disinterestedness. Rather, I am exploring the tension between aesthetics as an expression of taste, specifically about notions of 'beauty' or attractiveness, and aesthetics as a form or style which is mobilised by an artist to evoke a particular affect, what Cohen, Varea and Walker call aesthetic-as-language,¹⁴ which audiences experience collectively with affective results.

Drawing on Grosz's argument that the body is a 'site of social, political, and geographical inscriptions, production, or constitution',¹⁵ I consider how colonial inscriptions of women and postcolonial engagements with these inscriptions impact on the ways in which artists are using their own black female bodies to consider which images, imaginaries and regimes of truths are appropriate now. According to Kaila Story, in the eighteenth century, 'European naturalists and anatomists deemed European women's bodies *dangerous* and *suspicious* due to the fact that they had anatomy unlike males; African bodies were *hypersexual* and ultimately *nonhuman* because of their polarization to whiteness.'¹⁶ She continues, 'The nude or seminude bodies of black women in nineteenth-century paintings and photographs suggested the hypersexuality of African (black) women and the hidden sexuality of European women who, although objectified through these visual images, were still allowed to remain modest and fully human.'¹⁷ Bodies and clothing are thus central to the colonial discourse on the civilised subject, but, as Ayo Coly suggests, African

¹⁴ Cynthia E. Cohen, Roberto Gutiérrez Varea, and Polly O Walker (eds.) *Acting Together: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Violence: Volume I: Resistance and reconciliation in regions of violence*. (New York: New Village Press, 2011) pp. 5 & 9.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) p. 23.

¹⁶ Kaila Adia Story, 'Racing Sex—Sexing Race: The Invention of the Black Feminine Body', in *Imagining the Black Female Body - Reconciling Image in Print and Visual Culture*, ed. by Carol E. Henderson. (Palgrave online, 2010), pp. 23-43. (p. 28).

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 40.

engagements with the colonial rhetoric on ‘the un/clothed African female body underscore the Fanonian argument that colonialism ultimately determines the form and content of anticolonial resistance’.¹⁸ Contemporary African feminists are thus engaged simultaneously in challenging colonial discourses and various traditional African inscriptions of how they are defined and represented, particularly in terms of their sexuality, sexual attractiveness and humanity.

Memala Nyamza: *Hatched*

Dancer and choreographer Mamela Nymaza was born in 1976, at the height of apartheid, and brought up by her maternal grandmother in an isiXhosa-speaking community in the township of Gugulethu in Cape Town. Unusually for a black woman, she extended the ballet training she received at the ZAMA Dance School at Fezeka High School into a professional career, earning a National Diploma in Ballet at the Pretoria Technikon in 1994 as the only black dancer, and then dancing professionally with Performing Arts Cape Town. However, the one-year fellowship at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Centre in 1998 and the African Dance workshops that she attended in Soweto in 2005 motivated Nyamza to question the semiotic of her black body in European ballets. In 2008 she created *Hatch*, the first of her choreographies dealing with the political and social issues she faces as a woman born during apartheid into a very patriarchal culture, which means that she continues to battle oppression on the grounds of her race, gender and sexual orientation. Her works include *Kutheni (Why?)*, *Shift*, *Isingqala* (isiXhosa word signifying sorrow characterised by incessant weeping, 2011), and *Okuya Phantsi Kwempumlo* (The Meal, 2012). In 2012, she collaborated with the UK-based artist Mojisola Adebayo in *I Stand Corrected*, which addresses the rise of so-called ‘corrective rape’ of black lesbians and trans-men in South Africa. In 2013, her *19-Born-62-Rebels* reflected on the Soweto Riots and massacre of children in 1976, and her own experiences of education under apartheid. Her most recent works, *De-*

¹⁸ Coly, Ayo A. ‘Un/clothing African womanhood: colonial statements and postcolonial discourses of the African female body.’ *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*. 33.1, (Jan. 2015), pp. 12-26 (p. 13).

apart-hate and *Rock to the Core*, which included Chuma Sopotela, have been performed in Cape Town and various European cities in 2017.

I am focussing on her first piece, reworked as *Hatched*, which premiered in Cape Town in 2009 at the On Broadway, Out the Box Festival and Baxter Dance Festival,¹⁹ because it evidences the moment that she begins to explore what a critical feminism might mean for a black woman producing art in post-1994 South Africa. It addresses the issues Nyamza faces as an artist negotiating her isiXhosa culture, its traditions and societal demands against her evolving cultural and sexual experiences and desires. Nyamza describes this piece as her landmark work, which facilitated her as a woman, a mother and an artist 'hatching' and becoming who she is today.²⁰ I will trace each of these aspects in terms of her aesthetic choices and how these reflect an emerging South African feminism.

Hatched is a dance solo, usually performed 'end on', that is framed as ballet, but which draws on modern and African dance styles, jazz, mime and release technique in relation to her black female body. It is set around a washing line and the gendered domestic labour associated with it, while her son sits downstage drawing. Nyamza enters *en pointe*, wearing a tulle skirt reminiscent of a ballet tutu, covered with wooden pegs; and her torso is naked. She balances a bucket on her head. Village sounds, including cowbells can be heard behind the music, which alternates between Tchaikovsky classics and African songs. Nyamza takes items of red clothing from the bucket, hangs them on a clothesline that stretches across the stage and then uses them to explore various roles assigned to her as a woman, and juxtaposes these to her personal desires, dreams, and fears. The piece ends with her removing her *pointe* shoes and her tulle skirt, hanging them on the line and dancing freestyle on stage.

¹⁹ Since 2010 it has been produced in the USA, Canada, the UK, and the Netherlands where Nyamza performed in shelters for abused women, in Brazil and Vienna, and at schools and conferences throughout South Africa.

²⁰ I Am Woman - Leap of faith, Episode 2, Season 2 - Mamele Nyamza, SABC (2013) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SkeP3aCoEwE>> (17.08-17.33 mins) [accessed 21 June 2016].

The ways in which Nyamza mixes classic European and African music, and dance styles is challenging as it makes visible implicit hegemonies of performance forms, while asking audience members to analyse their associations with specific rhythms, sounds and dance forms personally and culturally. For many, as Jill Mills has argued, 'ballet is the pinnacle of the dance world and "ethnic dance"... is at the lower rung'.²¹ Mills argues that this is because ballet is narrated as a higher level of artistic or aesthetic ability, including balance, grace, control; while African dance forms are seen to embody power and energy, but to lack the technical and disciplinary aspects of western dance forms.²² Green has analysed how 'African-American' students in university classical dance classes were 'pushed to the back of the room', or chastised for 'having a big butt',²³ experiences familiar to Nyamza. By presenting and juxtaposing ballet against jazz or African dance forms, she begins to highlight how these forms are implicated in social discourses that constitute racialized and gendered bodies and their related power networks. However, paradoxically, she also physically demonstrates how her embodied identity has been constituted by years of dedicated practice to specific aesthetic and social practices, just as the black woman's body has been encoded over centuries by various colonial and patriarchal discourses. Here Nyamza is exemplifying the Foucauldian 'practices of self', whereby she acknowledges that she has been actively involved in constituting her own subjectivity by engaging with these different discourses, rather than simply being 'acted upon'²⁴ by them, and this provides a model for other women to shape their own subjectivity and performances of themselves. At the same time, she is inviting her audience to consider how it makes meaning from what it sees and hears in her performance, and to evaluate how cultural practises ranging from everyday domestic labour to dance forms affect how we constitute ourselves as social beings

²¹ Jill Mills, 'Is it or is it ain't: The impact of selective perception on the image making of traditional African dance', *Journal of Black Studies* 28.2 (1997), 139–56 (p. 154).

²² *Ibid.*, (p. 144).

²³ J. Green, 'Socially constructed bodies in American dance classrooms', *Research in Dance Education* 2.2 (2001), 155–173 (p. 168).

²⁴ Foucault, M., 'The ethics of the concern for self as a practice of freedom', in *Michel Foucault: Ethics, subjectivity and truth. The essential works of Foucault*, vol. 1, ed. by P. Rabinow. (New York: The New Press, 1997) p. 291.

individually and collectively. Thus, we see how Nyamza ‘hatches’ as a performer as she critiques her own artistic practice as a woman, her body as a ‘site of social, political, and geographical inscriptions, production, or constitution’,²⁵ and dance as her artistic medium.

This critique extends to the narrative focus of the piece, which focusses on domestic labour and gendered roles. Right from the start Nyamza juxtaposes her embodied subjectivity aesthetically and conceptually as a graceful ballet dancer to her socio-cultural subjectivity as a house-wife or domestic worker carrying and hanging up washing. One is presented as art, the other menial labour; one seems effortless, the other is presented as being both literally and psychically ‘heavy’. As the performance progresses, Nyamza deconstructs these binary juxtapositions as she reveals the labour in art, and the potential art involved in domestic labour. For example, after she has rolled in pain under the washing line she struggles to stand again, *en pointe*, revealing the precarity, but also strength and grace of the ballet performance, and by implication the effort required by a woman getting up after experiencing extreme physical or emotional pain. The jerky, painful movements she uses to express her agitation as she frantically calms an imaginary child on her back, exaggerates a familiar gesture into one expressing a sense of entrapment within a role, as the child is literally tied to her body. These moments interrupt our engagement with the aesthetic flow associated with ballet and invite us to reflect on why we consider ballet ‘beautiful’, art, and the movements associated with domestic work as not worth noticing; and how we ‘read’ the repertoires of everyday domestic gestures.

Nyamza extends her critique of the performativity inherent in her negotiation of gendered roles beyond her body and corporeal repertoires to engage the external signifiers of her role – the literal washing that she bears on her head. We see her struggle with it, as she hangs up the clothes, and then how she attempts to escape the drudgery of the domestic realm by draping red cloth hung on the line around herself, to simulate an evening dress. However, she remains tethered to the

²⁵ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p.23.

domestic realm physically, as the cloth remains pegged on the line; and psychically as this is just another costume women use to perform physical attractiveness, beauty, and elegance to fulfil roles defined for them by society. Later, she dons a man's red jacket, while it is still hung on the line, and with her back to the audience mime's amorous caresses, humorously suggesting a heterosexual encounter, suggesting another way in which women gain some power in their gendered roles. However, when she takes the jacket off the line and models it, lovingly turning up the collar to suggest a role in which she is comfortable (see fig. 1), this performance of gendered roles is complicated. Nyamza says, 'The red jacket symbolises power, but could represent men too – as something hard to get out of; in my case as a woman who was married, divorced and is now with a woman ...'.²⁶ Here clothing references some of the colonial and contemporary discourses on black women cited earlier (Ayo) in a playful exploration of the extent to which these inscriptions regarding black women's perceived social and sexual roles can be challenged or changed.

This performance goes beyond a simple rejection of traditional domestic gender roles. Nyamza's backstory reveals the complex social and filial relationships that have impacted on her as a black lesbian woman. Nyamza says, 'The original piece began its journey with a dream of red: that vivid red, which is also a very Spanish colour, to me represents love, danger, but also my own "blooded" relationship with things.'²⁷ We see this both in the dominance of red on stage, and in the emotions she expresses as she struggles with her gendered roles and sexual orientation within a community that expected her to marry, become a wife and mother, and relinquish her professional career.²⁸ Motherhood is an issue that Nyamza foregrounds both as a struggle, to care for a child while working as an artist, and as central to her life and art, signalled by her son Amkele Mandla being present in each performance – he sits downstage drawing or painting, at first covered by a diaphanous red cloth she

²⁶ Nyamza in Alex Phillips, 'Hatched 2015 – A Journey to the Heart of South Africa' (7 June 2016) <<http://lookingfordrama.com/2016/06/3608/>> [Accessed 21 June 2016].

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ 'I Am Woman', (11.09 mins).

wears.²⁹ This suggests that their negotiations of identity and creativity are intrinsically related to one another and that the next generation of both men and women should be involved in the debates about women's roles and struggles now. This parallels much work emerging on new masculinities in southern Africa.³⁰

Nyamza, like many post-1994 theatre practitioners, have turned increasingly to embodied forms like dance or physical theatre³¹ to create what James Thompson terms 'affective theatre', or a performance that 'awakens individuals to possibilities beyond themselves without an insistence on what the experience is – what meanings should be attached'.³² This shift is important because during apartheid many theatre productions depicted unified racial identities that were gendered,³³ and often quite stereotypical. In *Hatched* Nyamza uses her body to begin challenging various assumptions regarding unities, hierarchies and separatedness of gendered and racial identities, art forms, and social engagements. Her work asks us to consider what Mark Sanders calls a sense of 'foldedness', whereby we come to recognize how 'our human-being is folded together with the other', so that we can begin to acknowledge the 'alterity within'.³⁴ Susan Foster argues that,

By inviting viewers into a specific experience of what a body is, they also enable us to contemplate how the body is grounded, its function in remembering, its affinity with cultural values, its participation in the

²⁹ Qtd in Alex Phillips, 'Hatched 2015'.

³⁰ See Morell, Robert (ed.) *Changing Men in Southern Africa (Global Masculinities)*. (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press; London & New York: Zed Books, 2001); and Ouzgane, Lahoucine and Robert Morrell. *African Masculinities: Men in Africa from the late Nineteenth century to the Present*. (New York & Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005).

³¹ For background on physical theatre in South Africa see Adrienne Sichel, 'Grappling with South African Physical Theatre', *South African Theatre Journal*, 24.1, (2010) pp. 41-50. See Mark Fleishman 'Physical Images in the South African Theatre', *South African Theatre Journal*, 11.1, (1997), pp. 199-214, for a clear articulation on reasons for this shift from narrative to physical forms in SA theatre.

³² James Thompson, *Performance Affects*. (Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, [2009], 2011), p.111.

³³ Miki Flockemann, 'Getting harder?', (p.43).

³⁴ Mark Sanders, *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid*. (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 125.

construction of gender, sexuality, and the ways in which it is assimilating technologies so as to change the very definition of the human.³⁵

Or, in this context, challenge colonial and patriarchal African inscriptions of contemporary black South African women. Her use of beauty as an aesthetic is seductive, and as Baudrillard has argued, 'There is no active or passive mode in seduction, no subject or object, no interior or exterior; seduction plays on both sides, and there is no frontier separating them'.³⁶ This approach to challenging gendered roles is important because it offers concrete ways to begin breaking down binaries of roles and of systems of gendered power.

Chuma Sopotela: *Inkukhu ibeke iqanda* (the chicken has laid its eggs)

I turn now to consider how Chuma Sopotela's work invokes a very different aesthetic experience that stages complicity more aggressively for its audiences, and its effects as a form of embodied feminist activism.

Sopotela is an actress, dancer, puppeteer and performance artist from Cape Town. In her first year as a professional actress, she received the Fleur du cap Best Actress Award and the Naledi Best Newcomer Award for the lead in Lara Foot's play, *Karoo Moose* (2007-2008). In collaboration with Mwenya Kabwe and Kemang Wa-lehurele, she created a performance art piece called *Unyawo aluna mpumlo* (The foot does not have a nose), dealing with the experiences of migrant labour, which won them the 2007 Spier Contemporary Award. She has been awarded the Standard Bank Young Artist award for 2018.

I saw *Inkukhu ibeke iqanda* (the chicken has laid its eggs) on 4th February 2014 as part of the Theatre Arts Admin Collective festival, which ran from 4th to 21st February; although Sopotela had created this performance during a residency in Switzerland in 2013. The festival's title, *Melomo* is 'a Sotho noun; mouths – *to mouth off* / meaning dependent on context', suggested that the function of this festival was to give the three young black women selected to celebrate 'black women working on

³⁵ Susan Foster, *Choreographing Empathy*. (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 218.

³⁶ J. Baudrillard, *Seduction*. (trans.) B. Singer. (London: Macmillan, 1990), p.81.

the edge' a space to express themselves without censorship. In an interview on the festival and her performance Sopotela said:

We, as a group of black women artists, are using this platform to talk about issues that are closest to our hearts, to promote ideas and share knowledge. As black females there aren't many platforms that accept work of this kind. Black females are mostly promoters and fulfillers of other peoples' visions.³⁷

Inkukhu ibeke iqanda is a physical theatre piece, eschewing text. The title is ambiguous, and cannot be literally translated as its grammatical structure makes the meaning unclear, referencing the conundrum of whether the chicken comes before the egg. The performance space was intimate: it was staged in a small hall at the back of an old Lutheran church, with three wooden church pews for the audience placed close to the performance space. A stool covered by a long red cloth stood stage right, a tin bath stage left, and a red swathe of material ran from centre back to front of the stage. A web of what looked like woven hair hung centre stage. A strong, sweet smell of cow dung dominated the atmosphere. The performance began and ended with Sopotela entering and leaving in silence, dressed in a maid's overall. In between, she removes her clothing and performs personal everyday activities associated with women, which are then subverted through the performance aesthetic. For example, while bathing, Sopotela took pieces of dry cow dung from around the bath, usually used to heat water, and washed herself with the dung, before biting off, chewing and spitting out pieces of it through the course of the performance (see fig.2). Later, she climbed onto the stool and pulled the red cloth covering it up over her naked body – so that it transformed into a tight evening dress, and the stool became a plinth. Instead of modelling the dress, she turned her back on the audience, lifted the fabric and explored her genital area, then she stepped off the plinth, squatted, struck a match and the audience smelt hair burning. After donning very high-heeled platformed shoes, she tottered about naked in the space. Finally, she lifted the red cloth that ran down the middle of the

³⁷ Qtd in Karen Rutter, 'Shared, Edgy "Mouthings"', *Cape Times*, 7 February 2014 (p. 13).

performance space, crawled into it, writhing, groaning and screaming, before emerging, crying. As she returned to the chair to dress herself, in Xhosa she said something about 'today we have been told' in a low voice as the woven hair was slowly lowered again.

This performance was clearly engaged with specific gender issues related to the objectification of the female [black] body and how women negotiate their own bodies and sexualities. But the aesthetic was difficult, causing people to literally flee the space, without pausing for the programmed Question and Answer session. How to evaluate the aesthetic of this theatrical experience?

The publicity flier described this performance as 'an experiment on sexuality, theatre, performance (and cow dung)', and Sopotela suggested that

It requires and challenges the performer for complete emotional and psychological presence, an awareness of space and time and the surroundings as well as the inner environment. The emotional landscape of the performer is the main director and creator of the live performance with clues or props that help towards a memory or emotion already expressed in the past to tell a new story.³⁸

This statement signalled that Sopotela was drawing on her own knowledge, and emotional and psychological experiences to make this piece. However, she also used 'clues and props' to trigger memories, emotions and events that members of the audience could recognise from their own experiences. She uses aesthetic-as-language insofar as she 'engage[s] people on multiple levels at the same time – sensory, cognitive, emotive, and often spiritual'; and often 'all of these dimensions are involved simultaneously in constructing meaning and framing questions'.³⁹ For example, the performance used odour, the smell of dung and burnt hair, to somatically engage audience members. Given that implicit olfactory memory

³⁸ In Karen Rutter, 'Shared, Edgy "Mouthings"', (p. 13).

³⁹ Cynthia E. Cohen, et al, *Acting Together*, p. 6.

does not require conscious recollection of the initial encounter of the stimulus,⁴⁰ and that explicit memories of odors are believed to facilitate communication and identification within a species,⁴¹ this performance used visceral stimuli to trigger deeply personal memories, which the audience was then implicitly asked to compare with the meanings being suggested within the context of the performance. For example, I associated the smell of the dung with the labour of rural black women who smear it on floors and walls of their dwellings in Zululand, or collect it to burn for fuel. When placed alongside the image of Sopotela washing her body with and chew the dung, my emotional associations engaged me viscerally with the cognitive parallels I then drew between domestic labor and the objectification of the black female body.

This kind of layering of the performance draws attention to the extent to which an audience's subjective knowledge, experiences and epistemologies define their meaning-making processes. For example, in an interview Sopotela suggested that her use of dung went beyond its obvious semiotic reference to cite current events in South Africa, which included 'the act of Thamanqa Jantjies, our interpreter at Mandela's funeral. We are truly a country full of sh*t – some have to eat it to survive, while some just get away with it.'⁴² Here she is referencing how Jantjies, 'got away' with his role as sign language translator at Mandela's funeral when he cannot sign at all, critiquing corrupt or inept performances by officials in public fora. The reference to those who 'have to eat it to survive', cites 'the story of Sibongile Khumalo, the woman from Hluhulwe who claimed that poverty had forced her to eat cow dung before taking her retrovirals'.⁴³ Here the dung as signifier is used to highlight wider issues of poverty and HIV-Aids in South African society today that are often rendered invisible through silence due to shame, fear or powerlessness. An audiences' awareness of these references contributed to how it made meaning and

⁴⁰ C. Rouby, B. Schaal, D. Dubois, R. Gervais, & A. Holley (eds.) *Olfaction, taste and cognition*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁴¹ Bruce Goldstein, *Sensation and Perception: 6th Edition*. (Pacific Grove CA: Wadsworth Group, 2002), p. 477.

⁴² In Karen Rutter, 'Shared, Edgy "Mouthings"', (p. 13).

⁴³ Ibid.

connections between this piece and Sopotela's activist foci.

The embodied form is an effective contemporary feminist performance strategy as it can incorporate and connect several interrelated issues and levels of engagement within a performance; while positioning them within their wider socio-political context. For example, throughout the performance, Sopotela overtly engages her audience with the idea of aesthetics as value judgements of beauty; while simultaneously demonstrating how the notion of beauty relates to related gendered social values of women's sexuality, fecundity, and work, which are often experienced as abjection and shame. Sopotela's embodied performance of as a black model standing silhouetted in every curvy detail, silent on a plinth; and her parodic catwalk, naked in precariously high heeled shoes highlighted how women are expected to perform attractiveness and sexuality. The high heeled shoes were a particularly note-worthy aspect of this performance because they are at once a signifier of vulnerability and ability – to balance and display physical form, not unlike Nyamza *en pointe*.⁴⁴ How women are expected to perform their female attractiveness is often defined, and policed, by the media, magazines, and society at large.

The implicit violence in the performance – signalled by the abjection in Sopotela's washing in and eating the cow dung, the burning of her pubic hair, and performing fascination and disgust, caring for and proudly parading her naked body, while simultaneously abusing and humiliating it – is ironically the point of reciprocity in this performance. Sopotela links the construction and performance of gendered identity as involving various forms of complicity: personal complicity, as woman accept these roles and perform as sexual objects in their dress and manners; communal as men and women impose these values on one another through their acceptance and definitions of specific gendered performances and social practices; and even national, as role models and leaders

⁴⁴ Nicolas Guéguen & Jordy Stefan, 'Men's Judgement and Behavior Toward Women Wearing High Heels', *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*. 25:5, (July 2015), 416-425 (p. 416).

impact on black women's everyday 'practices of self', often resulting in female abjection. Sopotela added this national dimension to her performance at the Grahamstown festival performance (July 2014) where she pulled a South African flag from her vagina, perhaps to reference official denials on current rape and HIV-AIDS statistics in South Africa. Cumulatively, the audience is asked to acknowledge that the ways in which societies collectively make women perform beauty in relation to gender are not beautiful, but ugly and humiliating; and that social or political inscriptions of women as primarily objects of desire or domestic workers render them silent eaters of dung.

The fictional performance frame is crucial in facilitating the audience's ability to engage with this violence. As Kant argues, the fictional aesthetic allows an audience to be 'at once detached and absorbed by the potentialities of violence to which the artwork has given fictional form'.⁴⁵ First, it allows for an abstract realisation of the fears and fantasies involved with the violence being performed, before audience members identify with the victim, who remains fictional. However, in live performance, the embodied subject may trigger a more immediate acknowledgement of the 'alterity within', as an audience is faced with an actual body, which Flockemann argues facilitates 'moving from dichotomies of race and gender to exploring "other", often transgressive identities and subjectification processes'.⁴⁶ This emphasis on the body makes an audience aware of their own vulnerable bodies, who do not want to wash with or eat dung. This aesthetic strategy highlights the potential consequences of the social, political, and geographical inscriptions, production, or constitution of gendered bodies on a personal rather than a broad social or political level.

Here the role of the audience shifts from being the focus of accusation to becoming the potential source of the resolution of conflict. Sopotela suggests that the audience is necessary for her investigation of 'performance as ritual where one

⁴⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*. (trans.) Werner S. Pluhar. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), p. 44.

⁴⁶ Miki Flockemann, 'Getting harder?', (p. 52).

heals oneself through accessing deeper consciousness in the presence of and with the help of others',⁴⁷ both in the sense of 'being seen and recognised, and mobilising support for change. Ritual is increasingly being invoked in post-apartheid South African theatre to create a liminal time and space in which social and political transformation can be negotiated. This performance certainly aids its audience to access a deeper awareness of their own sense of gender and complicity in the subjugation of women, particularly black women who carry the burden of gender, as well as race and the legacies of colonialism and/ or apartheid. In terms of Victor Turner's model of 'redressive social action',⁴⁸ this performance did suggest 'the hidden causes of social conflict', and offer a 'therapeutic ritual (involving the exorcism of malefic spirits and the propitiation of "good" ones)', but I do not believe it led to healing or included 'a major ritual celebrating the values, common interests, and moral order of the widest recognized cultural and moral community, transcending the divisions of the local group'.⁴⁹ Rather, it left its audiences reeling. Through immersive theatre and somatic effects, Sopotela denies her audience an easy escape into their intellects, where they can analyse and rationalise what they have experienced. Rather she insists that her audience feel, remember, and respond to the stimuli subjectively, before wrestling intellectually with the issues. This aesthetic strategy engages audiences in new and complex ways with the constructions and performances of transgressive identities and subjectification processes that dominate contemporary South African society insofar as it denies binary relationships of victim versus perpetrator regarding gender, race, or indeed colonial legacies. Rather she demonstrates in an experiential way how we are all complicit in subjugation processes that are implicitly violent, and thus must all be involved in their deconstruction.

Both these artists layer their performances to create aesthetic experiences that engaged their audiences in an active and embodied way, albeit in opposing ways: Mabela Nyamza uses beauty to seduce her audience, and draw them into the piece;

⁴⁷ Rutter, 'Shared, Edgy "Mouthings"', (p. 13).

⁴⁸ Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*. (New York City: Performing Arts Journal Publication, 1982), p. 10.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

while Chuma Sopotela shocks her audience out of its comfort zone and provokes them to consider why she is so angry, how iconic images can be uncomfortable. Despite these different approaches, both performers actively engage their audiences with the issues being raised. They also both use their bodies to interrogate their own complicity in self-subjugation, while encouraging their audiences to consider their complicity in various kinds of normative subjugations of black women. The thick performance modalities they use make visible paradoxes of ideologies and positionalities, as audiences are pulled into the performance somatically, and then pushed out of their somatic responses to consider their views on the issues being raised, and the source of these views. These performance modalities insist that black South African women can be actively involved in constituting themselves by engaging with discourse, rather than simply being 'acted upon' by it. This approach practically suggests ways in which woman can circumvent the 'gender and development' or 'empowerment' discourses and instead find ways and forms that facilitate the exploration of gendered issues without reducing them to solving the 'problems' defined by Mikell as being of concern to women in Africa.

The centrality of their black female bodies in both performances is key to understanding the potential of embodied activism for contemporary feminism as it both cites and deconstructs the social, political and geographic inscriptions and constitution of black female identities. These performances use common repertoires of women's everyday performances of their identities to critique the multiple cultures, traditions and expectations that African women must negotiate within the constraints of linguistic, political and economic systems of colonialism or patriarchy that have not been deconstructed in the postcolony. The subjective, even emotive awarenesses evoked by and within the performers and in the audience through the somatic aspects of these performances are important because the recognition of responsibility in complicity is a necessary first step for resisting social injustice, and imagining and rehearsing change, and as such constitute and embodied feminist activism.