

# LESSER VIOLENCE

VOLUME 1



# **LESSER VIOLENCE**

**VOLUME 1**

Edited by Amie Soudien

Dear reader,

As you make your way through this book

take your time

and take care.

In this book the authors discuss

violence, rape, sexual assault and murder targeted against

women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, non-binary people.

There are numerous discussions of death and mentions of suicide.

There are discussions of racism and xenophobia.

As you traverse these pages,

there is space

to take a breath.

While you might find comfort here,

this experience may not always be comfortable.

Stop reading entirely,

if needed.

Whatever you choose to do,

take your time

and take care.

# Contents

Care amid crisis: Lesser Violence — from reading group to publication Amie Soudien	1
Why “Lesser Violence”? Reflections on organising the Lesser Violence Reading Group Keval Harie, James Macdonald and Amie Soudien	9
In memoriam Ayanda Denge	19
Sitting as a Lesser Violence Saarah Jappie	29
<i>This song is for...</i> Inhabiting the scratch, performing the rhapsodic Gabrielle Goliath	41
<i>Chapter Y: Is survival not archival?</i> Donna Kukama	66
What’s in a name? And other archives of forgetting B Camminga	101
<i>NO EASTER SUNDAY FOR QUEERS</i> , Haunting story Nondumiso Lwazi Msimanga	111
Institutional irresponsibility: How coverups at art institutions perpetuate gender-based violence M. Neelika Jayawardane	141
Endnotes	164
Biographies	170
About the organisations	173
Acknowledgements	174





# Care amid crisis:

Lesser Violence — from  
reading group to publication

Amie Soudien

The Lesser Violence publication emerges from a network of professional partnerships, friendships and mutual commitments to uncovering how we, as people impacted by gendered and sexualised violence, can explore these experiences in community. These relationships have contributed to and arisen from the Lesser Violence Reading Group, a collaborative project between the GALA Queer Archive and the Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Centre (VIAD) at the University of Johannesburg.

What began as a panel discussion, co-hosted by GALA and VIAD in 2017, developed into the Lesser Violence Reading Group, established in 2018. Following three successive iterations of the reading group, it became evident that the important scholarship and artistic practice presented during these sessions should be celebrated and shared in the form of a publication. Driving this publication is the commitment to exploring questions of gendered and sexualised violence from a variety of artistic and intellectual perspectives within a practice of curatorial care. The guiding principles of the reading group have further shaped the direction of the publication, informed the editorial approach, the publication's structure and a commitment to holding space for the vulnerability that comes with sharing experiences and accounts of violence.

In coordinating the reading group, we, the organisers,<sup>1</sup> invited artists, scholars and activists who were already engaging with themes concerning gendered and sexualised violence, and asked them to share a selection of texts that had informed their work, and in particular instances, writing of their own. Within the context of the reading group, "texts" has taken on an expansive meaning and includes film screenings, images, podcast episodes, audio recordings and YouTube videos. This multimedia approach has allowed for a dynamic engagement with artwork, offering space for a diverse range of historical and contemporary "readings".

The presenters at the first reading group in 2018 were Gabrielle Goliath, Nondumiso Lwazi Msimanga, Katlego Disemelo, Keval Harie, Donna Kukama, Amie Soudien and M. Neelika Jayawardane. For this publication, we are honoured to welcome back the presenters, as well as reading group participants B Camminga and Saarah Jappie, to share their work with a wider audience.

The Lesser Violence Reading Group sessions were designed around specific themes and topics raised by the presenters, it soon became clear that group participants were eager to talk about violence, art, the creative industry and art making in ways that required of us, the organisers, both a dedicated commitment to sensitivity and a dexterity in facilitation. We realised that it was insensitive to limit the scope of conversation regarding gendered and sexualised violence, as this violence affects not only our private lives, but also how we make art, create performance, write, travel, inhabit space, experience time, engage with the people around us, how we inhabit our working environments, how those environments are constituted, and what – or who – we perceive as safe or unsafe.

It was therefore necessary to develop a set of care practices in the context of the reading group. The groups were limited to a small number of participants, which allowed us to create a setting for sensitive conversation. It was important to make sure that everyone was guaranteed an opportunity to speak. In holding space for these difficult conversations we also needed to make space for moments of disclosure, for raw emotion and for vulnerability. Care practices developed over this time included an opening orientation shared by Keval Harie before each session; hosting sessions in locations such as GALA Queer Archive's library, in artists' studios and in homes; as well as providing a meal to accompany each meeting. Whether it was through one's own scholarship or through the work of an artist or activist, we were all talking about our lives and our experiences in some way, and the process needed to be handled with care in a comfortable setting.

Still, negotiating the impacts of rape culture is not new. As noted by Pumla Dineo Gqola, rape and rape culture are indelibly linked to the global projects of white supremacy and colonialism, where rape played an instrumental role in the establishment of marginalising colonial power relations.<sup>2</sup> These patterns of sexualised violence, domination and power took root in South Africa and their legacies continue to haunt contemporary society. In acknowledging the historical roots of rape culture in South Africa, we also acknowledge gendered and sexualised violence's compounding intersections with racism, xenophobia and queerphobia.

We continue to live in a state of crisis; we experience emergency daily.

Even if emergency is not the current reality, the threat of violence is always present. We live the reality of the horrifying statistics that name South Africa as “one of the most dangerous countries for women” *and* “one of the most unequal countries in the world”. These are the living conditions that have come to define life where white hetero-patriarchy and toxic masculinity thrive, and where people marginalised under this system are doubted, vilified and ignored when they speak out against the violences inflicted upon them.

## Re-imagining publications within practices of care

This publication is a reflection of the authors’ ongoing artistic or scholarly practices, and their personal commitments to confronting the reality of endemic violence against women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer or questioning and intersex people. While a number of the authors are academics by profession, they were encouraged to explore the creative possibilities enabled by writing as an artistic practice, by developing new writerly forms specific to the needs of their chosen subject matter. This approach was enthusiastically taken up by the authors, resulting in an experimental collection of texts. Explorations in affect run throughout the publication in the evocation of words or sounds designed to be spoken or sung, the experience of live performance and the emotions elicited by these shared experiences.

Writing within this type of creative arena circumvents the clinical aspects of academic writing conventions that can, in themselves, re-enact or perpetuate violence. For these reasons, as the editor and publication team, we saw no urgency to replicate the conventions of academic writing and publishing.<sup>3</sup> As demonstrated in the structure of the publication, we have chosen to decentre abusers and perpetrators of violence in favour of acknowledging survivors and their voices. This decision is reflected in the placement of the names of abusers in the endnotes of the publication, so as to minimise the risk of their presence, and their attending scandals, eclipsing the work of the authors.

Additional steps have been taken to design the publication around an intentional reading experience that supports readers throughout. The note at the very beginning of the publication is designed to function as a trigger warning for the content of the publication overall, and to provide readers a sense of what is to come. Between each text there are blank pages to offer readers breathing space between the authors’ contributions, owing to their potentially emotionally taxing material. These intentional pauses create space for possible reflection and consideration of the forms of refusal and possibility these offerings assert – not limiting the gesture to an acknowledgement of violence only, but moments of possibility. Working with designer Naadira Patel of *studiostudioworkwork* has been pivotal in bringing these care-centred devices to life.

## What it means to remember

The authors, in conversation with the themes of the 2018 iteration of the reading group, discuss questions of gendered and sexualised violence as they coexist with theatre, performance, the fight for fair professional practices, the experiences of survivors and the memory of those who have passed on. As the authors reflect on their work and the discussions that arose in 2018, their texts reflect the progression of time, and through it the development of their respective scholarship and creative practices.

In the processing of pain, fear, disappointment and sadness, what is most evident across the contributions is a powerful commitment to refuse the norms that have enabled forms of racialised, gendered and sexualised violence – both individual and systemic – and to honour those who have not survived. Overwhelming in these texts, too, is the potential for life-affirming alternatives in which there is space to hold and be held. The authors create possibilities for transformation, for thinking and feeling in new ways.

**B Camminga**, in “What’s in a name? And other archives of forgetting” shares with us their reflections on trans death and the harrowing experiences of trans people in processes of migration across the Mediterranean middle passage. In this text, Camminga questions the violent bureaucracies and conventions of the archive that fail trans people as they traverse state and

institutional systems, and calls upon the reader to remember the dead through the creation of new kinds of archives, new modes of remembering.

**Saarah Jappie** explores the commemoration of a historical instance of fatal sexualised and gendered violence during the era of slavery in South Africa in her contribution “Sitting as a Lesser Violence”. In collaborative dialogue with artist Gabrielle Goliath (who also contributes to this volume) and her ongoing performance work *Elegy*, Jappie reflects on the life of Louisa van de Caab, an enslaved woman from the 18th century who was killed by her romantic partner. Jappie contemplates the process of research into van de Caab’s life and demise, and what it means to “sit with” the enormity of these histories and life stories.

**Donna Kukama’s** contribution to the volume is a textual translation of her work *Chapter Y: Is Survival not Archival?* originally performed in 2017 at the Iziko South African National Gallery in Cape Town. Playing with the conventions of a performer’s script, the work follows Kukama as she recalls the names of women artists historically excluded or omitted from the gallery’s archive, the names of queer people murdered and targeted in hate crimes, and the names of people who survived the violent attacks against them. Kukama offers further commentary on the works exhibited in the gallery space and, through her interventions, destabilises the presumed cordiality of gallery patronage and institutional participation.

**Nondumiso Lwazi Msimanga**, in her contribution “*NO EASTER SUNDAY FOR QUEERS, Haunting Story*”, spoke to the performers of *NO EASTER SUNDAY FOR QUEERS*, the stage adaptation of the poem written by Koleka Putuma. A landmark and award-winning South African production, the play deals with the romantic relationship between two women who meet at church. A performer and theatre-maker herself, Msimanga taps into the actors’ experience of performing in the play and the lingering emotions, ideas and conflicts the production stirred up for them. In 2019, the play was the subject of a Lesser Violence Reading Group session hosted by Koleka Putuma and the production’s director, Mwenya Kabwe.

**Gabrielle Goliath**, in her contribution “*This song is for...* Inhabiting the scratch, performing the rhapsodic”, reflects and theorises upon her own artistic practice and her nationally and internationally touring exhibition *This song is for...*. Developed in close collaboration with a group of women

and queer-led musical ensembles, Goliath explores the aftermath and the afterlives of rape through the reimagining of the dedication song. Exploring the notion of “the scratch”, this work enters into the psychic and durational trauma of sexualised violence and the lived experiences of the survivors of rape in the rhapsodic, and points towards the possibilities of refusal, imagining and claims to life.

**M. Neelika Jayawardane**, in “Institutional irresponsibility: how coverups at art institutions perpetuate gender-based violence”, discusses individual and systemic accounts of abuse as they occur within the art industry and how these abuses intersect with global conversations such as #MeToo. In this contribution, Jayawardane makes reference to the practice of refusal, as theorised by Tina Campt, and the personal and professional costs of holding people and institutions accountable. As a journalist and scholar, Jayawardane is known for her unflinching commentary on mechanisms of power and her critiques of institutional abuse and misconduct.

We also remember **Ayanda Denge**, trans activist, sex worker and poet, who was murdered on 24 March 2019. We pay our respects to her, and her life’s work, in the reproduction of her address delivered on Human Rights Day 2019 at the District Six Museum Homecoming Centre.

Guided by the authors, we are led to listen, witness, account and remember; to sit, breathe, search; to haunt and be haunted; to refuse.

As the publication team, it was our hope that the publication reflect the new and existing communities the Lesser Violence Reading Group brought together over the last three years. We hope to convey the sense of collectivity developed in the reading group, despite the fact that the publication’s production took place during the Covid-19 pandemic and with it a series of lockdowns, and for publication team members and authors, individual periods of quarantine and isolation.

While negotiating these incredibly difficult circumstances, the contributors have shared work that reveals their deeply embedded networks of connection; the friendships and collaborations between one another; and an understanding that sustained collective artistic and intellectual engagement is a critical source for life-affirming work in the face of a crisis on both a national and international scale.

# Why “Lesser Violence”?

Reflections on organising  
the Lesser Violence Reading  
Group

Keval Harie, James Macdonald and  
Amie Soudien

### Why the name “Lesser Violence”?

**James Macdonald (JM):** The naming of this group signalled from the start what I think we all felt to be a very necessary acknowledgement: a recognition of just how fraught and difficult any engagement is with questions (and lived realities) of raced, gendered and sexualised violence. To recognise this violence as normative – as a social, political and cultural context of customary abuse – is to recognise also our own entanglement, our implication. Looking to the work of artists, curators and activists seeking to engage in meaningful ways with such questions (or lived realities) was thus not a matter only of content – which is to say the about of any given work – but also of approach: how these individuals or collectives chose to engage, to navigate this fraught and difficult field, in the hope of envisioning and to some degree making possible a more hopeful, liveable world.

The idea of “lesser violence” was a useful reference in this regard, recalling the kind of contingent ethics outlined by Jacques Derrida, in which the decisions we take – and for which we are accountable – can never hold for us an absolute guarantee of being best or right. We can never be entirely sure that a given response or approach may not enact some unexpected harm, recycle some trope or logic of violence, or become the unanticipated trigger of another’s trauma. This is not, however, grounds for inaction or paralysis. Rather, it calls for a self-reflexive framework of ethics, care and community. In practice, I think each of the groups has pushed and expanded this idea of a lesser violence, working it into specific contexts, geographies, communities, and reimagining its possibilities within an explicitly Black, feminist and queer politics of care.

**Keval Harie (KH):** I was thinking around the language of “lesser violence”, particularly within our context of South Africa. It is not uncontroversial. I don’t think anyone can factually disconnect that we exist within this very violent society. So, when we were thinking about “lesser violence” it was to acknowledge the violence, but also to acknowledge the dignity of queer Black women and our bodies. And saying that through these violent systems, we still continue to exist. For me then, the “lesser” is not necessarily about a lesser person or lesser being, but more around showing how we continue to exist despite these challenges or the continued violence. Which means that we are more than that. We are more than just the discrimination or the injustice that we continue to face. Does that make sense?

**Amie Soudien (AS):** Absolutely. I do feel that is so important, because we have also reconceptualised what “lesser violence” is, and it has become its own way of thinking, making and curating as the project has developed. That is the benefit of working on a project for a number of years – it takes on its own identity. The project began as the idea that you conceptualised in 2018, James, and you are correct. It is now beyond this Derridean idea. It is even beyond restricting ourselves to concepts of violence, because we all understand that people are not defined by violence. But we also know that we can’t always outrun it.

**JM:** That is so true. I think this has been its primary framework: what does it mean to negotiate? When Pumla Dineo Gqola speaks about terms of rape culture, we are saying, okay, yes there is this normative epistemic historical framework of violence that determines our everyday, and there is an acceptance that there is that “nevertheless”, right? It is about holding all of that, but I love how both of you said, “How can we still be more than this?” How do those spaces open up and those moments of refusal offer opportunities? We are seeking to lessen this because people are confronted with a scenario of violence where they aren’t expecting to wake up tomorrow and it’s gone. But we are doing this work together: working against what people are facing within the everyday and seeking a change, some possibility of transformation – which is to say, holding to hope.

**KH:** James, on that point, I was also thinking about “lesser violence” particularly through the reading groups, and acknowledging the work of the artists, the writers, the contributors, the poets, and acknowledging their creative genius and their ability to work within the space of such pain. Producing this body of work also allows us to lessen the degree of the violence. To have the conversation can provide a sense of dignity for all who have experienced the violence. To allow us to grieve, to show joy and love for each other and care. That was so important throughout the reading group as well.

**JM:** And that it is worth it. The conversation might be difficult, but these are conversations worth having. It is worth taking the care to make the conversations less difficult, because of community and care and food and all of these other things. Yes, we might not be sure if we are doing it exactly the right way, but you can’t learn all the lessons upfront. I think that we are committed to that. This is not a group that is lodged in a theory. It is a



group that has come through praxis, and it changes, it grows, and we have learnt. Why should we speak about “lesser violence” the same way as when we named the group?

**Starting the Lesser Violence Reading Group: how was the programme conceptualised and what happened in practice?**

**AS:** I remember sitting in the Wits Art Museum café with both of you a few months after the first Lesser Violence Reading Group in 2018. I think we were all feeling a little taken aback, because what we had planned for the group was not really what happened in reality. Planning for the 2019 iteration, we realised that we needed to let go of some of the ideas that had founded the group, such as anchoring discussions purely around the readings. We realised that participants were not only interested in talking about the texts. They wanted to talk about their experiences, and how the theory and the reading related to their lives and their own work. It wasn’t simply about “reading”.

**KH:** I remember that conversation so well. I remember that it felt really special, and personally I had so much that was challenging within my own space as Director of GALA. This conversation felt like an avenue for being able to trust within this group and what we were envisioning. We learnt very early on that people could not only speak about gendered and sexualised violence in a formal “academic” way, because it is something we experience on a daily basis. So we had to create a space which allowed for us to engage and share on a deeply personal level, which sometimes included trauma, but allowed for a space of care. You have to just speak about it, as it is not something parallel to our very own existence.

**JM:** One can find oneself adhering to a structure that exists – whether that is a programme or an expectation. What does a reading group mean? I think that our experience really expanded that framework of a reading group. The readings, instead of being this reference that we must adhere to, became openings rather – making space for other conversation to happen.

**AS:** We had to let go of the academic seminar or tutorial, or any type of context that you would read in a group at a university, because we realised that those environments alienate people and they don’t take seriously ideas around emotion, affect, or personal experience.

**JM:** I certainly felt that anxiety of, “Is this okay? What’s happening here, is it good enough?” I think that we found ourselves saying that this is what people were looking for and needed. We are talking about a particular community of people for whom this was a necessary space and there were other people who came, I believe, looking for a reading group and they didn’t find one and they left. Was it a proper reading group? I guess the answer was no.

**AS:** We had planned to come to this project with a commitment to curatorial care, but I felt like over the course of the reading group, and even over the course of developing this book, it pushed me to fully understand what curatorial care even means. What does it mean to hold people’s experiences in a conversational forum? Shortly after the first session we realized quite quickly, “oh no, we are not prepared”. There was a moment with you and I, James, where we specifically felt the need to upskill in a particular area. We came to you, Keval, and we thought, “how do we practically respond to this new type of discussion that we are otherwise not used to in the institution?” You really guided us through it. That meant holding the space in practical ways, such as the orientation at the beginning of every session.

**KH:** It is actually interesting for me to hear that both you and James felt like some of this was uncharted. I suppose for me, that was also something that GALA had never done before, particularly in an academic group of this nature. I often feel that the reading group is important in the work of the archive. GALA is not an archive in the sense of a traditional historical repository. We speak about queer life, livelihoods and experiences. We often have to think very carefully around partners who understand our work and our community, so that when we do create books, exhibitions or workshops, that none of it feels extractive. Engagement with the queer community from an academic perspective often feels extractive. In the reading group, nothing was the “other”. It was us.

I remember us having quite a long conversation around how we would engage triggering moments or moments of trauma within the reading group. We then had to think about the ways in which we as organisers, in relation to those triggers, could create care. It actually is quite simple. For me, it was about considering the actual physical space or venue of the group – which is why we considered using different spaces that were intimate. We felt we could not have this divide between the personal and the private

or the academic, so we thought that we could host this group in homes – and we did. We felt so deeply about the care that we wanted to create within that space. We then started making sure that people had catering. On some level, it sounds very basic, but it is not. Catering makes a huge difference, particularly when people were spending their time outside of their work-spaces, afterhours, coming into the space and sharing not only their work, but also their experiences.

**AS:** If we are not working in an academic space and we are trying to create something that feels a little bit more hospitable, then what does it mean to actually host people? And to take seriously the idea of hosting and the idea of treating participants as guests in our home? What would that mean to create a space that feels more comfortable, that feels more relational? The food was at first a practical sort of concern – it's around 6pm, dinner time. Then when your mother, Keval, started providing food for us, that completely changed the atmosphere, and developed that sense of homeliness and comfort for people who attended the group.

**JM:** Reflecting back on it, so much of our work in this group was the one of preparation, the pre-work; all the work that one puts into creating a welcoming space and holding a gathering. But there was also the after-work. We asked people to give feedback. One example was where someone said, "In that session, I did not feel like I could speak because someone else was speaking every time I wanted to". It is never easy to receive such feedback – but we thought, "Okay, this is what we have heard, now what are we going to do about it?" It was about embracing the difficulty, without being offended, without feeling that it discredits what you have done, and remaining open to continual adjustments. That filtered into our preparations for future sessions; so, the pre-work and the post-work became mutually informing. This was a process of learning and for me, Keval, your role in this was crucial, in outlining and holding a framework of care – maybe you didn't realise! That address you would often give up front was an opportunity for those reminders to come through, for that feedback to find its way back into the group. It gave us an opportunity to recreate a welcoming space, and to improve it. Rather than presuming ourselves to be these "super sensitive" people who knew just how to create a safe space, these practices grounded us in the important and practical recognition of how difficult and to a degree, impossible, it is to make and hold a truly safe space.

**KH:** Part of our commitment was also to critique academia and how knowledge is perceived to be produced within these spaces. We had to acknowledge that the academy is also a very violent space. We know that instances of abuse and sexual harassment continue to occur. So when we say that we did not want the space to be 'academic' I think that that is quite intentioned. Creating small intimate spaces to speak and think in ways that felt contained was important because we were dealing with difficult content. We wanted to be able to constantly engage with the group itself and to get feedback that is often lost in very large groups.

**JM:** We learnt a lot about shifting one's sense of value in these kinds of programmes. Within the academy one is thinking about success in terms of numbers or outcomes. Whereas for us, Amie, you, and I were thinking a lot of this together, how do we do "less" in a way, and how do we put a lot of value into small things? I think Lesser Violence was the primary example for us. All this work and thinking went into a small group, and now this group has grown over three years. It is becoming a publication; something bigger has grown out of it. I think through that commitment to the small, to the intimate, to "what was that session like?" or "what was possible?" as opposed to how many people were there. This has been something that I have taken with me. There has been a real pressure to let go of that anxiety around the "success" of programmes determined by quantity and to really think about human interaction and community and what are we building over time, slower time.

**AS:** Keeping the sense of intimacy within the group is also really around protecting our participants in some ways. Keval, you mentioned the violence of academia. We've all participated or attended talks and public seminars where, because of the public-ness of the forum, people choose to offer their opinions, are met with judgement, with derision, with sometimes violent responses by other members of the audience. We wanted to avoid that at all costs. We wanted to avoid the space in which people felt like they could say anything. Which is strangely antithetical to what the group is, but for some people saying anything means saying violent things and behaving violently. By creating a space that was more comfortable and more welcoming, we knew that we couldn't prevent violence, but we were trying to create safety nets around this discursive space. There was always the possibility of failure.



### Why was it important for us to discuss the crisis of gendered and sexualised violence through the lens of art and performance?

**KH:** I think part of it was acknowledging the work. When I say “work” I mean in its fullest sense. We knew the work that artists, writers and people within the orbit of Lesser Violence were doing in raising awareness and creating a public consciousness. You know, art and performance were such important ways in which these conversations needed to happen because we keep asking ourselves the same questions: “How does this happen? Why does this happen? How are the victims or survivors acknowledged and given a sense of dignity within an undignified system?” These are the people who are doing that work.

**AS:** It was about tapping into an existing network of relationships, friendships and professional collaborations and then bringing those relationships and connections into a new type of forum. It was an opportunity to offer us all the opportunity to learn and engage with artists in our immediate sphere. Because we’ve been living with this crisis our whole lives, so to talk about it academically wasn’t sufficient. In fact, it felt offensive on some level. Because it denied people’s experiences and so that is where the space of art and art making and people who are creative enters into the conversation. In order to make art about that subject matter or create work that is impactful, we have to acknowledge personal experience. We have to acknowledge people’s traumatic experiences. As you say, in the work that GALA does, we can’t separate the subject matter from the people. It’s important to really open up the conversation into our conversation, as opposed to a conversation about the “issue”. The generative work of creative practice and artistic practice opens up new ways of understanding our context. Experiencing art, performance, poetry and literature is a really special collective experience. In academic forums, there is pressure to have an opinion, a response. Whereas what I love about art – and performance art particularly – is that there is always room for not knowing, not understanding, which I find really generative.

**KH:** We wanted this community who had written or engaged with gendered and sexualised violence in different ways to come together. We would be happy if any of the participants saw each other’s work and started engaging and said, “Hey, let’s collaborate on something”. For us, that would have

been a huge success of Lesser Violence. It was about a community that was deeply impacted by each other’s work, a community that really wanted to grow that work collectively, and then to be able to support each other.

# In memoriam

Ayanda Denge

*I'd like to share some poetry with you.*

The following is an excerpt from Ayanda Denge's address at the District Six Museum on 21 March 2019<sup>1</sup>. The gathering was held to commemorate Human Rights Day as well as serving as the closing event for the Kewpie: Daughter of District Six exhibition that had been held at the centre.

Denge was a trans activist, sex worker and poet. She was murdered just three days after this event, on 24 March 2019. Denge had been living in a city-owned residence occupied as part of the Reclaim the City movement. In a bid to evict the occupiers, the city had cut power to the building. Denge's killer has never been found.

## Trans Advocacy

Is trans advocacy  
a right to democracy?  
Despite the stigma and discrimination  
comrades accuse transgender people  
of dramatisation  
We're the most vulnerable and loving souls  
Exploitation is common amongst us  
as we are silenced both those  
seeking personal goals  
Digesting reality,  
as we pray and reflect  
our voices amplified or in silos  
Reality is we are not reject  
across the world  
Trans endure pain that is the same  
If only people knew it hurts  
and we end up feeling lame  
The sabotage and deceit we endure  
makes it problematic for us to trust  
Our stories empower others  
leaving us hungry  
and craving a simple bread crust

I so wish to ask a question  
because I'm hurt and confused  
and cannot wait for the next session  
Do you personally support trans advocacy?  
The constitution does  
and in South Africa we have democracy.

Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Ayanda Denge. I am an LGBTI activist. I got into this activist lifestyle in a way that I didn't expect. I lived my life on the streets because of the stigma and discrimination that I faced on the home front – a place where I was supposed to find love. So I ended up living on the streets and doing all the unsavoury elements. Now, as the first speaker has said, back in the day, it was not allowed for us to dress up like women. *Wat is jy? Is die 'n ballie, is die 'n man, is die 'n vrou?* We would get those assumptions. But with South Africa's constitution today it allows you to be free, to be whoever you want to be. But then, because of being of unique identity, you are not given opportunity. Because some people look at us as if, no, you're just a puppet [for a cause], while they [have their own motivations].

Now I would like to share who I am. My real, personal journey.

## I am a wonder

I am a wonder  
 Therefore I have been borne by a mother  
 My life has been like no other  
 as I begin to stutter  
 Born in pain  
 I was nourished by rain  
 For me to gain  
 was living in a drain.  
 As I shed a tear  
 I stand up and hold my spear.  
 Voices echo, do not fear  
 Challenges within a year,  
 challenges of hurt are on my case  
 Community applauds as they assume I have won my race  
 but in reality my work strides at a tortoise pace  
 On bended knee I bow and ask for grace.  
 For the Lord is my sword  
 to remind humanity  
 that you provide sanity.  
 Why, Lord, am I this wonder?  
 The Lord answers me with the rain and thunder,  
 for questioning my father  
 who has in the book of lambs  
 a name called Ayanda.  
 From the streets my life was never sweet  
 the people I had to meet  
 At times I would never greet  
 even though I had to eat  
 I'd opt to take a bow  
 rather than a seat.

I thank you, ladies and gentlemen.

Images to follow:  
Ayanda Denge at the District Six Museum Homecoming Centre on Human Rights Day, 21 March 2019.  
Photograph credit: Paul Grendon.





# Sitting as a Lesser Violence

Sarah Jappie



Several years ago, I cautiously entered the dimly lit front hall of Cape Town's Slave Lodge museum. It was a damp September evening and as a biting wind blew outside I, and dozens of others, found refuge inside the imposing building.<sup>1</sup> We had gathered that evening for the opening of *Under Cover of Darkness* (2018), an exhibition about the forgotten lives and trials of women in servitude in colonial Cape Town, thoughtfully and hauntingly staged at the site where the enslaved women, men and children "owned" by the Dutch East India Company had resided during the 17th and 18th centuries.<sup>2</sup> Under our own cover of darkness, we battled for space in anticipation of the event's scheduled opening performance. I awkwardly negotiated myself a seat between strangers – legs twisted and palms uncomfortably grounded into the stone floor. And then the performance began.

Over the course of roughly an hour, we witnessed seven vocal performers share the task of maintaining a single musical note, in shifts. As each performer assumed the responsibility of carrying the sound, they stepped onto a modest wooden platform and into the spotlight in the centre of the room, at once filling the space and creating it. What we were witnessing was an iteration of artist Gabrielle Goliath's *Elegy*, a powerful, ongoing performance project that serves as an act of ritual mourning and commemoration of "a specific woman or LGBTQI+ individual subjected to fatal acts of gendered and sexualised violence."<sup>3</sup>

The work has been staged across place and in memory of individuals across time periods. That night we collectively held space for Louisa van

de Caab (d. 1786), an enslaved young woman who resided on a farm in the Tygerberg, but 24 kilometres from Cape Town proper. Louisa's death was the result of a violent crime of passion: after hearing rumours about her supposed unfaithful behaviour, Louisa's partner – an enslaved man named Ceres – confronted her and then stabbed her in the chest. Her lifeless body was found the next morning in the yard behind the slave owner's home. As an enslaved woman, no record beyond that of her death was left behind in the historical record. This performance of *Elegy* would thus provide an opportunity to collectively commemorate Louisa where most of history had forgotten her. It would also offer the chance to hold space for a single life story in a museum, and a historiographical landscape, where traces of enslaved individuals' lives remain at best elusive.

In the words of Goliath, *Elegy* is "[d]urationally and physically taxing" as "the performance sustains a kind of sung cry."<sup>4</sup> While the vocal performers sustain the cry for the entirety of the performance, *Elegy* also requires a level of endurance from its audience: to be present, to hold space, to remember. And mostly, to sit with discomfort: that of the commemorated individual's story and the violence that ended their life (which audience members learn about from the written eulogy circulated in advance), and of bearing witness to this kind of mourning.

Yet, that night, many people seemed unable to sit and witness. Periodically, chatter wafted through the air, followed by whispered, apologetic reprimands. People stood up, stumbling to find paths to an exit. Those already standing moved in and out of the room. Sometimes a door would open, welcoming new bodies into the space or releasing others from it. Sitting – either physically or metaphorically – seemed to be the hardest thing to do. Yet, choosing not to sit served as an act of violence in that instance, disrupting the soundscape and disregarding the story.

\*\*\*

The act of sitting plays a prominent role in our everyday lives. There are many ways to sit, reflected in the richness of language we use to describe this otherwise simple movement. In English, we *crouch* and *squat* and *kneel*.



Sometimes we even *recline*. In some languages, single lexical items exist for kinds of sitting that can only be described in other languages through the use of phrases: for instance, the word *basa i* in the Austronesian language Manam translates as “to sit cross-legged”. Meanwhile, in Central Pomo, an Amerindian language, there exist five verbs for sitting, including *bamáw*, which describes a group sitting together on a bench, and *čhá:w*, referring to a single person sitting on the ground.<sup>5</sup> Alongside the physical posture, sitting can describe other actions and states of being: a position in an organisation (“sit under”), being in a fortunate situation (“sitting pretty”), waiting and inaction (“sit tight”), suppression (“sit on”) and processing (“sit with”).

As a physical posture in its simplest form, sitting is now largely considered a necessary evil. It is demanded of us everywhere, yet we are told we should avoid it. Search “sitting” online and one is bombarded with articles about the act’s slowly murderous effects on our bodies, interspersed with tips on how to sit less and advertisements for standing desks. According to some, it is the new smoking, heightening the risk of developing heart disease, diabetes and particular forms of cancer. Sitting can also be detrimental to our mental health, increasing the potential for anxiety and depression.

Yet today, where pandemic-related restrictions on our lives have limited our mobility even further than usual, sitting seems inescapable: throughout the day we move from one seat to the next as we work, eat and distract ourselves from the increasing levels of chaos in our daily lives. Even as we move through space, in cars or other moving vehicles, we sit. There is little to no choice in this sitting: it is unavoidable, even if it is killing us. Standing and moving, on the other hand, signal responsibility over one’s health and therefore one’s life. Standing reduces the risk of weight gain and obesity, while movement in general strengthens the bones, refreshes the mind and aids circulation. Where being active is a choice – and for many it often isn’t – it is the lesser violence, at least to our bodies.

But what if we chose to sit? And what might sitting with intention look like? Buddhist traditions of sitting meditation provide one perspective on this matter. According to Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh, mindful sitting is “to sit in a relaxed way, with your mind awake, calm, and clear”,<sup>6</sup> and to do so with enjoyment. Unlike the majority of sitting we spend too much time doing, it

requires practice and dedication. As Nhất Hạnh explains, we can perform this kind of meditation alone or together, but while sitting alone brings joy and might feel easier, doing it together creates a more powerful collective energy, for meditating with others is akin to “allowing the water in the stream to be embraced by the ocean”.<sup>7</sup> Sitting in this manner nurtures our ability to be in the present, wholly and invigorated. It is an inaction that increases one’s potential to contribute positively to the collective, by offering a steady, solid presence in contrast to, say, action from a state of inner turmoil or anguish. Here, sitting can be for the greater good.

\*\*\*

Why the preoccupation with sitting? It emerged as I was trying to make sense of things: of my experience that evening in the Slave Lodge, and how I had come to be there in the first place. These ruminations led me to events thousands of kilometres away, and many months in the past.

Although I occupied space – somewhat awkwardly – on the floor of the Slave Lodge as an audience member, I was also there to witness the performance as a collaborator. Some months earlier, during a casual conversation, Goliath and I had briefly contemplated the idea of commemorating an enslaved woman for the Under the Cover of Darkness iteration of *Elegy*, given the proposed setting. I was later invited to use my skills as a historian to select a story and craft the eulogy for the performance. So, for several weeks, back in my apartment in Johannesburg, I pored over scans of handwritten archival documents in 18th-century Dutch and published translations in English, reading court documents detailing the murders of enslaved women.<sup>8</sup> I eventually chose to focus on Louisa van de Caab’s story, and deliberated over how one could convey the heaviness of it all to strangers, and if it was indeed possible to do justice to the life story of a stranger from a faraway past based only on fragmentary evidence. So I read and wrote, and deleted, and tried to talk it through with family, and rewrote until I felt comfortable with an imperfect text. This collaboration with the artist Goliath, who had also become a friend, required me to be deskbound and weighed down in order to grapple with the violence of the past.

I don't think I realised it at the time, but that investment in highlighting gender violence in the context of the history of slavery in South Africa, and certainly my familiarity with *Elegy*, stemmed from my participation in the Lesser Violence Reading Group, which had begun earlier that same year. Initially, I had joined what was then the first iteration of the group because, as someone new to Johannesburg, I was looking for an avenue outside of work to meet potentially like-minded people, and to be immersed in new conversations, in novel places. Prior to joining, I wasn't particularly sure about what we would focus on (what was a lesser violence, after all?), or if I would have anything to say. In reality, I found that sometimes I did, sometimes I didn't, and sometimes when I did, I couldn't. But showing up seemed important and being in the group became a kind of practice: delving into the texts by oneself to absorb the complex and the painful in silence, crouched over an office desk or dining room table, and then gathering with others in a semicircle of mismatched chairs, to voice perspectives and hold space for the discomfort and the heaviness. On a monthly basis we met to create a supportive ocean from our various, individual streams of thought. Those conversations then travelled home with me, and the texts infiltrated everyday encounters and, increasingly, my own scholarship.

I had chosen to sit in and with the group, which in turn led to a concatenation of sitting in different places, forms, emotional states and kinds of furniture. The sitting was as much mental and emotional as it was physical, and without being fully aware of it, the more I dealt with the themes that emerged in the group, the more I seemed to make space for them outside of it. So what to make of the sitting, beyond a coincidental link? I am beginning to see that sitting with discomfort and brutality results in further sitting, and choosing to hold space for these ugly realities inspires us to create room for others to try and do the same. However, whether they choose to sit or not is up to them.

Images to follow:  
Excerpts from the eijsch ('legal claim') concerning the murder of Louisa van de Caab. Source: WCARS CJ 424 ff. 9-31, Western Cape Archives and Records Service.  
Photograph credit: Maria Holtrop.

23  
Comparaede, die de in de godkennende  
gecommuniteerde is, met den E. Agt. van  
van Justitie van des Gouvernements  
Stoffel van de Caab, Maaf van den  
Lingen Oltman, Maaf, van Compoten  
van Oudeboom, de welke te bequiste  
van den het fiscaals ampt van Inter  
in was eenen menen St. Gabriel  
Ofters verklade hoe voorn is.  
Dat wanneer der sompt'lyc op Satur  
dag den 19 February 1816 hijs plaats  
van zijn lyfheer in de Rykshuysen, g.  
legde, daerom de klokke na gissing  
sagt men, met een benoemen van mede  
Maaf April, en de Harinnen, Sandra  
met de welken dogter Louisa in de den  
Luis beriden was, alwaar gen Louisa  
bater gewest was om de kopjes  
Schoon te maaken en om de wagen, dafte  
van de kinderen in goedheid te brengen,  
den Harin Jongel, Cien van de agte  
den in de Combuys was gekomen, en de  
Harin Louisa, al laggende, en den  
den brood te spreken, teegen gen  
Louisa, haer by de hand geveken  
met de Combuys de agten deen, met  
mede na buyten, gencomen was, cogen



Niets meer des slaunders gaft  
 den Compt' voor deden, dan, welken  
 Schep als in den best presentaren de  
 14 Selre altoos nader te staren,

Alous gepascent aan Cabel  
 goederloop den 20 maart 1786 mitz  
 den Compt' in presentie van den slaaf  
 feres by wege van recollement weder  
 voorgelesen zijnde, betruygde deselre  
 daarbij te byren, penwesteener, j. voor  
 d' El. Salomon van Conker, en Johannes  
 Nathias Blettermar, luden by den  
 E. agtb. raad van Justitie voor. die  
 de minnute deeser beuereus den  
 Compt' en mij Secretaris medebe  
 hoorlijk hebben ondertekend

Welk ik getruyg

W. Westling  
 1786

Comparende voor de Ondertekende  
 geconmitteerde van den E. agtb. Raade  
 van Justitie desels. gouvernements, Salma  
 van, Kallebaal, Plavens van den burger  
 Althman, Alers, van, Comptentus, inderdom  
 demichte ter Reguette van den het Schied  
 ampt pro Inten, waanemenden, P. G. Phiel  
 Alter verklaarde hoe waar is.

Wat wanneer de Compt' haer op  
 Saterdag den 10. desels. maand February  
 Savonds de Kiech wel agt Uren, op  
 haer Lijfhuys in de Tjyberberge, geliegene  
 plaats, met ende benevens de Plavens  
 Jongens Christoffel en, Apil en de  
 Combuys beuereus had, en des Compt' Doolet  
 Louisa in de zaal in deselre Combuys  
 beuereus gemeent was, op, water en, wethes  
 kiedet voor des Compt' Lijfhuys kinderen  
 op de opkamer te blingen, in gersedheid  
 te maaken, van Plavens, Jongen, en, Naamie  
 Ceres. Voor de agter deur mede in de  
 Combuys was gekomen, en onder een  
 woord te spreken, des Compt' Doolet Louisa  
 met Danielke geu feres het ghewone laft  
 by de hand geuut, en, des mede buyten  
 de Combuys de agter deur mit genomen had

Zonder



De Requisitie van den Heer de interim  
 Fiscaal Mr. J. H. Storer Verklaart  
 Ondergetekende tweede opper chirurgijn  
 van het S<sup>c</sup> Comp<sup>te</sup> Hospital ten Windstam,  
 Van gecomonenteerdens iijt den Edelst.  
 aaren Raad van Justitie des Gouverne.  
 ments de E<sup>z</sup>l. van Ceylonen Mr. Van  
 Citters op gisteren geordent te  
 hebbe een voor Slavin hebbende  
 den Burger Ottoman Aerts aan de  
 Tegerberg bevende wond te zijn  
 toegebracht een met een Pijp  
 in de linker Borst met verbeeting  
 van de tweede rib penetroende van de  
 Long met quetsing van deszelfs bloed.  
 Waar - Welke wondte verklaart veldheer  
 Lethaal of dodelijk te zijn  
 Cabo de Goede Hoop den 21 Feb 1786  
 J. L. S. 1786

178

4

29

nen

re

at

van

n

*This song  
is for...*  
Inhabiting  
the scratch,  
performing  
the rhapsodic

Gabrielle Goliath

I begin with “Bohemian Rhapsody”, shared with me by Nondumiso Lwazi Msimanga as a dedication song to her own survival of rape. The well-known anthem by Queen, later reimagined by The Braids, was performed anew by Nonku Phiri and Dion Monti as one of 11 songs that collectively constitute the song-cycle and video and sound installation that is *This song is for...* And these are the words she offered to accompany her song and to hold the space in which it sounds:

“I tried to kill myself.  
I still want to kill myself.  
I have to fight to not want to kill myself.  
I don’t want to just die.  
I’m a fighter and every day I’m fighting for my life;  
fighting for it to matter.  
Here’s to the good fight!”

Nondumiso’s offering speaks to the proximate relation of rape to death, to the extent that rape is a physical but also inscriptive and deeply political violence, historically informed and recycled in the present as a marking of certain bodies as disposable – as rapeable, killable, as matter that does not matter. Veena Das speaks to the experience or non-experience of rape survivors as individuals physically alive but socially dead – foreclosed, polluted and subject to social rituals of ostracisation and disavowal. This is rape as utter negation, a de-inscription of femme life (and, to follow this negation, Black femme life), in which to “survive” is to occupy “a zone between two deaths, rather than between life and death”.<sup>1</sup> If such is the violence of rape, as a “life world” of death, and if we hope to cultivate a meaningful politics of relation and response, we must join with Das in asking, *what happens then to the work of mourning?*

Flow, another survivor and collaborator, shared her song with me, “Don’t Wish Me Well” by Solange. These are her words, which never fail to undo me:

“Death knocked on my door  
He took away my innocence for sure  
Death left me on the sewer floor  
With a soul no more”

For Pumla Dineo Gqola, this death that is rape is inseparable from the structural self-perpetuation of hetero-patriarchal power: “reigning in, enforcing submission and punishing defiance”.<sup>2</sup> This is patriarchy as constitutive of colonial modernity and the “pornography of empire”, with its racialised, gendered, sexualised, economised and nationalised hierarchisation of human life. It is an everyday, normative crisis of rape culture, that clearly communicates which lives matter, and perpetuates the disposability of those that do not. It is a paradigm of permissible violence in which Black femme life is marked – tracked, traced and determined – by conditions of death and a drive to negation.<sup>3</sup> Such are the political conditions of inscription, of lived precarity, that make sense of and render urgent the Black feminist injunction to *refuse*. For to live is to live in spite-of, in the refusal of this terminal demarcation. And so I circle back to Nondumiso and hear this refrain of refusal and claim, in spite of all:

“I have to fight to not want to kill myself.  
 I don’t want to just die.  
 I’m a fighter and everyday I’m fighting for my life;  
 fighting for it to matter.  
 Here’s to the good fight!”

Let us linger for a moment in the scratch...

In *This song is for...* I return to and re-perform the popular convention of the dedication song, in collaboration with a group of women- and genderqueer-led musical ensembles. Playing sequentially within the immersive, sonic space of the installation is a unique collection of dedication songs, each chosen by a survivor of rape and performed as a newly produced cover-version. These are songs of personal significance to the survivors – songs that transport them back to a particular time and place, evoking a sensory world of memory and feeling. For some, these songs evoke the violent encounter(s) of their physical rape, for others, a journey of healing and recovery. For Nondumiso it was “Bohemian Rhapsody”, Flow “Don’t Wish Me Well”, Pat Hutchison “Unstoppable”, Sinesipho Lakani “Save the Hero”, Deborah Ho-Chung “Everybody Hurts”, Corey Spengler-Gathercole “Fight Song”, Karen Howell Ben, Gabriel Xavier both “Black Hole Sun” and “Something from Nothing”, and for two women who chose to withhold their names, “Ave Maria” and “Uyesu Ulithemba Lam.” Alongside the 11 songs, the survivors offered to me an accompanying colour and text, be it a poem, reflection, narrative or exhortation. The sound of the songs fills the room and the bodies within it, while the dual screen projection of the performing musicians bathes all in purple, blue, pink, red, ochre, yellow or black. But then *the scratch* – introduced within each song a sonic disruption, a recurring musical rupture recalling the awkward, looping stuck-ness of the “broken record”. *And it goes on...* not as mechanically produced cut-and-paste sound production, but as durational performance, sustained (not without difficulty) by the collaborating musicians – sometimes for as long as 20 minutes. Listeners are drawn into an extended sonic encounter; at times demanding, jarring, unsettling, but then also mesmerising, ritualistic, transporting. The scratch calls for a certain lingering, offers to those present an opportunity to affectively inhabit a contested space of traumatic recall – one in which the de-subjectifying violence of rape and its psychic afterlives become painfully entangled with personal and political claims to life, dignity, hope, faith, even joy.

... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo-  
 ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo-  
 ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo-  
 ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo-  
 ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo-  
 ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo-  
 ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo-  
 ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo-  
 ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo-  
 ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo-  
 ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo-  
 ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo-  
 ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo-  
 ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo-  
 ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo-  
 ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo- ... any way the wind blo-

*This song is for...* sounded in the Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town, for over a year. From hundreds of reflections shared in the visitors' book, this extract captures something of this scratch experience:

"This song is for...  
 At first, made me sick.  
 Not sick, dizzy.  
 Fear of the sickness is worse than the thing itself.  
 After coming and going, trying to block out the music,  
 which took me to the experience of trauma, that which cannot be narrated,  
 held, withstood, I returned...  
 I stayed until I was no longer dizzy.  
 Thank you."



Gqola's intellectual and spiritual presence – I would like to say her *femininity* – is entangled in my work; is my love letter. Writing on the iterative, affective register of the scratch, following her experience of *This song is for...* at the Monument Gallery in Makhanda, she reflects:

The 'scratch' in each melody is an apt metaphor for the scratch created by rape in a survivor's life. A scratched record irreparably alters a song as rape does its afterlives, disrupting the ease of seamlessness. The scratch is permanently etched on to the psyche. Rape may not define a survivor's life. After all, the survivor continues to feel and experience a range of other life textures and emotions. Still, there is no escape; the song cycle returns to the moment of disruption in each song. Each return is recall – sometimes expected, often unannounced.<sup>4</sup>

In the scratch, listeners are thus drawn into a location of cyclic recall, as the event of rape returns as trauma and haunts a life. But it is also a location of deep entanglement – of counter-claims – as a desire to survive, to *live*, insistently performs a refusal of death: refusing the negation of Black femme life that is the governing logic of this normative, systemic, patriarchal violence. And here I want to think about the ways in which Tina Campt and others are thinking about refusal, or rather *practicing refusal*. Campt speaks to a refusal (or refusing) of the terms of diminished subjecthood – of life rendered illegible, inconsequential. This is a practice, an everyday labour, a striving as she puts it, “to create possibility in the face of negation”<sup>5</sup>

Songs carry us along – move, uplift and inspire us. They follow an arc, a form, and resolve – they shift and shape our moods and very often transport us back or imagine us into a different time and place. This was important to how and why I worked with song as an alternative modality of representation, and as a way of affectively broaching and to some degree making shareable experiences of trauma. The scratch, however, introduces a difficulty, a temporal shift. There is a halting impediment to the flow, a sonic glitch that frustrates the listening experience and confronts

participants with something *they just can't get past*. To me, this is important in establishing a certain set of conditions: the terms of our engagement with these dedication songs. In seeking to approach the suffering, pain and trauma of another, we are confronted by the inherent limit of representation, as these experiences exceed our modes of articulation, our capacity to understand or fully relate. Language in all its modalities falters, and our coming to know rests, as Judith Butler reminds us, on a certain *unknowing*.<sup>6</sup> In the sounding and resounding of the scratch, this representational limit, this opacity of the traumatic experience, comes to the fore, is felt and experienced, becoming for those willing to work with its difficulty the opportunity for a different kind of (un)knowing.

Helpful in thinking about the difficulty/possibility of this scratch is Sara Ahmed's formulation of the contingency of pain and “the impossibility of fellow-feeling”<sup>7</sup> In considering the problem of pain, Ahmed insists on its essentially social and interrelational character, as a condition situating bodies in relation to one another and within a world of others. In this conception, pain is not limited to the interior experience of individuals but informs, and is informed by, encounters with the surfaces, objects and bodies of the environments they inhabit.<sup>8</sup> The nature of such attachment, which is to say the relation of bodies in pain to other bodies in the world, is complex and demanding. The injury of pain is always such that the pain one feels is never, and cannot be, felt by another – if it is to be shared it must be on terms other than commensurate experience. For Ahmed, this kind of relation demands the necessary acknowledgement of a certain impossibility, the “*impossibility of fellow feeling*”. Consequently, she insists that empathy is a violence in itself when understood as a claim to another's pain. This is not to suggest that suffering bodies have no bearing on others, but rather that the sociality of pain, complicated by the irreducibility of its experience, calls for an alternative ethics of empathic response. For Ahmed this implies a *different kind of inhabitance*, by which she means a form of political relationality premised not on some absolving drive for resolution or healing, but rather on, “learning to live with the impossibility of reconciliation, or learning that we live with and beside each other, and yet we are not as one”<sup>9</sup>

To linger in the scratch is then to inhabit a certain relation – not of commonality or the presumed empathy of over-identification, but a contingent mutuality of political bearing and acknowledged, often incommensurable difference. This calls for something more than a sympathetic listening or witness, but rather an implicated, embodied interrelation, what Camp describes as an effortful practice of *hapticity*. This is not empathy in the sense of “feeling-for” as much as it is a precarious feeling *in-relation-to* differentially valued/devalued bodies. It is, as she rather beautifully puts it, “the labour of love required to feel across difference, precarity, and suffering... of creating and sustaining affiliation and intimacy by embracing the inextricability of joy and trauma”.<sup>10</sup>

The *hapticity* and *different inhabitance* of the scratch is what *This song is for...* seeks to enable. This is a relation and community premised on the uneasy terms of difference and bearing, and it is in such a relation that I recognise and hope for a certain capacity for transformation – a possibility of possibility for the re-inscription of Black femme life. And so, from the scratch and with the scratch I turn to the effusive, ephemeral working, or performing of the *rhapsodic*.

*This song is for...*  
*a woman who chooses to withhold her name*

“Ave Maria” plays and the counterpoint of the vocal and piano lines catch, are caught in the scratch, looping out of phrase, sync and time signature:

...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris-  
...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris-  
...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris-  
...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris-  
...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris-  
...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris-  
...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris-  
...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris-  
...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris-  
...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris-  
...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris-  
...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris-  
...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris-  
...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris-  
...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris-  
...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris- ...fructus ventris-

And then ... *Ventris tuae, Jesus...* the aria resumes, opens up, and when it does there is the most extraordinary sense of relief, and yes, a kind of euphoric lightness that is a part of what I am thinking about in relation to this idea of the rhapsodic. But this is not to suggest a kind of hereafter, a getting over and past, in some dialectical framing of trauma as event, healing and resolution. Rather, it is about the possibility of a certain rhapsodic space opening from within that glitch and difficulty of the scratch. Read the words she *who chooses to withhold her name* shared, along with her song, “Ave Maria” and colour, yellow:

“What shall I say, what shall I write? I have deleted my words several times, written and rewritten them, tried again and again, but I know that even if I delete them, they will be an eternal replay...

An eternal retracing of feelings and of what I relive day after day.

The smear is there, it stares at me every day, it forces me to have to confront it straight on, from the side, from the back... there is no getting away from it.

Today I am able to own it without guilt – I was abused. I felt guilty for years and wanted to prove to the world that everything was alright!

But deep inside I was shattered.

My wounds will never ever heal completely, and I grow them (I have grown roses in this garden of mine). I care with much tenderness for this little corner of myself, because I know there is no cure, there are but ‘remedies’ taken in small doses to alleviate the symptoms of this silent wound.

Women: water your gardens and fertilise this incurable wound with self-love.

I will not write of the depths I have sunk to

I simply sing, meditate, pray...

Sing, meditate and pray for us!

One day at a time...”

This reflection, in all its beauty and difficulty, allows for a certain sensing and feeling our way into this idea of the rhapsodic. In rhapsody we think of a certain affective register, a performed possibility of rapture, the ecstatic, of extravagant emotion. And it comes to us through music: improvisatory, irregular in form, but also virtuosic. What happens and what becomes possible when an aria like “Ave Maria”, or an anthemic pop single like “Save the Hero”, is radically disrupted, shifted off course and altered through a sustained sonic incursion, through the virtuosic feat of the performed scratch? What emerges is the rhapsodic, sounding and re-sounding within the rupture of the scratch, within the altered conditions of disruption – not as a release or a return to form, but as an opening within the difficulty, a possibility within the impossibility. For what does this shared text speak to if not the possibility of us feeling and caring and nurturing into being another space in which to be? This space, this garden, this corner of the self sits *within* a context of woundedness – that which cannot heal – and yet we must heed the words of a woman who chooses to withhold her name:

*“water your gardens and fertilise this incurable wound with self-love.”*

For me, thinking and performing the rhapsodic, always in uneasy relation to the scratch – to its difficulty and disruption – is to practise possibility within the impossibility of violent inscription, to open spaces for relation, even community, inside the folds of power.<sup>11</sup> This is about a sociality premised on difference and bearing – open to love as effortful labour; as practices of hapticity, refusal and Black virtuosity; as intimacy and care; as the everyday re-inscription of Black femme life on terms other than those of negation and death.

Images to follow:

*This song is for...* Vol 1. 6-vinyl record collection & listening room, Goodman Gallery, Cape Town. 2021.

Gabrielle Goliath. Photograph credit: Hayden Phipps.

*This song is for...* Installation view, Göteborgs Konsthall, Gothenburg. 2020. Gabrielle Goliath.

Photograph courtesy of Göteborgs Konsthall.

*This song is for...* Installation view, Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh. 2021. Gabrielle Goliath.

Photograph credit: Sally Jubb.

*This song is for...* Installation view, Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town. 2019-2021. Gabrielle Goliath.

Photograph credit: Matthew Bradley.

*This song is for...* Vol 1. 6-vinyl record collection & listening room, Goodman Gallery, Cape Town. 2021.

Gabrielle Goliath. Photograph credit: Hayden Phipps.











This song is for ...  
Flow

Don't sleep the wall  
by Stranger  
performed by Opa Ravi Jati & Ravi

"Death knocked on my door  
He took away my innocence for sure  
Death left me on the other side  
With a soul no more"







# ***Chapter Y: Is survival not archival? (2017)***

**Performance at the ICA Live  
Art Festival  
Iziko South African National  
Gallery, Cape Town**

**Donna Kukama**

*In the middle of a dark room, a black woman in a black suit stands alone, waiting for the room to fill up. The room's main entrance is to her left, and she stands facing the entrance to the next room in front of her. She turns her head past the growing number of visitors and her gaze slowly shifts towards the main entrance and then tilts upwards, directly above the massive doors to her left. Her body turns to the left, where she locks eyes with brown wooden sculptural objects above the door of the entrance. They are embedded in the museum. They have possibly always been there, present yet out of sight. They form part of the museum's structure and history, yet they remain on the margins of the exhibition. Like unacknowledged ancestral spirits, they hover invisibly.*

*She points a handheld torch towards the wooden figures and begins to slowly walk to the side of the door, where a ladder awaits.*

*She steps up the ladder, continuing to point at each of the figures with a torch, in the dark. With each figure illuminated, the others remain in the shadows, waiting their turn. With each attempt to illuminate them all, their shadows, cast by the museum's colonial architecture, deny a collective visibility.*

*I summon their presence by calling out names, one by one, in no order, repeatedly...*

Helen Mmakgabo Sebidi

Valerie Desmore

Helen Mmakgabo Sebidi

Esther Mahlangu

Valerie Desmore

Bonnie Ntshalintshali

Noria Mabasa

Eliza Xaba

Gladys Mgudlandlu

Valerie Desmore

Noria Mabasa

Esther Mahlangu

Helen Mmakgabo Sebidi

Eliza Xaba

Alina Kumalo

Bongi Dhlomo-Mautloa

Bonnie Ntshalintshali

Noria Mabasa

Esther Mahlangu

Helen Mmakgabo Sebidi

Valerie Desmore

Eliza Xaba

Alina Kumalo

Bongi Dhlomo-Mautloa

Bonnie Ntshalintshali

Noria Mabasa

Esther Mahlangu

Helen Mmakgabo Sebidi

Gladys Mgudlandlu

Valerie Desmore

Eliza Xaba

Alina Kumalo

Bongi Dhlomo-Mautloa

Bonnie Ntshalintshali

(Note to inner-self: we sometimes repeat because we forget)

*They become me.*

*Present, marginal, yet alive.*

*Momentarily heard, and soon to be felt.*

We (them and I) reach out for tape, and stretch all the way towards the wall where the exhibition title, Our Lady is written.

The masking tape speaks through us.

Pam Pam..... Krr  
Krr Krr Krr Krrr, KRR kr kr kr...

(We breathe)

Pum Pum Pum  
X! X! X! X!

Masking tape as it covers parts of the exhibition title:

(We still breathe)

Krr Krr Krrr Tack tack tack tack tack!

Q! Q! Q! Q!!!

P(rrrm)!  
Trrrr Trrrr  
Kr Kr Krrrr Krrrrr!  
Qtrr X! ...

X! X! Trrrr! X!

Krrrrrr Tlrrr Trrr!  
(Continues...)

*The process of rewriting the title simultaneously amplifies an erasure of often unheard voices. It is through the echoing sound of breaking masking tape that lesser known voices are made present. It is through this moment of listening to the indecipherable and muted violence of multiple erasures that the original exhibition title "Our Lady" becomes "I am no lady."*

*Silence follows...*

*With a smile, we step off the ladder and invite everyone on a journey...*

Welcome

Let's take a tour of the exhibition.

Welcome to I am no lady!

*(First painting - unknown european male artist)*

Here we have an image of a lady

She's gentle, smooth

Her gentle breasts...

Look how gentle she is

Let's bring out the gentleness...

*(Seductive playfulness in voice and gesture)*

This

Is a lady

She looks down with her gentle eyes

Feeds with her gentle breasts

And gently caresses a baby

A baby that she gently gave birth to

Look at her gentle hair

Gentle curls swirling down

This

Is a portrait of a lady!

*(Second painting - unknown european male artist)*

Over here we have another lady

A lady who gently looks with her gentle eyes

*(Sighs)*

*(Sighs)*

*(Sighs)*

*(Sighs)*

Her gentle hat

Which gives the form of a gentle afro

*(Sighs)*

*(Sighs)*

*(Sighs)*

*(Sighs)*

She wears a dress in gentle white and gently carries an egg

In a cage

*(Third painting - unknown european male artist)*

And here we have another lady

See how gently she jokes with the old man

*(Playful "innocence")*

Naughty,

naughty,

naughty girl!

So naughty,  
 so, so naughty!  
 Look how she gently smiles...  
 Gently lifting her skirt as the man looks over

Naughty little girl!  
 What a naughty little girl!

*["Lady" by Fela Kuti instrumentals play from a small radio]*

Follow me!

We enter the main exhibition room in search of gaps in our collective memories. The first gap is that of women whose lives have been violently and brutally ended. I kneel down, collect soil from the floor, and place it on an overhead projector. The projected image falls onto the space left behind by a work that was removed from the exhibition in protest<sup>1</sup>. I write a series of names in the soil on the overhead projector by tracing each letter with my finger. A light shines through from underneath the soil, cutting through its weight as each name appears on the wall. The cut is gentle, as though it is meant to soothe the scars made visible. Names are made visible for a moment. As soon as they shine through, they are blown away with a few breaths. A gaping hole of light is left behind as they float, returning back to dust. This ritual, this silent memorial written in time, is repeated with each name, and with each breath.

*Multiples of breath(lessness)s in honour of...*

Zoliswa Nkonyana  
 Novulo Swelindawo  
 Sizakele Sigasa  
 Salome Masooa  
 Sihle Sikoji Sibongile  
 Mphelo Phumeza Nkolonzi  
 Anene  
 Noku

*She/we continue(s) to breathe into the soil,  
 lifting it in honor of those names that have gone unrecorded,  
 the ones who did not make it to our newspaper headlines.*



(Second removed work)

I clearly need to breathe. We all do. I need to breathe because it is not possible to fully re-member ourselves without also holding those who keep us dead, silent, or in protest accountable. Their muted violences often become forgotten in our mourning. We continue the work, the work of calling to accountability and in not-celebration, those whose violent actions are pushed to the sidelines. Those whose accountability remains at the margins of our experience of erasure, silencing, witnessing, surviving, dying and surviving. Those who we are told to forgive in order to live. The ones who continue to live as we die, one by one. The monument of (non)apologies comes to life...

Over here

We have the monument of apologies

As you can see it is filled with a list of many, many apologies. I'll read some for you.

Not all...

Just a few!

(We switch on a portable radio, and white noise is heard in the background.)

So this young man apologises for slipping a pill in your drink

(She places a megaphone to the speaker of a radio, and the white noise is amplified )

Radio: Drrrrm drrrrrm drrrr drrr drrr drrrr drrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr

This man apologises for taking a shower.

(She places a megaphone to the speaker of a radio, and the white noise is amplified.)

Radio: Nnnngwaaongwaa Drrrrrm drmmmm dr dr dr dr drrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr

You can't hear the apology?

Let's just maximise

(She places a megaphone to the speaker of a radio, and the white noise is amplified.)

Radio: TTTTrrrrrrrrrrm TTTRRRmmmm DRR DRRRR DRRM drrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr, TRRR

TRR TRR TTRRR,

DRRrrrrmm drrrrm drrrrm drmm drrrrm

Oh!

This husband over here

apologises for losing his temper

(She places a megaphone to the speaker of a radio, and the white noise is amplified.) Radio: DRRRMM DRRMM DRRRM DRRRM DRM DRM DRM DRMMM

DRR

This one is sorry that you're dead

(She places a megaphone to the speaker of a radio, and the white noise is

amplified.) Radio: grr grr grrr grr grr grrrrr

This one apologises for stopping you as you were minding your own business

down the street

(She places a megaphone to the speaker of a radio, and the white noise is

amplified.) Radio: drrr drrr drrr drrr drrrrrr drrrr

Ahhh,

the list is so long

Basically,

sorry not sorry

(She places a megaphone to the speaker of a radio, and the white noise is

amplified.) Radio: drr drr drr drrrr drrrr drr drrr drrr drrrrrr drrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr

DRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRM!

Keep the apologies running

(silence)

We'll continue to the next exhibition.

*(Third removed work)*

*This section is dedicated to the LGBTIQ+ communities of Khayelitsha and Gugulethu in Cape Town, who have survived homophobic violence and live fearlessly in the face of marginalisation.*  
*(A silent television screen with visual white noise [ants]. Names on transparency sheets. A camera facing the TV screen and connected to a projector. A live projection of the television screen onto the wall behind it. Their names are written on the clear plastic sheets, and pasted one by one onto the TV over white noise. A live stream of first names [no surnames] placed on the television screen is projected onto a wall of the gallery.)*

Noxolo  
Hlengiwe  
Lindeka  
Simphiwe  
Tebogo  
Zukiswa  
Pearl  
Mvuleni  
Funeka

*(The projection stops. These memories will not be televised, but they'll be seen, heard and felt.) (Spoken)*

The wall of remembrance.

*(Written with white chalk, directly onto the wall where the earlier projection was. The sound of the names being written is amplified with a hand-held microphone. The chalk screams, and the wall carries scars.)*

Lukiswa  
Simphiwe  
Pearl  
Lindeka  
Noxolo  
Funeka  
Simphiwe  
Tebogo  
Mvuleni

*The names are illuminated with a head-torch, and then disappear into darkness.*  
*They are illuminated again, but become invisible once more.*  
*They are present – absent – seen – shadowed,*  
*thriving and surviving with or without any spotlight.*

*(A stolen image of our ancestor)*

*We come across a black-and-white photograph of an unidentified Ndebele woman.  
She is photographed with her hand covering her mouth. We cover my mouth, and  
collectively hum with her, for her, for us.  
Our humming is loud, for her, and for us.*

Hm Hm Hm Hmmm Hmmm x2  
Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hmmmmmmmmmm  
Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm x2  
Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hmmmmmmmmmm

Hm Hm Hm Hmmm Hmmm x2  
Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hmmmmmmmmmm  
Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm x2  
Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hmmmmmmmmmm

The humming continues as I move towards the middle of the room, where a  
portable radio is switched on, and it hums along.

Hm Hm Hm Hmmm Hmmm x2  
(Radio: kshhh kshhhh kshhh, kshhhhh kshhhhHHH  
kshhhHHH x 2)  
Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hmmmmmmmmmm  
Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm x2  
(Radio: kshhh kshhhh kshhh, kshhhhh kshhhhHHH  
kshhhHHH x2)  
Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hmmmmmmmmmm  
Hm Hm Hm Hmmm Hmmm x2  
(Radio: KSHHhh, kshhhh kshhh, kKSHhhhh,  
kKSHHHH, kshhhhHHH)  
Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hm Hmmmmmmmmmm

*The portable radio and I walk past the fourth painting by an unknown european  
male artist.*

*We tell it to be quiet and listen!*

*Collectively: SSSSHHH, SHHHHHHHHHHH!!! SSSHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!  
SSSSHHHHHHHT!*

ROOMS 2 & 3  
(Re-membering Nokuphila Kumalo)

*We approach a free-standing fan located halfway through the exhibition room and off-centre. It faces the entrance at the back of the gallery. I switch the fan on. It blows air towards the closed doors at the back of the room. Hard, cold air that is reminiscent of the wind in Woodstock, Cape Town. I walk towards the doors and slide them half open to reveal light coming from the room behind. The portrait of Nokuphila Kumalo painted by Astrid Warren is revealed. The doors are left slightly opened, wide enough for the portrait to be the only thing visible to witnesses in the darkened gallery. Returning to the fan, there is a roll of light white transparency paper. A type of transparency that is also opaque. I unroll it in front of the fan, allowing it to dance and float in its wind, towards the direction of the portrait. As the unrolling and floating continues, I stroke the paper with a microphone.*

**The sounds of the wind**

**didn't stop.**

*The stroking continues, becoming increasingly forceful, unpleasant, violent. Sounds of a violently amplified microphone breaking transparency paper apart fills the room.*

*The paper breaks repeatedly,  
floats towards the ground.*

*Soft microphone strokes follow.*

*Each stroke leads to another piece broken.*

*Again, and again, the pieces break, float and fall to the ground.*

*We are all witnesses,  
and repeatedly, not a single one of us dares to pick up the broken pieces.*

*This time around, the paper returns to the front of the fan and unrolls, uninterrupted, until it becomes a long blank scroll that is floating and falling simultaneously. It dances momentarily in the wind before finding its place of rest on the floor.*

*We,  
the spirits,  
pick up the pieces  
and create a transient floor memorial that gently dances under the blowing wind.*

(Fourth removed work)

A TV set is turned upside down. It has white noise (ants) on the screen. Above it is a downward-facing camera connected to a projector that shares a live feed of the TV's surface onto the adjacent wall. A smaller fan hums occasionally on the side. We lift the fan up with one hand. We, the memories that will forever haunt, collect soil from the ground and place it on the TV screen with our other hand, while the fan blows parts of its dust off screen. One hand traces and carves out our ghost in the soil on the screen, while the other hand blows air from the fan. The fan is loud, but its cold air fails to erase our ghost.

The humming fan, still amplified by a microphone, follows us as we move across to the projection of our ghost on the wall. The fan is positioned on the floor to blow its now muted air in the direction of scrolls of "brown paper in protest" from a distance. The brown papers feel a breeze and move very slightly, but we know they have always been there, long before the fan.

Once we're in front of the projection,  
and positioned inside the carved outline of our ghost(s),  
we turn to face the witnesses to speak.

**Long live, delenfznkjccjkndcjlstn,  
Long live!**

(The fan hears us and turns with a desire to blow its air towards brown-paper-in-protest at a distance. It desires to be a "participant" and "ally", yet it cannot move close enough because it is still connected to power and privilege. It blows at pieces of brown-paper-in-protest from a distance.)

(Fifth painting - unknown european male artist)

Torch flashing at the painting,  
like strobe lights at a rave.  
White innocence, white privilege,  
and all the ladies from the first room of paintings are present.  
The fan on the floor is one of them.

The fan recognises its own oppression, and continues to blow at the far-away brown paper,  
not the painting right next to it.

This is how a lady enjoys her party.  
Ladies walk around naked,  
'Cause that's what ladies do!

(Fifth removed work)  
Brown-Paper-In-Protest

Blank scrolls of brown paper are found hanging against the wall. They appear old, as though they might have already been there before. A scaffolding stands in front of the "unwritten scrolls". I lean against the scaffolding and swipe a microphone across the scrolls, revealing bits of the blank wall behind while a sound fills the room. From the microphone, we hear the thundering indecipherable cries of those whose stories are yet to be written.

(Thundering, indecipherable cries begin)

We were crying

(Speaking amongst ourselves)

For nznfkqenljzlkfmg q lkNmflknr

(Loud thundering, indecipherable cries from the brown paper against the wall  
continue)

And AS they were crying...

*(Amplified brown-paper-sound stops)*

... Some ladies

Saw THAT!

*(We move on to the next work)*

*(Sixth painting – unknown european male artist)*

*We flash a torch at the figure of a white woman painted from a white european male's gaze.*

*At this point, the presence of white feminism(s) centring its/their bodies and tears in our struggle becomes evident.*

*They also wanted to cry along*

*So they joined in*

*And they cried*

*(Lies on the floor, below the painting, and imitates the sounds of cries)*

Whuuu, whuuuuu, whuuuu, whuuuu, whuuuu, whuuuu, whuuuuu...

*They cried rivers and rivers of "tears of solidarity"!*

*(Imitates more cries)*

Whuuu, huuuuu, Whuuuu, huuuu...

*Until we could no longer hear anything*

*But the sounds of their tears of solidarity.*

*(Cries pause, but they are to be continued...)*

*(Sixth removed work)*

*We approach a wall that is already marked with what resembles a landscape by us. Unlike in the empty spaces before it, we know that we have already been here. The imitated cries from earlier continue. This time around, they are accompanied by strokes of white chalk that occupy and take over our landscape.*

*Our head torch illuminates the amplified strokes of white chalk against the dark wall.*

*Each stroke is accompanied by a fake cry.*

*Each spoken sentence is followed by multiple strokes and multiples of fake-cries.*

*Piles of white chalk gather at our feet, settling as a noise that is as soft as it is loud, and as innocent as it is violent.*

*Imitated cries continue...*

Tears!

*Imitated cries, white chalk on the wall, and the sound of chalk falling at our feet continue...*

The tears of solidarity

*Imitated cries and white chalk gain more presence...*

The tears of solidarity all over the place!

*Imitated cries translate themselves to Setswana: Nnngweee, Nnngweee, Nnngweee, Nnnngweee...*

And the tears from there were in bucket-loads!

*Briefly points to previous painting as cries continue in a deeper, more dramatically mournful voice.*

So we decided to move on, and focus on justice.

*Moves across to next work...*



*(A photograph of a Black woman dressed as a judge)*

*The woman in the photograph wears a red judge's robe, a white judge's wig and white gloves. We point at her image with a handheld torch.*

*This is justice.*

*We let the torch scroll down, and it lands on her folded hands. We focus on the gloves.*

*These are the gloves of justice.*

*We move away from the representation and towards a pair of white archival gloves on the floor beneath the painting of the judge. I pick them up, dust them off, and stand next to her, in the same pose, without putting the gloves on. They sit on my hands, empty, limp and actionless.*

*I move forward to place the limp gloves on a podium, and begin to walk backwards towards the first room, rolling the podium to where our unacknowledged ancestral spirits hover invisibly.*

*(The smallest removed work)*

*Behind us is a removed work, now replaced with our text "I not be lady-o!!!!!"*

*["Lady" by Fela Kuti instrumentals play from a small speaker with LED disco lights]*

*We pull fresh brown paper from a roll on the podium. As the brown paper unfolds, it guides us towards the exit. I pull the paper, and the paper guides the podium as we walk backwards towards the entrance (now exit) of the exhibition.*

*Witnesses follow.*

*After passing under the brown wooden sculptures above the entrance doors, we stand still and then begin to sway in place to the music. A soft smile emerges from behind the podium, as our head continues to sway from side to side.*

*All the witnesses have left.*

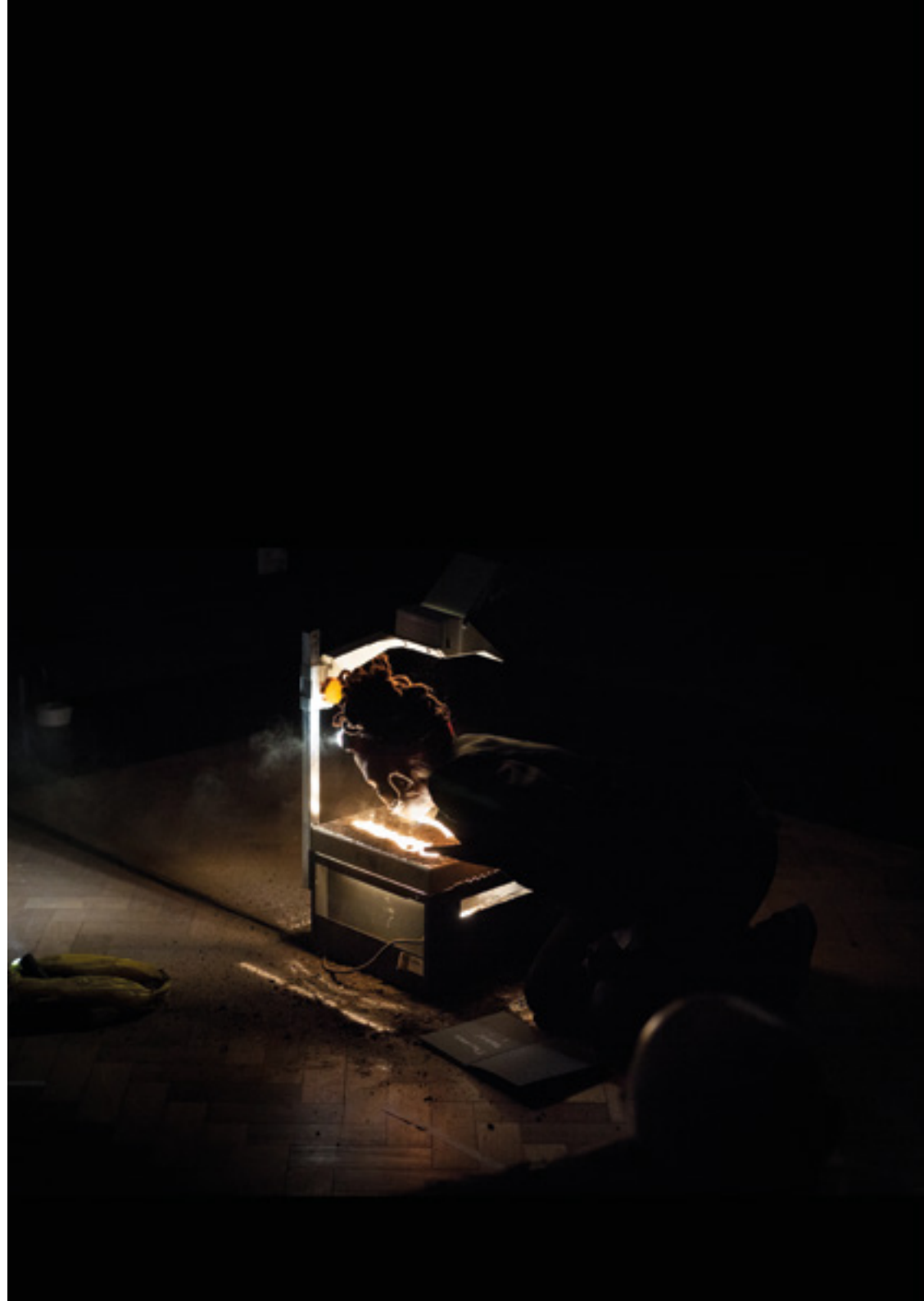
*We, the fresh brown paper, and the backward-rolling podium move back into the gallery.*

*The wooden doors shut.*

*We spend a moment in silence to recall and re-member.*

*Is survival not archival?*

Images to follow:  
*Chapter Y: Is survival not archival?* Live Arts Festival ICA, 2017. Donna Kukama.  
Photographs courtesy of Institute of Creative Art.



N'comya-













# What's in a name? And other archives of forgetting

B Camminga

*The United Kingdom, May 2020.*

*The BBC News website headline reads: "I am scared of being buried in the wrong gender".<sup>1</sup> In a Reddit thread, referring to the headline, two comments follow:*

- 1) "Being buried as the wrong gender is the most world problem that has ever been put to writing" (a sub comment suggests that perhaps the author omitted the word "first").*
- 2) "Pro tip: dead people do not care about jack shit".<sup>2</sup>*

I type in the words "Trans Murder Monitoring Project". Four words. Four words I have typed upwards of 104 times. Four words that are four swift knuckle-cracking raps at the door of death's statistics. Twenty-eight characters, two years short of the average life expectancy of a trans woman of colour.<sup>3</sup> Thirty-one characters, if you count the spaces. That's one year into what many trans people call "miracle territory" and "everything from here is extra time".

Let that sink in: we have a project that exists to monitor the murder of trans people. To take their deaths, to collect, collate and analyse as data so that it can be made to prove a point; to "put" a "world problem... to writing"? We might also call this project, this death tally, given that "precarity is, of course, directly linked with gender norms";<sup>4</sup> an archive of trans precarity. Between 1 January 2008 and 30 September 2020, the project recorded a total of 3314 reported cases of murder in 74 countries worldwide.<sup>5</sup> So many nuances... A person named as trans and reported. A murder, put to writing, with the adjective trans. The death of a person recognised as trans reported as a murder. A naming and reporting that brings trans people into grievability by making them, if not recognisable, then, at the very least, statistically readable. The difference between death and disappearance? The "knowledge and perspective of the person reporting the crime".<sup>6</sup>

***1) The most world problem that has ever been put to writing.***

A problem with the world that I am trying to word. A world problem. Not put in writing but "*put to*" it. That is, somehow made legible for the public record?

It is February 2019, and I am in Greece. She is from Egypt, and I am from South Africa, but we met in Sweden. She likes to tell the story about how, at our first meeting, she was purposefully late and then tried to get into an argument with me to see how I, the white genderqueer trans researcher, would treat her. To see how I would treat a woman, how I would treat a migrant woman, how I would treat an Egyptian trans woman, and treat a trans woman of colour who is also a refugee. I have never asked after her

story because that has not been the focus of our working relationship or, indeed, our friendship. These days, she calls me “Sweet B”.

In Athens, we are in a shisha bar known as a safe space for trans migrants, smoking across from one another, with trans women who had survived the Eastern Mediterranean route, Turkey to Greece, survived the crossing. There is sugary tea and black coffee in clear glassware and plumes of buoyant smoke enveloping our little table. We are all clearly trans; this is what happens when trans people choose to gather, we hum with our own visibility. On this day, a day on which we had both held the heavy consistency of the words repeated over and over by those who made it to shore (“They throw us in the sea. They know that we can’t swim and we will die. They take our life jackets and throw us in the sea”), she turns to me and starts. No warning. The words flood out of her:

You know, I didn’t move from Egypt to be illegal in another city... the UN [in Turkey], they didn’t even write I’m a trans woman [when I claimed asylum]. They told me, ‘you are a single male’... I told them my name, the name I’d like to be called... but they didn’t care.

They didn’t care about who she was or who she said she was or her name. They gave her the name her parents gave her when they were mistakenly told they had a son. They wrote that name, a deadname, not her name, on everything. Put to writing, she became a single male seeking asylum. *Knowledge and perspective.*

A deadname is the name a trans person might have been assigned at birth that is no longer in use. Deadnaming is often used as a mechanism to undermine a trans person’s gender identity. Using the name suggests that the person might be something other than who they say they are. Dupliciousness and falsehood. It is to say “you are lying” without actually saying it. In “Deadnaming a Trans Person is Violence – So Why Does the Media Do It Anyway?”, Sam Riedel suggests that to deadname someone violates a deeply personal boundary. It perpetuates “the single

most harmful misconception about trans people all over the world: that our true gender identities – who we are at our core – are the ones we were assigned at birth.”<sup>7</sup> The corollary to this idea is that any violence trans people experience is the outcome of their own fraudulence and therefore deserved. That transphobia is simply a difference of opinion.

*You are a single male  
without a lifejacket,  
drowning.*

Members of religious orders, including the Pope and Mother Theresa, have deadnames. Monarchs, too, often adopt a regnal name upon ascending to the throne. Yet society seems content to accept and respect such processes of self-naming.<sup>8</sup> Why not the same for trans people? For our Kings and Queens and Prinxes and Mothers? In defining an archive, KJ Rawson broaches this question of naming and care:

And what of the history that is hoped to be forgotten? Transgender people who transition their gender presentation may feel betrayed by the archive’s stubborn and persistent refusal to forget. Thus, while archiving transgender materials is essential for community and personal identity formation, political advocacy, and historical memory, it should be treated as a powerful mechanism of memory and identity with far-reaching impacts.<sup>9</sup>

### What of the archive that persists in forgetting?

At night, she and I make heavy calls to each other across Athens. Our breathing tide-like. We know that there are people that have simply vanished. We cannot say their names. We do not have names, dead or otherwise. We have vague outlines. Evidence, but no body – how can there be? Long seabed silences. Running from one border unacknowledged, unknown, and, if we believe that documents tell us the truth of a person,

unreal in both gender and name.<sup>10</sup> They cross the sea, like so many have before, and disappear into that sea, like so many have before. No one is waiting for them to arrive on the other side and no one has acknowledged their leaving. So who can know, when life jackets are taken, and a person is pushed into the brine, that she was ever there to begin with?

The boat from Turkey to Greece is eight metres in length. Those eight metres hold 85 people. She tells me about the crossing, about how the expanse can make you crazy, and about how gay men positioned themselves in front of her to keep her safe. She tells me about seeing the shore of Greece while the boat, in that vast sea, murmured:

**Embarrassment.**

**Abomination.**

She has a life jacket, the colour of a ripe orange – she paid extra – but she knows that this is nothing:

If this risk includes my death, so be it. I cannot stay, and I cannot go back... I have nothing to lose. If they kill me, then thank you. It's like this – when you reach the maximum fear you start to see things differently... [getting in the boat] then is... win-win. If I cross and go to Greece, it's a win. If I die in the process, it's also a win because I cannot keep suffering like this, when death is an escape plan for you it's as like 'Okay, let's do it.'

She says to me, "Even if my body washed up, how would I be identified?"

*You are a single male.*

*The most world problem that has ever been put to writing.*

Judith Butler reminds us in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*:

Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and grievable death?<sup>11</sup>

*Germany, July 2017.*

*Having crossed the Mediterranean from Turkey to Greece, a trans woman from Lebanon applies for asylum. Her application is rejected. Reason for rejection: she had undertaken her journey dressed as a man.*<sup>12</sup>

After Greece, I carried the dead with me – a consistent haunting. Every time I looked at the sea, I wondered what bodies were below or who had washed up where, and what had been said. Who might have known their names? Living names. Writing about archives of the enslaved, Saidiya Hartman asks, "is it possible to reiterate her name and to tell a story about *degraded matter* and dishonoured life that doesn't delight and titillate, but instead ventures toward another mode of writing?"<sup>13</sup>

Trans life is tenuous. If anything, this is what trans living has taught us. For Eléni Varikas, the genocide of Jews, Romani and others during World War II is something that has taken up the role, since the first years of the post-war period, of a monstrous exception. Very few, she suggests, intellectual and otherwise, were able or willing to look at the "final solution" in a way that might consider the condition that made its very conception possible. She writes;

It was as though the fault-line created by the enormity of the event had revealed the dark side of a tradition that thought could not look at directly without calling itself into question, or without questioning the certainties, presuppositions and hopes that had been its foundations for centuries.<sup>14</sup>

## Knowledge and perspective.

*Ireland, May 2019.*

*After dying of ‘unknown causes’ in the all-male Great Western Direct Provision Centre, a trans asylum seeker from South Africa, Sylva Tukula, was buried by order of the state. Placed in what the newspapers called a ‘pauper’s grave,’ no flowers, no obituary and an unmarked plot, a place for the unknown or unclaimed. Though friends had asked to be informed when her body would be released, no one was ever contacted. No headstone to mark a life or a death was erected, and we can only guess what name and gender appeared on her death certificate. Incidentally, this kind of burial is also called a ‘public health funeral.’*

*The most (first) world problem that has ever been put to writing.*

Dagmawi Woubshet, in *The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of Aids*, reminds us that interring someone “under a false person” leaves them “in effect unburied and unburialable.” It is a “breach of the ethics of burial, a breach of the human.”<sup>15</sup> Sylva is South African, yes, from that country of progressive constitutionalism, and yet she sought refuge elsewhere. An almost unimaginable thing, almost. (An) *embarrassment*.

Sylva is unburied and unburialable.

A pauper.

In *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, James Baldwin calls on those reading to “bring out your dead.”<sup>16</sup> Baldwin’s call is an invocation to remember those unseen, those actively forgotten and, in this instance, those at the slippage point. Those taken by the sea. To bring out your dead is “a memorial and

challenge, an act of grief and defiance, a register of mortality and decline, and the possibility of struggle and survival.”<sup>17</sup> To bring out your dead is to say these deaths are not unimportant or forgotten or, worse, coincidental. It is to say, recalling Grace Kyungwon Hong, “these deaths are systemic, structural.”<sup>18</sup>

I am bringing out our dead. There is an archive of the dead, and it lies somewhere between the shore and the Mediterranean seabed. It lies in paupers’ graves. It is an archive to escape plans measured in boat metres. It is filled with deadnames and documents matching no one in particular. It is brimming with lives labelled abominable, the mismarked, the mismatched and the unknown. It trades in misleadings and falsifications. Citrus cushioned, it is an archive to illegality and supposed deception. It is boats, it is waves and it is wakes.<sup>19</sup> Seemingly never-ending. It is names carried behind pursed lips like gifts. It is no one knowing you’ve left and no one expecting you to arrive. It is win-win.

2) *Pro tip*

*I venture to put this world problem to writing. We are tethered to one another now. This archive is also in me. Your names are outlines, and outlines are enough. They have to be. Beautiful and buoyant. Strung across the city.*

**NO EASTER  
SUNDAY FOR  
QUEERS,  
Haunting  
Story**

**Nondumiso Lwazi Msimanga**



*I would like to invite you to step into a magical world.  
To enter the role of an actor...*

**Award winning script *No Easter Sunday for Queers* by Koleka Putuma to make its debut at the Market Theatre**

#### **SYNOPSIS**

*NO EASTER SUNDAY FOR QUEERS* follows the ~~hate-crime murder~~ love story of Napo and Mimi. The lovers, through the ~~spirit, subconscious~~, Easter Sunday sermon, return on the anniversary of their wedding death crucifixion to make the ~~church pastor perpetrator~~ Father ~~reconcile~~ reckon with the present and the past and a ~~sacrifice~~ crucifixion he must account for. The alter is a cross and the subconscious a court room where the dead seek justice for a ~~an act~~ sin committed by their perpetrators. The ~~antagonist~~ protagonists cannot ~~any more~~ tell the past from the present and scripture from the truth. Every year, through the ~~visitations~~ on Easter Sunday the ~~pastor and his~~ church is made to remember.

Excerpt from the *No Easter Sunday for Queers* press release, August 2019.

In 2019, a cast of professional performers along with a chorus of first-year students from the Market Theatre Laboratory were brought together under the direction of Mwenya Kabwe to perform Koleka Putuma's play *No Easter Sunday for Queers*. Putuma had written a queer play. A work of the love between two women. A play of poetry, where the two women haunt the stage. The ghosts of the two lovers protest against being erased. They haunt the pastor who drowned them and the congregation that watched as he killed his daughter and her partner. In the synopsis, Putuma writes "alter" instead of "altar" signalling towards the alternate work of every element of this play. As the crossed-out and underlined words of the synopsis show, the play plays with alters and alterations. In the play, at every turn of the story, an alternative memory is shown, and the audience is invited to question why the ending of this love story is murder. We stay in place and listen to the living and the dead. The play haunts us by revealing the alternate possibility which the church's homophobia and erasure of the queer attempts to destroy.

This queer play stages ghosts that conjure the absent into reality. It is the ghosts who try to make the father/Father of the congregation see their continued presence. The father/Father remains in a yearly loop of his memories of the Easter service and the women haunt the church, without final resurrection. They haunt as a call for change. An alter theatre is birthed.

\* \* \*

Try to imagine that you performed in this play...

Imagine that you were either one of the two lovers, a member of the chorus, or the father/Father. And ask yourself what might it feel like to perform being dead or alive?

Consider what would haunt you if you were anywhere on the LGBTQI+ spectrum, or if you were heterosexual; if you were Christian or if you were not; if you cared or if you did not?

\* \* \*

I was interested in speaking to the cast of *No Easter Sunday for Queers* about their experiences of creating an ethereal world of ghosts in the ephemeral space of the theatre. I was inquisitive about what this process called their attention towards, that they may not have realised before – absences, presences, absent presences, queerness. I wondered how reflecting back could answer why the ghost of *No Easter Sunday for Queers* remains restless? I spoke to 13 cast members and asked them about aliveness, queerness and haunting.

Haunting is to imagine and act on the alternatives that should exist in the present – alternatives that are possible, if we act for the future – because we cannot continue to repeat past injustices.”<sup>1</sup> Haunting, then, is also what we can do with being haunted. To be haunted is to be asked to see injustice and to haunt is to ask others to see it too. Actors show us not only what is seen, but what they feel. May their feelings happily haunt you too...

Tumeka Matintela (chorus leader):

Even during rehearsals this struck me so much. We never really think about how much this affects people.

During the drowning, when the chorus is asking for forgiveness and the pastor’s preaching, he is performing *nje*, but it used to give me chills.

Even thinking about it now, I’m getting chills.

What we wanted to say with the play is how it made us *feel*.

Lunga Radebe (father/Father):

One of my memorable moments was when I was preaching and you could feel, sort of, the audience stepping out of the world of the play and into an actual sermon.

They would say, ‘Amen!’ It would happen almost every performance.

I would be so immersed in the pastor role and I would feel this sort of intensity, like the feel of a sermon. It was a beautiful feeling. And a conflicting feeling of being in the moment.

I kind of got why people flood in masses to churches and how... the power a pastor can wield. Because, in the moment, people get into the spirit of a thing.

Pretty-boy Sekhonto:

*No Easter* is like a – oh, I can say – spiritual kinda piece. I felt like I was being in a church kinda situation. Here, in Joburg, I’ve never been to church. So, at least *nyana* [a little], I can say some biblical things *nyana*. I kinda enjoyed that whole spiritual setup.

Lesedi Nkosi (chorus member):

Each show felt so different. It felt like there was a spirit moving. The singing! It felt like *besishumayela* [we were preaching].

Scout Fynn (chorus member):

There were moments for me when the chorus felt like they were spirits who were also trapped, like Mimi and Napo were. And that it was almost like this confrontation that we kept coming to; especially the moment where, you know, I think it’s Mimi, who’s like, ‘Where were you when this thing was happening?’ and we were like, ‘I was in the Spirit.’

*No Easter Sunday for Queers* asks us *not* to “lose our minds” as a radical act of queer responsibility. It asks us to be aware of how we usually see and do things. To learn how easily we give over our responsibility to each other’s lives. How we get swept up in the spirit of doctrine and forget to question. To not “lose our minds” means being conscious of how borders are created and how reality is constituted. We choose the parts we play in life. Unlike the chorus of the play, who project their responsibility to the proverbial spirit, ghosts call our attention to our own responsibility, to the people that our worlds make absent. The play asks us to be affected by things that are happening beyond ourselves, as actors do — to care and to act.

Tebogo Malapane (chorus member):

So now when the production came, I remember the word ‘queer’, I didn’t even know *ukuthi ithini* [what it meant].

I always heard ‘the LGBTQI community’ but I never called them the LGBTQI community, you know? So it was just, ‘ah, the gay people or lesbians.’ So, I think that was the highlight of the whole process. Like, understanding that, ja, there are gay people or queer. Also getting to understanding because, for me, I was so judgemental, growing up in a Christian community. It confronted me at that time.

Chaunees Bokaba (chorus member):

When we were still analysing the script and we had a talk-through after that. It was a very sensitive topic for me because I classified as a devoted Christian then, and there were certain principles that were being asked of me. And I think it was at that moment when I realised that I’m more to the spiritual side than the religious side of Christianity. Because I also had experiences where I used to question the Bible. And I used to actually go to a pastor after every service and I’d ask him some things and he’d be like, ‘No. Don’t ask too much. Sometimes when you ask too much your faith gets tainted.’ So I think I’ve been that Christian who lived with that wound of why is it that sometimes you are allowed to ask things? Is it because you have the answer or is it comfortable for you as the pastor?

When you use the word “queer”, as the umbrella term for LGBTQI+ identities, you are stepping into the space where those who have been called “weird”, “strange”, “different”, or “bent” have claimed the world of difference as empowering. To queer becomes an act itself.

Mnqobi Molefe (chorus member):

Talking about what we think being queer is or means. Then I realise also that being queer can also mean being different from other people described as “normal” in society.

There’s a reason why the most popular line of the ghost-play *Hamlet* is “To be, or not to be. That is the question.” Ghosts make us question our being. We also need to reflect on how to be different people.

\*\*\*

Are you still with me?

The world of characters is not so different from our own.

Are you able to imagine what it is like to be an actor?

\*\*\*

Mnqobi Molefe (chorus member):

I felt like a part of me was being represented. Because I also come... my family is from a very strong Seventh Day Adventist Church. And there are certain values that are... that you have to follow. And everything that was Mimi and Napo was actually, kinda in a way, like my story. Because there was always, like, this part of me that I couldn’t tell people about. My sexuality, for example. I couldn’t tell people about it because I knew that this is ‘wrong’ and it’s a ‘sin’.

So, in a way, I had to, *eish*, be an actor in this play but also try and find a way to, like, not be too attached to the story because in a way, ja um, that was, like, my story too.

Philangezwi Nxumalo (chorus member):

I was changed by the story. *Mina* [me], personally, also as a performer in the piece.

I used to be homophobic. So that was me. Because *mangikhula, ngikhulele emakhaya* [as I grew up in the homelands]. I was really not *bengingayazi indaba yokuthi* [I didn't know the idea that] there's a queer, there's a LGBT+ community. *Into ebengingayazi leyo* [That's something I didn't know about].

So, for me, *bengazi ukuthi umawumfana umfana, mawuyintombazane uyintombazane*. So, *masuthi, 'uyintombazane engathi umfana noma umfana onjengentombazane uyagula'* [What I knew is that if you are a boy, you are a boy, if you are a girl you are a girl. So, when you say, 'you're a girl that is like a boy, or a boy that is like a girl, you are sick].

The play actually made me realise that *sonke lesiskhathi* [I was brainwashed]. *Benginenkinga. Inkinga ikumina*. [All this time I was brainwashed. I had a problem. The problem was with me.].

Ghosts ask for your absolute humanity because they cry for justice, and not just against what's been done. They cry, too, for what could've been and what could now be done if you are willing to change. They flash before you as shadows of the darkness of the world, to foreshadow a possible future that is less dark than their past lives. If only you do what needs to be done.<sup>2</sup> Ghosts remind us that the present should be different. That the future can be.

If we simply try to exorcise them, we deny ourselves of the ability of being changed.<sup>3</sup> We deny seeing the way the future could be different. We deny the possibility of knowing more than what the eye can see. We deny, not just the justice they seek, but the expansion of our humanity.

Mnqobi Molefe (chorus member):

There were two moments: the part where the pastor catches them in the church, and the part where Napo was being drowned. I think it was, you know, metaphorical. And, like, an image of what happened to me, like, sort of how when we're baptised or we go to church, we have to sort of drown parts of ourselves in order to fit in. And that always felt so wrong – being the way that I was. So I had to keep that part of myself separate to, like, my church life.

Sydney Ndlovu (chorus member):

I've got a cousin who's lesbian. And her sister, I invited her sister to the show. She said, 'I'm not coming to a play *la ekushiswa khona i bhayibheli* [where they burn the Bible].'

I'm like, 'It's not about the Bible, please come?' I didn't want to tell her what it was about because *vele* she's going to block me, like, 'I'm not coming to that.' So, in my head, I'm like, '*How* can we reach out to those people who still think that way?' That was the conversation I had with *u Bra* [brother] Lungsta after the show.

Throughout the piece, I'm like, I'm going to relive my life as a twerking ghost and then I'm going to die also. I'm going to show this guy how this dead girl felt when she was dying. That moment also represented a lot of people. For me, it represented my little cousin who is lesbian. I can't be there to protect her. No one has accepted her. I feel like it was bigger than me. I don't know if I did it justice: to be Napo as she was drowning. She was drowning there and a lot of people were drowning. My little cousin was drowning with her. Her dreams.

Haunting replays the scene and asks us to feel what we cannot logically feel: to step into the shoes of the victim for those flashing moments and know what it feels like to drown.

To gasp and scratch and burn for air, to yearn to be held instead of choked, to not be able to breathe, to not understand anything that's happening to you, and to die. Haunting asks us to know what it's like to die. An impossible thing to know while alive, even as we metaphorically feel dead. Haunting asks us to actually feel death, critically, as it also makes us feel the life we deny when we ignore the existence of certain people in our lives.

MoMo Matsunyane (Napo):

In scenes like when my spirit visits my father, there was such longing. I longed for my father. I longed. Hmmm, why am I getting emotional? [Asks herself.]

I longed for him. I wanted him to see me. I wanted him to see me both for who I am, and to see me physically.

She was saying, 'You're gonna see me, whether you want to or not.' So he was forced [taps on table three times] to come to terms with what he did. And I appreciate her for fighting for that. For pushing to be seen and felt.

When you see a ghost, you see history, present and future, all at once. You see how you have been, how you are and how you can be. But this is no easy sighting. There's a reason why people have been scared of ghosts for eternity. It's not merely that ghosts are scary, but that what they ask for – in being seen – is that you alter something.<sup>4</sup>

"Do something," the ghost says. To listen means you must change. You must do more than what you have been comfortable with doing when a ghost calls. If you ignore it, you will not only be haunted by the ghost of the other, but the ghost of your possible future self. The alter is haunting.

Tshego Khutsoane (Mimi):

See yourself. Is this you? Have you done this kind of killing? Have you? Ja, have you murdered in this way? Have you damaged in this way? Have you ended life in this way? Have you... ja, are you this? Is this you?

And on every side, it is to see me see you. See you see me. Hear yourself. See yourself. Feel yourself. Whatever. Just make it close. Because it might not be you, but were you next to it, like the chorus? Were you a bystander?

\*\*\*

Try to not be afraid of the questions the ghost asks.

They were flesh and blood like you once.

Act, if you must, as though you do not fear them.

Act, and ask yourself the same questions too.

Stay with the questions these actors had to ask themselves to bring these ghosts to life.

\*\*\*

Tumeka Matintela (chorus leader):

All of a sudden, because we use these magic words: 'Mom, I'm gay.' And then the switch happens that all of a sudden *awusakwazi ukubona umntana wakho!* [you can't see your own child!]

There's just something dark about this switch that happens!

Our minds – we have this power of just deciding what is wrong.

**How?! What happens to you in that moment when you just conclude that *umntana wakho* [your child] is possessed?**

Lunga Radebe (father/Father):

There was a sense of past, present and future all at the same time.

I try to approach all the characters I play with a care for them, even though I don't agree with everything they do.

I needed to look at my daughter in the present sense but see something else.

Somehow, something in me [as the pastor] is dead as well.



Not doing something about the future our ghosts show is a life of torture. So why does the pastor, who is the only “alive” character on the stage of *No Easter*, choose to repeat his own torment rather than heed the call of the ghost of his daughter and her wife? Why does he allow himself this incredible cognitive dissonance: seeing the ghosts, but refusing to honour their requests to acknowledge them, so they can rest? One reason could be that he chooses to only see what he has known all his life rather than to see himself as their murderer. A fact that would require his own spiritual death in order to birth himself anew. A labour of great pain. Whatever the reason, he would have to acknowledge the incomparable pain that his daughter lived through at his hands, from being whipped by him to “straighten” her up, to actually being killed by her own father/Father, who also kills the woman she loves.

Only a false peace resides in a world where those who have been murdered go unseen. It can only be exhausting to work at maintaining dissonance rather than to act on the call to change.

Lunga Radebe (father/Father):

It was pretty cool. I had never done something like this. It was kinda like a one-man act in my head.

I’m playing by myself but surrounded by these ghosts who are actually physical people there. [referring to the other actors on stage]

I was playing in my imagination. I had to really contend with the duality in my head. I had to convince myself that it’s not real, but throughout the whole performance, they’re interrupting me. All the time, I have to try to maintain my sermon.

\* \* \*

Pause. Catch your breath.

Remember, this is acting.

\* \* \*

MoMo Matsunyane (Napo):

Memory is very important to this play because we remember differently and we choose what we want to remember and how we remember it.

So, I felt that between my body and the dead and aliveness, the memory of certain events shifted, you know? And how others started beautifully, and they turned sour. But in my father’s mind that’s not how he saw it.

And how his presence in that scene then affected my character because he’s still not *seeing* how he affected me.

Hmmm, *kumnandi uku actor mara kubuhlungu. Kubuhlungu emzimbeni nasemoyeni* [it’s fun to act but it’s painful. It’s painful on your body and spirit].

Because you literally evoke like-spirits.

Spirits who are like the one you are representing at that moment. And it’s no longer about you as the performer. And to be a part of someone’s life like that, and being responsible for telling it, is not easy...

He can continue refusing to see and painting it as something completely different.

Tumeka Matintela (chorus leader):

That relationship with the pastor, till this day, I haven’t figured it out. I didn’t like him. Half of the time I was just shocked at what he was saying.

There was this weird thing that happened in the middle of the play. The real me – the sympathetic me – kept coming out.

I was thinking, *‘Abantwana* [they are children], and they’re just in love.’ There was this conflict between her and *uTumeka* [myself] on

the stage. I felt like I was questioning, so I started using it as part of my[character's] journey in the play.

Momo Matsunyane (Napo):

I think it was important for us to show that we could be their children. That they know us.

Tebogo Malapane (chorus member):

We had an exercise when we were in rehearsal where they said, as much as we are in a chorus or a church, we are different people, so we behave differently. So the exercise was, like, 'Find your character; walk the way they would walk; talk the way they would talk; interact with everyone. How would you interact with them? And in this church, what role do you have?' So, in that moment, 'cause I was just that guy, I remember I said, 'I'm that guy who stands at the door. I'm that person who's known. *Ke rata go dumedisa batho* [I like to greet people]. So, when I was up there [on the balcony], I felt like, '*Hawu ngwana ka, Shem*' ['Oh my child', 'shame'].

Like I'm a parent, but also an outside parent.

On the floor with them... It's like that moment at church where we have fun, but it's played like a club vibe. The memories of, if ever they were alive, this is what would be happening. We would be singing and playing with them.

The line that was cueing us to enter was 'Would you marry me?' It was that moment of feeling alive.

Tshego Khutsoane (Mimi):

[Takes a long pause. Sits back in chair in silence. Tears in throat.]

Whoo, Ndu, I can't answer you.' [Pause.] I felt so, so alive. I felt so, so dead. I was all those things. Yooh, I don't know why that struck something so.

I don't know what just happened. I can't answer you. I don't have language.

\*\*\*

Remember to keep breathing. Acting is not easy, but it teaches us so much about ourselves.

\*\*\*

Lunga Radebe (father/Father):

You're looking at a man who's in a burnt down church, who's trying to justify his actions instead of going home to reflect and think: 'What could I have done to be a better human being?'

We justify our actions. Things can actually stop and when things stop, what actually matters?

Tshego Khutsoane (Mimi):

'The simplicity of a Bible. You know how evocative that is. Just on social media, my sharing the poster [laughs loudly] really had some strong - brought up strong things for people - people just read [rubs palm of hand vigorously]... you know, the surface reading.

Like already, it was a point. It was a 'don't come', eh 'rebuke', eh 'punish them', eh, whatever people do in the online space that enables them to be experts on any particular area without actually having engaged with it. That stuff was alive even before the play lived. Because those stories lived before - stories about the other - our stories about each other live before we even encounter each other. You know?

So that is the violence, that is the collision: things collide before we actually even meet. And so...[shakes off a shiver]. Oof! [pause, breathes deeply and holds back tears] I think it's in that space that I... I felt killed. That's where I felt dead. Because, ja, we kill things

before we experience things. I don't know. There are layers of deaths that I died in the life that this work lived.

And there are [sips air] incredible layers of life that I lived in the ways we breathed into this work... We made [finger quotes] 'sense of' anew. We created. And we shared. Night after night we *breathed!*

To live in alterity is an experience that is difficult to give language. To feel killed even as you breathe. But to act is to live. To do something. Not acting chains us all to persistent pain, instead of the possible freedom that is available to all of us. The freedom of the ghost is tied to all freedoms. Feeling unfree makes us feel dead, so we act to feel alive. For our breath.

\* \* \*

Please breathe.

We take inspiration from the actors.

Exhale deeply.

\* \* \*

Tshego Khutsoane (Mimi):

Girls making out on stage. Black girls making out on stage. Black girls existing out of... I don't even know what I'm saying... But, it does feel like that: **I'M KISSING A GIRL ON STAGE!**

I am who I am. I am the kind of committed artist I am. But still, this feels like a huge moment, that **I. AM. KISSING. A. GIRL. ON. STAGE!**

And it's tender and it's beautiful. At its core, this thing is fucking beautiful and it feels revolutionary [hand on chin, looking out, and smiling].

MoMo Matsuyane (Napo):

We can only plant seeds. Let's not undermine the work we do. It's just a pity we can't quantify it, or see, or track its success. But we know it works.

\* \* \*

I invite you to leave the world of acting now...

As you reflect on this journey with the actors of *No Easter Sunday for Queers*, reflect also on how our world remains haunted by the need for more alterity and alter theatre.

\* \* \*

Images to follow:

*NO EASTER SUNDAY FOR QUEERS*, Napo and Mimi kissing, holding each other's hands on the Bible. Scarf tying together. 2019.

*NO EASTER SUNDAY FOR QUEERS*, Mimi smiling fully, approaching dancing Napo in full-bodied movement. Pastor back. 2019.

*NO EASTER SUNDAY FOR QUEERS*, chorus, on balcony singing. Napo, Mimi, pastor, on stage floor immersed in water. 2019.

*NO EASTER SUNDAY FOR QUEERS*, chorus members as church choir, looking to the side anxiously or looking away. 2019.

*NO EASTER SUNDAY FOR QUEERS*, Napo jumping gleefully as father/Father plays joyfully, using whip as skipping rope. 2019.

Photograph credit for all images: Sherene Hustler.



















# Institutional irresponsibility:

## How coverups at art institutions perpetuate gender- based violence

M. Neelika Jayawardane

Names of institutions, galleries and individuals with whom I, as the author, communicated either verbally or in writing have been redacted in order to mitigate potential legal risk. The editor, the publication team of Lesser Violence: Volume 1, the board of GALA Queer Archive, and I discussed at length the possible legal risks and concerns regarding the naming of individuals and institutions, in addition to consulting experts on the matter.

Ultimately, as a team, we decided not to publish names not already in the public domain or not mentioned in the news article that initially reported on the (alleged) violent incident at Jomo Kenyatta airport. The name of the artist discussed in this contribution is also redacted, even though their name – reported in association with the alleged incidence of gender-based violence – is in the public domain. The only names included – with permission – are those of Charl Blignaut, the arts journalist who first reported on the case, and Katlego Malatji, who was one of the witnesses of the alleged incident.

As those invested in this publication – me, as the writer, along with the editor and publication team – we all recognise the threat of legal harassment as part of the culture of silencing. We came to this decision specifically because the legal team representing the artist sent letters to individuals who publicly spoke or wrote about this alleged altercation and broader issues of gender-based violence in the arts, demanding that the incident and the artist's name not be mentioned in public. As the writer, I understand that such “cease and desist” legal threats, though often made without basis, function to intimidate, drain energy, and financially exhaust individuals and organisations such as GALA Queer Archive that have limited resources. I wish to emphasise, however, that the presence of redaction in this contribution is not a theatrical gesture, or an indication of our capitulation due to fear. I hope that readers will appreciate that the redactions emphasise the ways in which silencing impacts the work of addressing gender-based violence.

## I.

I have no illusions about there being glory in the act  
of refusal.

In “The Visual Frequency of Black Life: Love, Labor, and the Practice of Refusal”, Tina M. Campt describes the practice of refusal invoked by the Practicing Refusal Collective, the collective that she and her collaborator Saidiya Hartman convened in 2015, as a “refusal to recognise a social order that renders you fundamentally illegible and unintelligible” as well as a “striving to create possibility in the face of negation”.<sup>1</sup> Further, she explains that “refusal” is

a way of thinking beyond hierarchical structures of power/resistance as the primary schematic for representing the relationship of black subjects to power... and to recenter the micro-labors of the black struggle and the everyday practices of refusal that are easily dismissed or taken for granted as complacent, irrelevant, or ineffectual.<sup>2</sup>

In these reflections, I aim to harness the practice of refusal that Campt details – the powerful possibilities made possible by saying no to social orders that render women, especially Black and brown women, as unruly, illegible and unintelligible when they fashion powerful, self-directed, life-giving subjectivities.

It is difficult to ignore that there are serious repercussions for refusal. Voicing refusal, especially in ways that are not acceptable to existing social orders and structures, unleashes a cascade of censorious reactions meant to prevent others from taking similar actions, or imagine a similar life of freedom. It means that you will be censured in obvious and less obvious ways. It means that your career may be derailed, and that you will lose income. It means that, at certain times, you may experience something akin to social death because your social and professional circles will *refuse* you – rendering your presence unwelcome and invisible. Refusal does not come without deep wounding from which you may not recover.

But.

But.

I also hope to offer some possibilities for spaces that may open – richer, more generative spaces – when one refuses the normative and widely accepted, albeit violent, orders.

## II.

In 2018, many in the art industry called for a reckoning. This call for accountability was buoyed by the powerful momentum of the #MeToo movement, which exposed abusers in several industries spanning Hollywood to publishing, news media, broadcasting, photojournalism and art.<sup>3</sup> As Kristen Chick wrote, in a special report on widespread abuses in the photojournalism industry:

Many women in the industry say [abusive] behaviour is so common that they have long considered it simply one of the realities of working as a woman in the profession.<sup>4</sup>

Seeing others come forward gave permission, courage and support to many women to speak out about their own experiences of personal and workplace violations. They were done being silent, done being fearful of the social and professional repercussions that had prevented them from reporting abusers and abuses for decades.

The abusive practices and practitioners brought to light by #MeToo were rooted in a number of factors that were industry specific, but each industry had characteristics in common. To begin with, they were all male-dominated workplaces that glorified hyper-masculinity. If women were hired to positions of authority, they were often present as token representatives who only served to reinforce violent, patriarchal values in the workplace, or had bought into these practices as normative and/or necessary. Second, they constructed an individual – an artist, photographer, or director – as “genius”. The genius artist was, and continues to be, framed as a magical if temperamental person (violent mood swings, general “bad behaviour” and misogyny simply added to the myth of genius) who was able to harness the alchemy of commercial success with public adoration and critical approval – and therefore had to be catered to at any cost. Third, vast power imbalances were purposefully maintained: between

established artists, curators, directors of an organisation, and lower-level workers, interns and hopefuls. Such a professional culture contributed to a lack of accountability, and a free-wheeling expectation that the “genius” should be given leeway not permitted to mere mortals.

Most of all, each industry with a history of abuses and abusers had its gatekeepers. These influential figures maintained the status quo by their silence towards prevalent abuses, as well as through excluding those who would speak up, removing them from their positions, and preventing them from having access to public platforms. Individuals who spoke up could be doxxed by gatekeepers, characterising them as irrational or vengeful persons. Although the “burden of [gender-based violence and sexism in workplaces] should fall on those who have power to fix it”, as photographer Amanda Mustard noted in Chick’s article about abuses in the photojournalism industry:

[I]t is and will continue to be on women, so long as the culture of silence continues and gatekeepers don’t have the courage to look in the mirror. For every gatekeeper that isn’t willing to be uncomfortable enough to make a change, there’s a woman who’s paying the price for that instead.<sup>5</sup>

Gatekeepers’ silences normalise, encourage and maintain violent practices and violent people in the industry. Their silences say: “This is how it is. You are upsetting things as they are. I’ve made it here because I know how to stay silent, how to accept and endure violence. Don’t expect me to compromise myself or the organisation’s reputation.”

Gatekeepers in the art industry are influential people who include editors at art magazines, gallery and museum directors, and curators. While the power and access that many of these gatekeepers possess may seem small and solely symbolic, it is still power. Symbols mean a lot – they are everything – in art.

The culture those powerful people helped create – which includes women in positions of authority – places the burden on women and other vulnerable people to magically change existing systems, create equitable access and ensure safe workplaces without the support of colleagues with far more power and authority.

If women find that it is not possible to change the professional environment when they witness or are subject to abuse, they are expected to “take the high road”, and simply leave their workplaces and abandon their ambitions. This culture – one that places the onus on women to behave well, walk away in silence and maintain decorum – demonstrates to all of us who is valuable for the industry and therefore requires protection from scrutiny, and whose presence, creativity, and contributions are expendable.

These were the truths and realities that #MeToo laid bare.

The problem, however, with #MeToo was that the public’s attention fell, for the most part, on a handful of individual abusers. Many more abusers remain protected, repeating their behaviour, finding ways to skirt being exposed and finding new platforms on which they have continued to further their careers. This was clearly not the intention of #MeToo’s founder, nor of the activists who continue to work to bring attention to pervasive abuses that happen every day, in homes, in places of worship and in workplaces. Despite the many powerful women’s voices that were buoyed by #MeToo, institutional practices remained, for the most part, the same. Gatekeepers continue to protect their respective institutions, reputations (the institutions’ and their own) and established practices. That means that they work to foster and protect abusers, too – tacitly or more explicitly, through their silences and silencing practices – if the artist or practitioner is important enough for the institution in some way, financial or symbolic.

### III.

In June 2018, prominent South African artist [REDACTED], who had previously been selected to represent South Africa at international art events, was detained by Kenyan authorities for assaulting his companion, a woman, in a boarding area at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi. He was, by the accounts of other passengers and airline staff, both verbally and physically abusive. When the artist’s companion refused to

leave with him and go outside, he (allegedly) tore up her passport. Kenyan authorities eventually arrived on the scene and took him in for disorderly conduct and damage of property, as a passport is considered the property of the state, and purposefully destroying one is considered a serious crime. Kenyan authorities confiscated the damaged passport as evidence. Witnesses verified that all this had happened.

The incident involving the artist and his companion came to be widely known only because [REDACTED], the critically acclaimed South African singer, took to social media on 21 June 2018, to say that she was sorry to have unwittingly aided an “abuser”.<sup>6</sup> The artist, a man she describes as a “family friend”, had contacted her from Kenya; she immediately acted to help him and contacted people she knew in Kenya so that he would be released. At the time, she did not fully understand why he was detained, but acted to help a friend get out of what seemed like a dire situation.

It also came to light that if it were not for the actions of another South African man in the boarding area, Katlego Malatji – who intervened and helped the artist’s companion get on the flight so that she would get home safely – things may have been far uglier. Malatji tweeted details of what he had witnessed, upset that the artist had subsequently been released.<sup>7</sup> In an interview via email, Malatji explained that he initially thought that he was “helping a couple not to get in trouble”, as he believed their “dispute was with the [airline]”.<sup>8</sup> But then he had seen how distraught the artist’s companion was. In a series of tweets, he explained:

She was vulnerable and seemingly at the mercy of an enraged man who seemed capable of anything. The only person resisting my efforts was [REDACTED] [the artist] himself. The airport and airline staff were all extremely helpful.<sup>9</sup>

The aftermath was covered by IOL News,<sup>10</sup> and by Charl Blignaut, one of South Africa’s most respected investigative journalists, in *City Press*.<sup>11</sup> His was not only the earliest published report of the incident available to the public, but also one of the few.<sup>12</sup>

\* \* \*



**Piano Man** @KMalatji · 21 Jun 2018

I'm so pissed off that [REDACTED] \*got [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]\*\* off the hook for his crimes in Nairobi.

I was there for the whole dilemma and fought so hard to have SAA allow his victim to fly cause I genuinely feared for her life.

I could actually cry right now.

That guys a monster

5:22 am · 21 Jun 2018 · Twitter for iPhone

260 Retweets · 46 Quote Tweets · 94 Likes

**Piano Man** @KMalatji · 21 Jun 2018  
Replying to @KMalatji

I haven't shared the story because I'm genuinely traumatized by the whole ordeal and I didn't want to jeopardize the victim who I don't know personally.

I'm so upset.

When does the victim get the benefit of the doubt? Goodness

1 · 27 · 8

**Piano Man** @KMalatji · 21 Jun 2018

I got checked in at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport and while walking to the boarding gates I noticed a couple in an intimate argument.

Laughed it off cause it looked like they were breaking up.

Boarded and walked out to Duty Free.

1 · 20 · 6

**Piano Man** @KMalatji · 21 Jun 2018

Upon my return I found this same argument at the boarding gate. Clearly something had happened and the guy was shouting at this lady. The Swissport staff was telling the guy to calm down and the lady was visibly terrified. He exclaimed that she was lying and she was dead quite.

1 · 20 · 6

**Piano Man** @KMalatji · 21 Jun 2018

I heated them speak Zulu and Sotho so I intervened and told the guy to relax and tone down his voice. He violently told me not to get involved while telling the lady that she should leave the area so they can talk.

She was scared and moved behind the counter for safety.

1 · 20 · 5

**Piano Man** @KMalatji · 21 Jun 2018

I got my pass and told the Swissport staff to allow the lady to sit in the waiting area and sat next to her.

They told the guy he wasn't allowed to board as they were waiting for a supervisor and he kept shouting that he doesn't care and speaking in a threatening tone to lady

1 · 19 · 7

**Piano Man** @KMalatji · 21 Jun 2018

Swissport informed me that he had ripped her passport with his bare hands and slapped her.

Airport security verified this as everybody had seen this argument.

Problem was now she couldn't fly because her passport was destroyed.

1 · 24 · 6

**Piano Man** @KMalatji · 21 Jun 2018

I called my local contacts in Nairobi and informed them there was a South African lady in grave danger whom they'd need to pick up and accommodate if she didn't make it onto the flight.

He saw me talking to the lady and charged into the area demand that I leave his fiancé alone

1 · 19 · 5

**Piano Man** @KMalatji · 21 Jun 2018

Her fear and tears were palpable as I was also scared. The man was a raging mess.

After unsuccessfully pleading with ground staff I left her with the contact details and proceeded to the plane where I asked the crew to speak to the pilot cause the passport issue could be solved

1 · 21 · 3

**Piano Man** @KMalatji · 21 Jun 2018

... in Johannesburg and the lady was not safe.

Flight got delayed by 20 odd minutes as the relevant arrangements were made.

She made a statement and SAA made plans in SA.

He was arrested and her passport retained as evidence. They allowed her on and he stayed



\* [the South African singer]

\* [the South African singer]

However, it turned out that [REDACTED] Art Gallery's director, [REDACTED] [REDACTED], and the senior curator [REDACTED] [REDACTED] – curator of this particular exhibition – came to know about what happened through an email I decided to send them on 10 July 2018. In it, I included a link to Blignaut's article in *City Press*, as a provision against my words being dismissed as hearsay.<sup>15</sup>

In my email, I made it clear that I didn't want to be part of this industry's propensity for whitewashing – especially not at an exhibition meant to examine the long-term effects of colonial violence on Black and Indigenous people. I acknowledged that I understood that the gallery's director was in a difficult position and that I didn't want to spoil [redacted] Art Gallery's wonderful exhibition, or take away from the recognition that Indigenous artists and their work deserve. An opening event is celebratory, a time to recognise innovative artists' work. I worried that in my attempt to call all those present – art professionals, fellow artists, writers and collectors – to responsibility and action, I would, instead, focus the spotlight on an undeserving and abusive artist.

Anticipating white liberal handwringing about censoring a Black artist, I explained that there are well-established reasons for why violence against women within formally colonised groups should be spoken about and addressed, rather than silenced. Given the devastating statistics of violence against women across social and racial spectrums – especially in the context of South Africa – and the work that activists, artists, scholars and women from a range of experiences have done to educate the public on the complicity of silence, my reasons, I thought, hardly needed explanation.

\*\*\*

When the [redacted] Art Gallery's director met me in person at her office, she welcomed a frank – but private – conversation with her, the curator of the exhibition and the gallery's marketing specialist. Given that I was to speak about the artists and their work at a public event the following day, I reiterated the points made in my email, and asked for guidance.

In clarifying my position, I emphasised that it was the powerful educative work of women activists from South Africa and the United States, where I now worked, that had helped shape my own ethics. It was these activists' inspiring labour that taught me the reasons that patriarchal violence against women, especially in groups that have experienced centuries of colonial and state violence, remains buried: it is because those in authority – those who have the freedom to speak, act and set precedents – sometimes protect abusers. Sometimes, it is because racist caricatures about Black and Indigenous people are furthered through the erroneous belief that “domestic” violence is a thing that Black men do, and – being hyper-

aware of that – we worry that if we act, we will appear to be participating in furthering those racist caricatures.

Keeping those complex threads in mind, I directed attention towards identifying institutional responsibility. How might we, as professionals in the art world, decide on an impactful course of action when we were faced with credible evidence about violent people working in our field? How might we step up to our collective responsibility – to a particular young woman who was assaulted, as well as to women (and children) who have lived through (and continue to experience) gender-based violence – rather than relegate this violence to the category of “private and domestic matters” beyond the purview of art institutions?

The gallery's director offered the following official position: in previous instances of allegations against an artist's unethical or violent behaviour, her institution – much like others – had waited for a court of law to charge the person before it made decisions about removing said artist's work or issuing any public statements. She added that “the value of the work must be separated from the actor,” and that it is up to “the enduring value of art” to reveal its significance. She emphasised that she wanted to refrain from trying people in public on the basis of rumour, or to conduct a “kangaroo court”. These statements seemed to show that any lessons learned from #MeToo had little impact on her decision-making and that her arguments did not seem to be informed by the contributions of feminist and postcolonial scholars to how “art” is constructed and given value.

Her final point: as a director of an Australian art institution, she had experienced previous situations in which an Indigenous male artist's violent behaviour, especially towards intimate partners, had come to light. Because she only referred to Indigenous men, I was forced to remind her that there is no doubt that intimate partner violence is not limited to Indigenous or Black people. She and the others at the meeting seemed to take a moment to reflect, agreeing that domestic violence did, indeed, happen in white homes. They made references to how “things had been kept quiet among white families”. It was as if I was bringing up a fresh idea they had never before considered.

These responses – each an example of personal and institutional refusal – put me in the awkward position of being an educator to women who were

primary decision-makers at a publicly funded state institution. To me, it seemed rather crazy-making and laughable to have to explain to those in executive positions at an institution, in July 2018, about the racism underpinning their ideas about intimate partner violence, and how relying solely on judgments of the court as the basis for ethical decision-making was not advisable.

The gallery's director made it clear that she was not censoring me. But she maintained there would not be any response from her, or the institution. I recognised that behind all this officialese – this polite, white, tone-deaf institutional rhetoric – was well-practised roadblocking.

\*\*\*

In the end, it was up to me to make a statement on opening night, as per the gallery's director's directive. It was an uncomfortable position in which to be, made especially so by the lack of institutional support and the unwillingness of the director to be party to any statement.

I knew that speaking about endemic violence among Black artists' communities in a gallery frequented largely by white patrons would not be easy to navigate. But I had no doubts. If Katlego Malatji, a stranger in an airport lounge, risked social awkwardness and potential violence, and intervened when he saw a man behaving violently towards a woman, how is it possible that institutions do nothing? How could I, and a public art institution, make high-minded curatorial statements on the significance of examining and countering violence – yet balk when faced with the responsibility to act?

When it was my turn to speak, I clarified why – on what should be a celebratory occasion – I was speaking openly about the violent behaviour of artists and art practitioners. I contextualised why gender-based violence, especially in groups that have experienced centuries of colonial and state violence, remains rarely spoken about in public, especially not with “outsiders”, because of the fear of perpetuating racist and violent caricatures about our people. I explained that these mythologies that were essential to colonial projects: the belief that “white” societies, being “egalitarian” and “civilised”, must act as “saviours” – policing, protecting and teaching the violent native-other to be better – accompanied the projects of empire.

Again, I was careful to point out that statistics show that gender-based violence happens across class, professions and racial groups. Moreover, that the long after-effects of centuries of colonial violence towards indigenous and colonised populations – subjects that many artists in the exhibition were grappling with – did not simply disappear. That violence, I said, lives on through continued institutional violence, evidenced in educational policies, policing practices, in judgments made by courts of law that reveal systematic bias against women and Black persons, and in the ways art institutions exclude Black artists except when it becomes convenient to tokenise them.

I knew that most of the Indigenous Australian people present at the exhibition's opening would know, from experience, that relying on institutions to make just decisions is not a particularly viable or productive course of action. After all, institutions such as courts of law have often enacted violence towards those who are not powerful. We know that when an art institution positions itself as too genteel and removed from authority to create an ethics of responsible encounter, violence will continue, and abusers will remain celebrated.

As I spoke, I saw many people nodding their heads in understanding and encouragement. Several came over immediately after I gave the opening address, and also came to speak to me over the following days on which I was at the gallery, and thanked me.

## IV.

Once I returned to the US, I pressed for an official statement, addressing my email to the gallery's director and the senior curator. The director opened her response by stating: “Our discussions were based on personal opinions and how the Board had responded to a particular instance in the past but at this stage this is not a formalised gallery policy”, deftly distancing herself from having committed to any position. She declined to “provide [me with an] organisational statement about this as it is a matter for the Board”. She then directed me “to take [the matter] up with ICOM [the International



Council of Museums] as they have an international Code of Ethics”, adding that she was “not sure that many galleries would have hard and fast policies in this matter and I have found that they tend to deal with them on a case to case basis”.<sup>16</sup>

I knew that this was just another attempt to derail my expectation for concrete action. But as the gallery’s director had instructed me, I looked up and wrote to the ICOM Australia, using a general email address provided on ICOM’s website. I was astonished to actually receive a written response from [REDACTED], OBE, Chair of ICOM Australia. He wrote that all violent actions, as well the “alleged incident involving the artist in question” would be “condemned and abhorred” not only on “grounds of ethics and human rights, but on the basis that they are illegal”. However, he “believed [I] had been misled about the nature and function of ICOM” as it is an organisation that has no jurisdiction over any museum or gallery in Australia:

In truth, I cannot understand why Ms [REDACTED] [REDACTED] Art Gallery’s Director] suggested that you approach ICOM Australia as [it] has no authority to instruct her.. It is a matter for [REDACTED] Art Gallery and its governing body.<sup>17</sup>

[REDACTED] gallery in Cape Town, which represents the artist, continued to remain silent up to two weeks after the incident. I finally received a response from [REDACTED], a representative of the gallery, on 19 July 2018. She said, in her email, that the gallery was in “discussion with [REDACTED] [the artist’s first name] to hear his side... [and] actively trying to get a response [from] Kenyan airport officials and other witnesses”; she also emphasised, “while we cant [sic] condone we also can’t alienate and seek to make meaningful behavioural change in a vacuum”.<sup>18</sup> She attached a statement by the artist, released subsequent to Blignaut’s initial *City Press* article, in which he claimed he had not, in fact, “physically assaulted” his fiancée, nor had he been “arrested or detained”. He added that they are “both undergoing counselling to help us address emotional issues” and “remain committed to each other”.<sup>19</sup> He returned to social media and posted an image of a boat at sea on his Instagram page (no longer available), with the caption “Come hell or high water”.

I would commend any person for taking responsibility for their rage and the effects it has on those around them. But while I agreed with the spirit of the

words in the email sent by the gallery representing the artist, I wondered how “meaningful behavioural change” could happen, given the propensity to silence any behaviour that would bring negative attention, often coded as “troubling” or “controversial” in the art industry. Soon thereafter, an email with an attached document was sent by [REDACTED] [REDACTED]<sup>20</sup> – a media and crisis management specialist – to those who had witnessed the violent incident at the airport and tweeted about it, spoken publicly about it, or written critically about the pervasive culture of protecting violent abusers in the arts industry (as I had). The attached document now had statements by the artist and his fiancée, [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. At its conclusion, the document included the following note:

Please note that [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [the artist] and [REDACTED] [his fiancée] have retained legal counsel and will take further steps to end the damaging rumours should this become necessary.<sup>21</sup>

Given the wording of this note, followed by the directive to send any further inquiries to the crisis and media specialist, fears of potential legal action would not be unfounded. The goal seemed to be to silence those who criticised the violent behaviour of the artist, rather than to take measures to prevent future violent behaviour or address the obvious evidence of physical and emotional violence towards his intimate partner.

## V.

In an industry that trades in symbolic-value goods, there is little transparency about anything, and direct communication is scarce. The business of art functions on practices of concealment: it camouflages its violent foundations by directing attention towards shiny objects in clean, white rooms.

Wherever silencing and violence exist, rumour thrives. Women who work in the art industry have always whispered to each other, privately, informing each other about harassers. Over the course of 2018–19, these “complaint discourses” about experiences of gender-based violence moved online, to social media. Websites provided spaces for anonymous

reports; the resulting deluge of abuse allegations in the art industry served to indicate the extent of abusive professional environments, implicating directors, supervisors, curators and artists. They evidenced how routine sexual harassment, assault and myriad of other violent working conditions were not only an accepted part of the art industry, but seen as a condition of work.

Just as women historically used their kitchens and living rooms to warn each other about violent men in their social circles, and strategise about navigating patriarchal violence, and even pushing back against perpetrators, the anonymity provided by Twitter posts, Instagram pages, and hashtags allowed women in the art industry a safe space for recording powerful complaints against abusers.

Critics of anonymous “callout” sites charge that this approach encourages irresponsible vigilantism, where false accusations can be made without consequences. But there are obvious reasons why anonymity is necessary for women in professionally and socially vulnerable positions in the art industry. Most of the women who reported experiences of violence on anonymous sites have precarious jobs. They are assistants, curators, gallery workers, aspiring artists. They lack networks of solidarity, face social censure, and the very real loss of a professional futures and income.

They know that shaming and social ostracism are routinely used methodologies of censure that remove one’s “social value” and connectedness by discrediting one’s word, experiences and contributions. They know that they will be blacklisted and never work again if they are “outed” as women who do not play along with the norms. Rather than address and correct violent behaviour, a whole system works to negate, silence and suppress dissent.

They know that established channels and legal processes often fail women and re-victimise them. They do not seek due process, because their employers and institutions lack processes for reporting complaints that are free of internal organisational bias. That is, if their workplaces even have established sexual harassment policies and due processes available.

Pervasive cultures of violence against women cannot exist without entire systems within powerful institutions protecting those who are known to

be, sometimes for decades, predators. Abusers are protected because they make money for galleries and institutions, because collectors don’t want the value of their artwork to be reduced and because networks of social and professional contacts in the art industry are intricately connected. No one wants to damage those codependent ties, embarrass themselves, or lose lucrative opportunities.

Refusal is not just calling out, but stepping up to responsibility, and following up when people try to derail your inquiries. Refusal is liable to meet a nice white wall of rhetorical resistance, and an email (with an attached institutional report) a year later, detailing how successful the exhibition was – the one that continued to keep an abusive and violent artist’s work up on the walls. There will be no mention of your exchanges with them, or the article you wrote, detailing how the institution and its director validated the abusive practices of an artist by refusing to speak or act.

Refusal is liable to get some threatening legal letters. It is liable to get you cancelled.

It is risky to refuse.

It is tiresome to refuse.

## VI.

Part of celebrating the cult of “star” art producers is to believe that their exhibition, gallery or the larger art industry itself would not survive without violent abusers’ work. It supports the myth that violent, “complicated” men produce brilliant work, that without them we would have empty spaces on our walls or that institutions would be mediocre if abusers were no longer accepted.

I would like to pose a reality check: despite some artists’ overblown egos that lead them to believe they are irreplaceable, there are plenty of others with talent to choose from. And once the “business” decides it is no longer



practical to back an artist, they may be abandoned and left with no social or financial support.

I have no doubt that there is pressure to maintain violent artists' works on the walls. And perhaps taking work down, alone, is not a productive solution that will make violence – particularly intimate partner violence – disappear. But keeping that work on the wall is evidence of our violent culture's predilection for giving precedence to the artist's subjectivity and creative work over that of the people he silences, violates and terrorises. An empty space on a wall would show that it is possible to decide against violence. That no artist's work is so sacred.

Refusing is a powerful action. Small wonder that it is threatening to those who've never been refused.



# Endnotes

## Care amid crisis: Lesser Violence – from reading group to publication

### Amie Soudien

1. The primary Lesser Violence Reading Group organisers and co-conveners are Keval Harie, James Macdonald and Amie Soudien.
2. Pumla Dineo Gqola. 2015. *Rape: A South African Nightmare*. Auckland Park: MF Books Joburg.
3. *The Lesser Violence: Volume 1* publication team is Linda Chernis, Keval Harie, Karin Tan, James Macdonald and Amie Soudien.

### In memoriam

#### Ayanda Denge

1. Denge's address has been lightly edited for clarity, given that it is a transcription of a recording made at the District Six Museum Homecoming Centre.

## Sitting as a Lesser Violence

### Saarah Jappie

1. On the history of the Slave Lodge, see Robert Carl-Heinz Shell. 2013. *From Diaspora to Diorama: The Old Slave Lodge in Cape Town* [booklet and CD]. Cape Town: NagsPro Multimedia.
2. For documentation of the exhibition, see Under Cover of Darkness: Tracing Stories of Women in Servitude Under Colonialism. 2020. Available at: <https://undercoverofdarkness.co.za/>. [Accessed 24 March 2021].
3. Gabrielle Goliath. n.d. "Elegy", *Gabrielle Goliath*. Available at: <https://www.gabriellegoliath.com/elegy>. [Accessed 31 July 2021].
4. Goliath, "Elegy".
5. John Newman (ed.). 2002. "A Cross-linguistic Overview of the Posture Verbs 'Sit', 'Stand', and 'Lie'" in *The Linguistics of Sitting, Standing and Lying*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, p. 3.
6. Thich Nhat Hanh. 2016. *How to Sit*. United Kingdom: Ebury Publishing, p. 14.
7. Hanh, 2016, p. 87.
8. For published records related to the Cape of Good Hope, see: Nigel Worden and Gerald Groenewald (eds). 2005. *Trials of Slavery: Selected Documents Concerning Slaves from Criminal Records of the Council of Justice at The Cape of Good Hope, 1705–1794*. Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society for the Publication of South African Historical Documents.

## This song is for... Inhabiting the scratch, performing the rhapsodic Gabrielle Goliath

1. Veena Das. 2007. *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 48–49.
2. Pumla Dineo Gqola. 2015. *Rape: A South African Nightmare*. Johannesburg: MF Books Joburg, p. 21.
3. A note on Black femme life: Gqola speaks to rape as a violence of power, "always gendered and enacted against the feminine" (2015, p. 21). In my use of "femme" I hold to her qualification of the feminine as not limited to women's bodies but, in relation to this intrinsically patriarchal violence, encompassing the span of identities, sexualities and age groups by which individuals may be deemed "safe to violate" (2015, pp. 14 & 21). Gqola also asserts the profoundly racial formation of this violence and its grounding in the slavocratic logics that rendered Black feminine bodies deviant, hypersexual and so available to rape, or rather, "impossible to rape" (2015, pp. 37–52). Black femme life is in this way haunted by a historically informed, raced and gendered paradigm of negation and death.
4. Pumla Dineo Gqola. 12 July 2019. "Gabrielle Goliath Creates Songs for Survivors in Scratched Melodies", *New Frame*. Available at: <https://www.newframe.com/gabrielle-goliath-creates-songs-for-survivors-in-scratched-melodies/>. [Accessed 4 July 2021].
5. Tina M. Campt. 2019. "The Visual Frequency of Black Life: Love, Labor, and the Practice of Refusal". *Social Text*, vol. 37, no. 3, p. 25.
6. Judith Butler. 2004. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, p. 49.
7. Sara Ahmed. 2014. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. 39.
8. Ahmed, 2014, pp. 24–25.
9. Ahmed, 2014, p. 39.
10. Campt, 2019, p. 43.
11. Here I am thinking about the "not-quite" spaces and fugitive Black women's geographies Katherine McKittrick outlines. See Katherine McKittrick. 2006. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. xxviii & 37–63.

## Chapter Y: Is survival not archival?

### Donna Kukama

1. *Chapter Y: Is survival not archival?* was presented during the Institute of Creative Arts Live Art Festival in 2017, at the Iziko South African National Gallery (ISANG) in Cape Town. In this durational performance, Kukama explores the function and nature of museums, archives and collections, allowing for a reconfiguring of the museum collection, while locating the trauma of gendered violence within the context of the Western Cape and further, within the context of the highly contested ISANG

exhibition *Our Lady* (curated by Kirsty Cockerill, Andrea Lewis and Candice Allison). Kukama's performance was in conversation with responses to the inclusion of work by photographer Zwelethu Mthethwa, who had been arrested and was awaiting trial for the 2013 murder of Nokuphila Kumalo. *Chapter Y: Is survival not archival?* was a rearticulation of protest action, following that of the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT), as well as the boycotting artists who opposed Mthethwa's presence in the exhibition. Mthethwa has since been found guilty of murder, and on 7 June 2017 was sentenced to 18 years in prison.

## What's in a name? And other archives of forgetting

### B Camminga

1. Ben Hunte. 17 May 2020. "Coronavirus: 'I'm Scared of Being Buried as the Wrong Gender'", *BBC News*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-52690931>. [Accessed 20 May 2020].
2. wadenelsonredditor. 18 May 2020. "'I'm Scared of Being Buried as the Wrong Gender': Even though lockdown measures have eased a little in England, the 'stay alert' guidance is still affecting daily life. Seven weeks on, some LGBT people have told the BBC they are in more danger than ever before.", Reddit. Available at: [https://www.reddit.com/r/worldnews/comments/gle59h/im\\_scared\\_of\\_being\\_buried\\_as\\_the\\_wrong\\_gender/](https://www.reddit.com/r/worldnews/comments/gle59h/im_scared_of_being_buried_as_the_wrong_gender/). [Accessed 20 May 2020].
3. Annie Murphy. 1 October 2012. "No More 'Lying': Law Bolsters Transgender Argentines", NPR. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2012/10/01/162100680/no-more-lying-law-bolsters-transgender-argentina>. [Accessed 17 June 2021].
4. Judith Butler. 2009. "Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics". *AIBR. Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana*, vol. 4, no. 3, p. ii.
5. *Transrespect vs Transphobia (TvT)*. 11 November 2019. "TMM Update Trans Day of Remembrance 2019". Available at: <https://transrespect.org/en/tmm-update-trans-day-of-remembrance-2019/>. [Accessed 14 May 2020].
6. Carsten Balzer. 2009. "Every 3rd Day the Murder of a Trans Person is Reported. Preliminary results of a new Trans Murder Monitoring Project show more than 200 reported cases of murdered trans people from January 2008 to June 2009". *Liminalis*, vol. 3, pp. 147-159.
7. Sam Riedel. 17 March 2017. "Deadnaming a Trans Person is Violence - So Why Does the Media Do It Anyway?", *HuffPost*. Available at: [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/deadnaming-a-trans-person-is-violence-so-why-does\\_b\\_58cc58cce4b0e0d348b3434b](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/deadnaming-a-trans-person-is-violence-so-why-does_b_58cc58cce4b0e0d348b3434b). [Accessed 21 June 2019].
8. B Camminga. 2022. "What is Private About 'Private Parts'? On Navigating the Violence of the Digital African Trans Refugee Archive" in B Camminga & John Marnell (eds.). *Queer and Trans African Mobilities: Migration, Asylum and Diaspora*. London: Bloomsbury Academic (forthcoming).
9. K.J. Rawson. 2014. "Archive". *TSQ Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 1, iss. 1-2, p. 26.
10. Vic Parsons. 14 July 2020. "A Trans Refugee Who Fled Persecution to Seek Safety in

Canada Has Been Forced to Claim Asylum as a Man", *PinkNews*. Available at: <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2020/07/14/canada-trans-transgender-refugee-asylum-hong-kong-gender-identity-naomi-chen/>. [Accessed 15 July 2020].

11. Judith Butler. 2004. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, pp. XIV-XV.
12. Morgan Meaker. 7 August 2017. "German Deportations Ignore Risks LGBT Asylum Seekers Face at Home", *POLITICO*. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/gay-refugees-syria-lgbt-german-deportations-ignore-risks-asylum-seekers-face-at-home/>. [Accessed 7 July 2020].
13. Saidiya Hartman. 2008. "Venus in Two Acts". *Small Axe*, no. 26 (vol. 12, no. 2), pp. 6-7 (emphasis original).
14. Eléni Varikas. 1998. "The Burden of Our Time: Hannah Arendt and the Critique of Political Modernity", *Radical Philosophy*. Available at: <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/the-burden-of-our-time>. [Accessed 27 April 2020].
15. Dagmawi Woubshet. 2015. *The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of Aids*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, p. 83.
16. James Baldwin. 1985. *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*. New York: Henry Holt, p. 39.
17. Grace Kyungwon Hong. 2015. *Death Beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 127.
18. Hong, 2015, p. 126.
19. I am partly thinking here of Christina Sharpe, who has theorised the conditions of Black life in the United States in particular and how we are all implicated in what Saidiya Hartman calls "the afterlife of slavery". See Christina Sharpe. 2016. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University.

## NO EASTER SUNDAY FOR QUEERS, Haunting Story

### Nondumiso Lwazi Msimanga

1. Avery Gordon. 1997. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, p. 5.
2. Avery Gordon. 1997. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, p. 2.
3. Katharina Fink, Marie-Anne Kohl and Nadine Siegert. 2020. *Ghosts, Specters, Revenants: Hauntology as a Means to Think and Feel the Future*. Iwalewa Books, p. 132.
4. Avery Gordon. 1997. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, p. 1.



# Biographies

**B Camminga (they/them)** is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the African Centre for Migration & Society, University of the Witwatersrand. They work broadly on issues relating to gender identity and expression on the African continent with a specific focus on transgender refugees and asylum seekers. Their first monograph, *Transgender Refugees and the Imagined South Africa* (Palgrave, 2019), received the 2019 Sylvia Rivera Award in Transgender Studies (with Aren Aizura). They are the co-convenor of the African LGBTQI+ Migration Research Network (ALMN). They are currently working on a new collection addressing African LGBTQI+ migration: *Queer and Trans African Mobilities: Migration, Diaspora and Asylum* (Zed/Bloomsbury, 2022).

**Gabrielle Goliath (she/her)** situates her practice within contexts marked by the traces, disparities and as of yet unreconciled traumas of colonialism and apartheid, as well as socially entrenched structures of patriarchal power and rape-culture. The affective and relational encounters made possible in her works seek to resist – and to some degree transform – the violence through which Black, brown, femme, queer and vulnerable bodies are routinely fixed through forms of representation.

**Keval Harie (he/him)** is an activist, writer and qualified attorney, who has always sought to put South Africa's constitution at the centre of his career, using it to find new ways to promote social justice and human rights across the country. As Executive Director of the GALA Queer Archive, Keval is most excited about the opportunity to connect the archives to new intersections of activism, particularly around gender identity and sexuality.

**Saarah Jappie (she/her)** is a scholar and writer based in Brooklyn, New York, in the United States. Her interests lie in interdisciplinary approaches to Indian Ocean histories, with a focus on cultural mobility across Southeast Asia and Southern Africa in the aftermath of early modern slavery and exile. Jappie holds a PhD in history from Princeton University and an MA in historical studies from the University of Cape Town. She currently serves as a Program Officer at the Social Science Research Council based in New York and is a Research Associate of the Visual Identities in Art and Design (VIAD) research centre at the University of Johannesburg.

**M. Neelika Jayawardane (she/her)** is Associate Professor of English at the State University of New York-Oswego in the United States, and a Research Associate at the Visual Identities in Art and Design (VIAD) research centre, University of Johannesburg. She is a recipient of the 2018 Creative Capital | Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant for a book project on Afrapix, a South African photographers' agency that operated during the last decade of apartheid. Her writing and research focus on the nexus between written texts, visual art, photography and the transnational/transhistorical implications of colonialism, ongoing forms of discrimination, displacement and migration on individuals and communities.

**Donna Kukama (she/her)** is a transdisciplinary artist and creative researcher whose practice presents institutions, books, monuments, gestures of protest and economies that are as real as they are fictitious. Her practice takes on an experimental form, shifting between performance, video, text, sound and multimedia installations, with the aim to subvert how histories and value systems are constructed. She has exhibited and presented work at several major international institutions, biennales and museums. Kukama acquired an MA in the Public Sphere from Ecole Cantonale d'Art du Valais in Switzerland in 2008 and is currently a PhD candidate at Transart Institute for Creative Research (with Liverpool John Moores University). She lectures at the Wits School of Arts (University of Witwatersrand).

**James Macdonald (he/him)** is an arts organiser and scholar invested in the reparative work of rethinking histories and present conditions of racial, gendered and sexual violence. James is the Research Coordinator at the Centre for the Study of Race, Gender & Class at the University of Johannesburg, a Programming Associate with the Space for Creative Black Imagination at the Maryland Institute College of Art in the United States and a PhD candidate at Vrije University, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

**Nondumiso Lwazi Msimanga (she/her)** is a performance artist and provocateur. Known for her public arts activism as co-creator of SA's Dirty Laundry, she works with creating her own performance events at festivals and public spaces. Her work is driven by a penchant for paradox, mess, and the possibilities of performing new worlds into being. Currently a PhD student at UCT and a twice-writing fellow with the Institute of the Creative Arts. Nondumiso freelances as a performance and cultural critic. She is also



the curator of the Theatre Think Tank; with the Market Theatre Laboratory in collaboration with the NIHSS.

**Amie Soudien (she/her)** is a curator, researcher and art writer. Her research concerns the use of art and performance in the commemoration of slavery in the Cape, as well as the history of Cape Town, archival studies, popular media, gender and sexuality. As an art writer, she has contributed to *ArtThrob*, *Adjective*, *Between 10 and 5*, *ArtAFRICA*, *Mail & Guardian* and *Frieze*. She is currently a PhD candidate in the department of Art History, Curatorial Practice and Heritage Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand.

## About the Organisations

The **Lesser Violence Reading Group** began in 2018, convened in partnership between GALA and VIAD. For its first iteration, the primary focus of the group centred upon working through issues of gendered and sexualised violence within the intersections of raced and classed violences. These discussions were further focused with a commitment to understanding gendered and sexualised violence as it is processed through art performance or “Live Art” within a South African context.

The group is a space of learning, listening and sharing; a space in which participants and presenters are able to hold conversations not easily hosted in academic contexts. Working with artists, writers, academics and activists, the group grapples with the lived experience of a deeply violent reality in which women’s lives and queer lives are rendered vulnerable to sexual assault, rape, fatal domestic violence and the daily manifestations of rape culture. The group is envisioned as an open, interdisciplinary discursive space. Participants are welcome from any field, and from any point in their education. The sessions are intended for all who would like to further their intersectional understanding, and would like to meet with like-minded individuals.

**GALA Queer Archive (GALA)** is a catalyst for the production, preservation and dissemination of information about the history, culture and contemporary experiences of LGBTIQ people in South Africa. As an archive founded on principles of social justice and human rights, GALA works toward a greater awareness about the lives of LGBTIQ people as a means to an inclusive society. GALA’s primary focus is to preserve and nurture LGBTIQ narratives, as well as promote social equality, inclusive education and youth development.

GALA publishes under their imprint, MaThoko’s Books, a publishing outlet for LGBTIQ writing and scholarly works on LGBTIQ-related themes in Africa.

# Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following people and organisations:

- all those who contributed to this project, for recognising the sensitivity of the content and for treating it as such.
- the Visual Identities in Art and Design research centre, University of Johannesburg (VIAD), and Prof. Leora Farber, Director of VIAD, for the tremendous support of the Lesser Violence Reading Group since its inception in 2018. In organisation, and through the participation of VIAD Research Associates, VIAD has been an integral part of the greater Lesser Violence Reading Group project.
- the Embassy of The Kingdom of the Netherlands in South Africa and Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (with funds from the Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development of the Federal Republic of Germany) for their generous financial support in the production of this publication.
- the Sigrid Rausing Trust and the Norwegian Students' and Academics' International Assistance Fund (SAIH) for additional support.
- Tina Smith for granting us permission to use Paul Grendon's photograph of Ayanda Denge.

First published in 2021 by MaThoko's Books

MaThoko's Books (an imprint of GALA Queer Archive)

Floor 7, University Corner, Corner Bertha and Jorissen Streets, Braamfontein,  
Johannesburg, 2001

ISBN: Lesser Violence: Volume 1, 978-0-620-95865-3 (print)

Lesser Violence: Volume 1, 978-0-620-95866-0 (pdf)

Publication ©2021 MaThoko's Books

Texts ©2021 individual contributors

Images © individual copyright holders

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any other storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

All images remain the property of the copyright holders. MaThoko's Books acknowledges all contributors mentioned in the image captions.

This publication has been made to be distributed for free. A digital version is available on [www.lesserviolence.co.za](http://www.lesserviolence.co.za). We encourage respectful and responsible sharing.

Printing by Keleketla! Library

Binding by PULP Paperworks

16 Viljoen Street, Lorentzville, Johannesburg, 2094

Contributors

Editor: Amie Soudien

Authors: B Camminga, Ayanda Denge, Gabrielle Goliath, Keval Harie, Saarah Jappie, M. Neelika Jayawardane, Donna Kukama, James Macdonald, Nondumiso Lwazi Msimanga, Amie Soudien

Copy-editor: Jennifer Malec

Proofreader: John Marnell

Design/typesetting: softwork.studio

Coordinators of the Lesser Violence Reading Group: Keval Harie, James Macdonald, Amie Soudien

To access bonus material for this project, visit [lesserviolence.co.za](http://lesserviolence.co.za)



Kingdom of the Netherlands



**SAIH**

**THE  
SIGRID  
RAUSING  
TRUST**





*Prior to joining I wasn't particularly sure about what we would focus on... or if I would have anything to say. In reality, I found that sometimes I did, sometimes I didn't, and sometimes when I did, I couldn't. But showing up seemed important and being in the group became a kind of practice.*

– Saarah Jappie, *Sitting as a Lesser Violence*

In 2018, a group of artists, scholars and activists came together to explore experiences of gender, sexuality and violence. This book celebrates the artistic and scholarly approaches that emerged from these conversations, with the aim of sharing the contributors' valuable work with a wider audience.

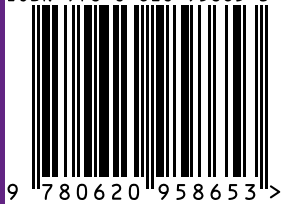
The Lesser Violence Reading Group, and as an extension this publication, seeks to explore questions of gendered and sexualised violence from a variety of artistic and intellectual perspectives, through a multimedia approach to “reading”, and within a practice of curatorial care. The contributors to this collection reflect on the texts and artistic strategies that enable them to work with, through, around and against the enactment and perpetuation of gendered and sexualised violence.

The name of the Reading Group draws from Jacques Derrida's conception of an ethics based not on the prescriptive certainty of an “ought” or “should”, but on an “ordeal of undecidability” and the possibility, at least, of a “lesser violence”. In this collection of creative, often very personal, contributions, this self-reflexive commitment to a “lesser violence” registers through a range of Black feminist, queer and decolonial practices of community care, and in tenuous relation to the normative crises of rape culture and patriarchal violence in South Africa.

South Africa is one of the world's most dangerous countries for women, children, and queer individuals and communities. It is also one of the most unequal countries in the world, with a long legacy of violence. The writing contained in this book indicates the contributors' powerful commitment to processing the effects of this legacy, rejecting the norms that enable racialised, gendered and sexualised violence, engaging with their community, and honouring those who have not survived.

But, perhaps most importantly, this book provides a precedent for new ways of performing possibility and imagining the world differently.

ISBN 978-0-620-95865-3



Published by MaThoko's Books