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Bottled Seawater: A Sea Inland

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

Johannesburg 2020

Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

Oupa Sibeko Signature 30th day of November, 2020

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND DEDICATION

My heartfelt gratitude to Prof Isabel Hofmeyr, Ms Donna Kukama and Prof B Peterson for their academic guidance and the Oceanic Humanities for the Global South for their generous funding. This dissertation would not have been possible without any of you.

This dissertation is dedicated to Mary Ngomi Sibeko, Nomathamsanqa Sibeko and Mvuyo Red Sibeko.

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BOTTLED SEAWATER: A SEA INLAND

Abstract

This project is concerned with the wide-spread practice of using sea water for healing and spiritual purposes. Deriving from Nguni and other traditions, this practice is linked to the 'people of water', usually water-based diviners, for whom the sea is a realm of ancestors, a site for spiritual cleansing and grounding. The sea holds potential to heal and its curative powers live in the water. While in the past such practices occurred at the coast, with urbanization and industrialization the practice has been adapted and now one can purchase bottles of sea water inland. The main purpose of this research is to artistically explore and reflect on beliefs and practices involving bottled seawater for spiritual, health and healing purposes.

The first chapter introduces the study, outlines its research purpose and sets out the frameworks informing the project. These are African Indigenous Knowledge, Caribbean and South African oceanic perspectives, and ritual. The second chapter explains the performative methodologies of play and ritual which have informed my ongoing series of performances. Through this framework, the body is a site of transformation. Through performance, I consider the re-positioning of rituals and their generated meaning/s within a contemporary South African context. The third chapter explores my durational performance *Black is Blue* (2019) and links it to the ideas set out in the first two chapters.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This project is concerned with the wide-spread practice of using sea water inland for healing and spiritual purposes amongst Nguni and other people of South Africa. The main purpose is to present a counterpoint to canonical, conventional modes of knowledge by offering indigenous oral history as passed down onto me by my late grandmother, and by describing and artistically exploring beliefs and practices involving the practice of bottling seawater for spiritual, health and healing purposes and bringing it inland. The two components of the dissertation, the performance and the essay are grounded in oral, spoken history that is personal, lived and embodied. This is no surprise considering Babalwa Magoqwana's conception of grandmothers as "institution(s) of knowledge that transfer…not only 'history' through folktales (intsomi) but also 'bodies' of indigenous knowledge that store…transfer…and disseminate…knowledge and values".[1] These ideas form the major conceptual, theoretical and aesthetic impulse in particular from my Nguni upbringing. Among the Nguni, water occupies a central position in belief systems. In addition, as Kiernan notes (1990:106), "it seems that for the Zulu, water, as the origin of living things has traditionally possessed some sacred powers and curative properties".

As Elizabeth Deloughrey states, the predominant way in which people talk about and relate to sea water is based on oceanography, science and engineering, therefore objectifying water as something alien and far from being human (2016:11). This commercial/capitalistic bias is imperialistic in separating for instance the relationship Africans have with the ocean and/or environment. Across much of southern Africa, the sea is regarded as a realm of ancestors, a site for spiritual cleansing and grounding; the sea holds a potential to heal and its curative powers live in the water. These views however have been erased or regarded as "primitive" in keeping with colonial negations of African culture. As Mawere notes: "The west considered Africa as a 'dark continent', and hence despised its traditions, customs, belief systems, and indigenous knowledge systems as diabolic, barbaric, and backward. This had a negative impact to Africa's own socio-economic and political development. Africa's valued traditions and knowledge systems had to change to fit in with the western scientism and modernity" (2010:209).

[1] See Magoqwana's chapter in the book, *Whose History Counts: Decolonising Precolonial African Historiography*. In the book she looks at oGogo as tropes of knowledge, African indigenous knowledge.

In contradistinction to the Eurocentric bias, the sea plays an integral part in African life and provides spiritual grounding. Perceptions that talk about and relate to the sea through a frame of engineering erase the long histories of African epistemologies of the ocean. “In Africa, like elsewhere, indigenous knowledge systems (IKSs) were used to administer peace, harmony, and order amongst the people and their physical environment. However, with the advent of colonialism in Africa, IKSs were not only marginalized, but demonized leaving their potentials for establishing and maintaining a moral, virtuous society, unexploited” (Mawere 2010:209).

The importance and depth of Mawere’s ideas is apparent from the number of contemporary South African artists who explore them. Working in different media, these artists have put on exhibitions (*Igagasi (2015)* by Buhlebezwe Siwani), performances (*Take in Take Out (2015)* by Albert Ibokwe Khoza), written poetry (*Water (2017)* Koleka Putuma) and music videos such as *Ingoma (2009)* by Thandiswa Mazwai who appears to sing underwater. Cultural practices involving seawater have artistic implications and are largely derived from a shared African indigenous oceanic perspective. The underlying motif of all the above case studies is advocating for Afrocentrism.

This chapter begins by explaining the research purpose of the project which concerns and relates to the ocean. Next it sets out the intellectual and scholarly frameworks which are African Indigenous Knowledge-oceanic views, Caribbean and South African oceanic perspectives and ritual. These have subsequently informed my thinking and the performative methods I have adopted.

1.1 Research Purpose

I use my body to create artworks in dance, performance, film, installation and photography. All of these mediums draw directly on the deep relationship I have built with my body through dance training, research and performance. This research situates itself at the intersection of ritual and play. The core of the project concerns rituals associated with seawater. These are explored and

experimented with, setting up a conversation between ritual and play. Play and ritual are the common language in this dissertation and the methodology employed rests in the two concepts. These two concepts consequently provide the methodological corner stones for my two performances *Black is Blue* and *Bottled Seawater: A Sea Inland*.

In *Bottled Seawater: A Sea Inland* the audience walks into a dark room with walls covered in text messages directed to the sea. The audience uses their own mobile device torches to read the text. When the lights are turned on, I am on my knees in the centre of the room unwrapping bottled seawater and this water is then poured into a bowl that is passed around for the audience to hold while a telephone is dipped into it to call ancestors. *Black is Blue* is a durational performance where I lay on two deck-chairs facing down, with four fish hooks attached to my back, in a blue lit room, with a floor covered in sea salt. The work sought to inspire people to embrace the myth of an inland sea. My work is often sourced from deeply personal events in my own life. I have a special interest in self-invented rituals, objects (found and bought) and natural `resources' (nature's) influence on the performing body. This fluidity allows me to make work that cuts to the heart of what it is to be a suffering, struggling, striving, exploring and ever hopeful human.

Furthermore, I have struggled working with one medium only, be it theatre (black box), the white cube gallery, or photography. Just like most contemporary creative practitioners, my approach has often been one of multimedia, or has an interdisciplinary approach to making. I have always viewed my role as an artist as being a facilitator. The Tate Modern captures this approach stating that "an artist is rather seen as a facilitator permitting the exchange of information between other artists and viewers thereby giving them an access to a form of power."[2] I have always been motivated to take an active role in selecting, fusing my artistic skills with my African traditions and knowledge systems rather than being a passive assimilator of western knowledge which is ethnocentric and views African traditions as backward.

[2]Tate, "Performance Art." https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/performance-art, accessed January 10 2020.

My interest in interrogating the relationship between humans and water started with site-specific performances *Dam Men* (2017) and *The Colours of Men* (2017) in Mpumalanga and the Emakhazeni district (Dullstroom, Belfast, Machadodorp and Waterval Boven). *Dam Men* (2017), was a performance that involved one woman among four men eating fruits from a white cloth laid on the water in a dam. It looked at water as a common denominator amongst differences that humans hold whether these be gender, race, culture and religion. "Water attracts us: rivers, ponds, rainstorms, coastlines – even puddles – have an undeniable sensual charisma. As so many of us (plant and animal) are largely made up of water, we cannot help but be moved by this shared relation" (Chen 2018:05).

The Colours of Men (2017) was performed by myself with four different colored umbrellas (orange, yellow, red and green) flipped upside down as I swim in a dam. It explored water as a holder of humans in the process of finding one's flow, navigating water. Next, I took all the experience and artworks (video and photographs) from the performances which were ephemeral and came back to Johannesburg where I continued my ritual of buying sea water at Bree taxi rank for health and spiritual reasons. That led me to the thesis proposal in 2018, with the working title *Bottled Seawater: A Sea Inland*. During the proposal presentation at Wits School of Arts (WSOA) on 3rd September 2018, I continued to explore these themes and also began exploring how play can facilitate a dialogue around imagining a sea inland. All the above culminated in an exhibition, *Black is Blue* (2019), in August.

In addition to the above, my work is made up of two main components. The first concerns research that deals with performance and the second is video making. For my performances with water, I've always thought about the documentation of social interventions, curating, archiving and inviting dialogue for alternative forms of knowledge production and consumption. This is what Mawere (2010:213) has termed "citizen science" which refers to participatory processes of public understanding and even challenging of scientific research as the direct consequence of public frustration with the limitations of science.[3] My live performances implicate everyone in discussion through playing or witnessing the game. Describing one of my performances, Fadzai

[3] Borrowing from Mawere's (2010:213) definition of citizen science, this is a term that I will constantly be referring to in relation to my performances throughout this thesis.

Veronica Muchemwa a curator from Zimbabwe writes: “a provocative mixture of social activism and slapstick, Sibeko plays on forked tongue to address the attitudes and duplicitous talk of the government when it comes to issues affecting South Africa as well as toxic masculinity…and race and neo colonialism” (Muchemwa 2019:7).

Bottled Seawater: A Sea Inland (2018-ongoing) is multi-disciplinary in its nature, a citizen science project that fosters consistent engagement with diverse publics and audiences about different exchanges of information about oceanic humanities with reference to indigenous knowledge systems (IKS). This is in line with Chen’s conception (2013:05) that water holds great spiritual meaning across cultures; it gathers stories, identities, and memories. For many of us, water possesses spirits. And water is a material substance essential to our life as per our African traditions. This dissertation in its two parts (practical and essay) challenges the authority of science and its hegemonic influence on epistemology and knowledge production that has undermined possibilities for other epistemological alternatives for explicating social reality

In his book, *A Contemporary Study of Musical Arts: Informed by African Indigenous Systems* (2007), Meki Nzewi states that, “Contemporary Africans must strive to rescue, resuscitate, and advance our original intellectual legacy or the onslaught of externally manipulated forces of mental and cultural dissociation now rampaging across Africa will obliterate our original intellect and lore of life”. As noted earlier, this dissertation begins with me, with my body, a body that seeks to claim its agency and create its own narrative within a shared cultural practice of bringing bottled seawater inland for health, spiritual and other reasons. I approach the sea and its water with multiple subjectivities, which are my body, my artistic background, a Nguni young man willing to learn more about the practice of bringing bottled sea water inland. Basically my body is a vessel that connects me with the sea but most importantly with the world of spirits; the human and ancestral world. And as argued by Mawere (2010:213) African traditional customs and practices emphasize the close connections between the empirical world and the cosmos.

This dissertation is a reconciliation of my different subjectivities (son, grandson, performance artist and student) while I employ the wealth of African knowledge that the sea holds through bottled seawater inland. All of this is embodied and internalized meaning; the functioning of

indigenous knowledge systems defies recourse to scientific explanation or prediction to sufficiently substantiate its existence and more importantly its moral relevance.[4] In this project, I draw on cultural references from the Nguni people in relation to the sea. This dissertation is centered on the wealth of knowledge that comes from the people of water, the water-based diviners, and the presence of seawater inland. This is in support with Nzewi's statement above.

To begin with, the prestige of the sea is immense amongst the people of southern Africa; God gave the sea to them so that they can be in conversation with their spirits (ancestors) (Dube 1994: 109). The spirits are ancestors who live in the ocean and the Nguni people insist that humans have never seen these spirits who are held in awe for their benevolent powers to communicate with God and bless the life of those who believe in them with good luck and success. Mawere (2010:213) argues that "spirit mediums act as intermediaries between mortal beings and the living dead or ancestral spirits and that indigenous knowledge systems are the adhesive vice grips that bind spirit mediums, rainmakers…and social relations together by setting the ground rules, in terms of cultural practices and customs observance in their communities".

The Nguni through identifying with their own shadows feel the ancestors' presence. The shadow is the doubling of the human; it is their own shadow and a shadow of their ancestors. One has to identify with the shadow of the ancestors as something that is constantly alongside, and guides one. Identifying and staying in contact with the shadow, allows one to constantly grow, to be in harmony interpersonally with others, ancestors and self. "The thrust of the discussion is that, among the indigenous and former colonized societies, people are 'beings' with many relations and many connections. They have connections with the living and the non-living, with land, with earth, with animals and other beings" (Wagner 2012: 58).

[4] In *Internationalism and the Rationality of African Metaphysical Beliefs*, Ikuenobe (2000) coins internalism as a term referring to the internally coherent claims about an explanation of the functioning of the cosmology to which scientific investigation is less privileged to infer from or draw on. I keep referring to internalism throughout especially in relation to the teachings and upbringing under my grandmother Mary Ngomi Sibeko. After all, her teachings are embodied.

The spirits in the ocean derive their power from regular animal sacrifices that are presented to them as gifts of goodwill. The spirits at sea sleep during the day but roam about at night. Hence the need to avoid being at sea at night because the ancestors will be tempted to take life as they are being invaded in their private time. Failure to respect their space and time at night means that ancestors will bring bad luck to the entire village even though it was only one person who ventured out to sea. The village upholds and fears the sea as a unit, and failure by one member is failure by the whole community. However, even though I am borrowing and dealing with Nguni cosmology because of the invocations of rural, tradition and village, I am dealing with urban manifestations of these ideas and practices Spirits control the fertility, wealth and health of the village.[5] In support of the above, Kiernan (1990:107) relates a Zionist usage of water where "water must be prescribed by a prophet and empowered by a ministerial blessing and this is as true of baptismal water as it is for the water bottled and blessed at weekly service to be drunk by the sick in the privacy of their homes".

To ancestors or spirits living in the ocean, certain animals are associated with the spirits among the Nguni because they live in streams and the ocean. Fish for example are associated with spirits by diviners in Southern Africa. I come from the Maziya clan and my surname Sibeko is one of the surnames prominent in the Nguni clan, a clan that identifies with water and believe that our work is seen through water. Often when my grandmother would tease me or recite our clan names she would say, "Maziya, Gembe, Ncusi, nina aba bonwa ngamazni, o gundungana"[6]. Crocodiles are also associated with spirits because they live in water.

Amongst the Nguni people, all-important rites of passage are associated with the practice of medicine. For curing and healing purposes, divination is the first step followed by prescribing herbal remedy or ritual to be performed and restrictions to make sure that one can be healed (Kiernan 1990:107). Diviners have a public responsibility towards their community. For instance, when a woman is barren, she approaches a diviner who will then prescribe frequent

[5] This information is derived from personal experience as taught by my late grandmother Mary Ngomi Sibeko.
[6] From as early as two years old, I witnessed my grandmother and uncles recite our clan names often during our family rituals such as burials or unveiling tombstones at home.

visits to the sea to bath as a way of getting rid of bad luck. When a child is being troublesome at home and has a calling to be a diviner, the parents take the child to a diviner who will initiate the child into being trained as a diviner by going on a rite of passage associated with the ocean. At the sea, the child is taught to awaken the spirits and communicate with them through acts such as pouring alcohol on the sea, burning herbs, reciting praise songs and clan names. This supports Mawere's (2010) position that:

> Even new comers should be introduced to both the society's indigenous knowledge systems and the ancestors of the land that are believed to protect the inhabitants of that land. This is often affected through the process of kusuma, which involves elders of the land pouring beer onto the ground and making meditations on connecting the new comer to the ancestors for spiritual protection and material growth.

Diviners are healers and religious experts. When a person has ill fortune in which they cannot get a job or stay in one, diviners can prescribe that either they go and visit the sea or if inland, they also prescribe that one gets sea water and baths with it. These actions and prescriptions are not meaningless but are connected to the deeply woven relationship Nguni people have with the ocean. Equally, the sea is upheld as the ancestral realm, a place of pilgrimage, healing and baptism and water from the sea is hence prized. In *Thinking with Water*, Chen (2013:07) speaks about the importance of situating water and in articulating the situations of water through which we shape the relations between our watery selves and our watery others.

Through industrialization and urbanization, different ethnic groups have come together inland and have altered their beliefs and cultural practices involving seawater inland. The Nguni people have a collective belonging to the sea but this belonging is shot through with different opinions and views about how to adapt seawater to cultural practices inland. Furthermore, these interactions have resulted in a disagreement amongst the Nguni people with some saying all cultural practices involving the sea, should be performed at the sea and others coming forward to say we can bottle sea water and perform these practices inland or wherever we find ourselves. Even though there are different opinions, we can conclude that indigenous knowledge is a set of

ideas and practices that are peculiar to a particular community and embody the community's identity and ways of surviving and maintaining the environment they find themselves in.

Turning the sea into a reference for collective belonging allows us to dialectically learn different ways of knowing water, something that is at the crux of this project. "Dialectical thinking is the ability to view issues from multiple perspectives and to arrive at an elegant conclusion despite seemingly contradictory information" (Paletz 2005:02). In chapter 2, specifically in performing the sea and the language of the sea chapter, I unpack dialectical thinking as a theoretical framework for this project.

This research essay is based on a journey engaging bottled seawater in the form of artworks such as texts transcribed from my shared and observed everyday living experiences of the people of water. Moreover, the project involves my own photography of people at sea and inland using seawater which details a journey of a young man inland with bottled seawater and a performance that dramatizes beliefs and stereotypes involving the sea and its water.

The above mentioned artworks (Igagasi by Siwani, Ingoma by Mazwai, Water by Putuma and Dam Men, Colors of Men) are cultural and social immersions of the Nguni people and other people of colour who are centered as agents of their African indigenous practices as opposed to being 'othered' by scientific or Eurocentric approaches to understanding the African phenomena. Africa has often been viewed as a dark continent thereby its forms of art, oral, visual and more other mediums have been dismissed as informal art practices that do not qualify when viewed through the Eurocentric perspective. As a result of Eurocentric bias, African art forms are viewed as non-art, an orientation extended to the settings in which these forms take place, these being seen as informal spaces, spaces of secrecy to rebel against colonial rules, informal gatherings and their practices labeled as mysterious.

Mary Nooter states that, "The literature on Africa has misrepresented secrecy there: early visitors talked of the 'dark continent' and described mysterious, clandestine practices performed in the

seclusion of 'secret society' houses. The sensational accounts reflected obvious Eurocentric biases, as well as their authors' ignorance of the nature and necessity of secrecy, and of its sophisticated role in African life" (1993:55). Given this context, this dissertation takes an African point of view in knowing the sea so that people of colour can make sense of their everyday experiences with bottled seawater inland. "Postcolonial researchers value cultural ways of understanding the world and emphasise the use of oral histories, social justice and healing methods, sharing circles, and songs as examples of methods" (Wagner 2012:58).

This project was first introduced at Wits School of Arts (WSOA) in September 2018 in Johannesburg, South Africa. My intention in making and performing *Bottled Seawater: An Ocean Inland* (2018-ongoing) is to develop a new personal language of making and performing the sea, and to invite people to write their own sea and perform it. "As watery bodies, we experience ourselves less as isolated entities, and more as oceanic eddies: I am a singular, dynamic whorl dissolving in a complex, fluid circulation. The space between ourselves and our others is at once as distant as the primeval sea, yet also closer than our own skin—the traces of those same oceanic beginnings still cycling through us, pausing as this bodily thing we call mine. Water is between bodies, but of bodies, before us and beyond us, yet also very presently this body, too" (Neimanis 2012:96).

Literature Review

My recent work experience as a black performance artist entailed reclaiming and reconnecting with my African heritage which I feel has been appropriated and performed largely for the Western gaze. My first point into reconnecting with my heritage was a journey back to water, to reconnect with water because it is a prerequisite of life not only as the water that we drink but as that which connects me to my ancestors. I draw from African indigenous knowledge as a body of knowledge for decolonial humanities in this dissertation and it is my own personal history and experiences that may have influenced the choice of my research topic.

The predominant way in which we currently relate to or think about water is derived from scientific understandings of water, be these derived from engineering, physics or oceanography. These views establish water as something removed from and separate to humans, to be objectively studied in terms of its composition, its dynamics, its current, salinity and so on. According to Elizabeth Deloughrey (2016:11), the sea "emerged as a kind of sublime and inassimilable other, not so much a power over humans, but an element outside and alien to the human, and outside time". This objective view of water is further underlined by a commercial and market-driven management of water that construes water as a 'resource' to be managed and sold.

One central concern of the project is to engage with different forms of knowledge around water, bodies of knowledge that conceptualize water or put differently, I employ a range of approaches but mainly two areas, (1) a decolonial oceanic humanities and (2) scholarship on ritual which forms the methodological cornerstone of this project. With regards to the decolonial humanities, I am drawing on ideas about the ocean, from African indigenous perspectives as well as Caribbean and South African perspectives.

There are a number of African epistemologies about the oceans like African indigenous thinking that construes the ocean as a sacred space; a space that holds divine power to heal and cleanse (Malidoma 1994:255). This is because the ocean is believed to be a clean space. People use it to baptize and are healed by sea water. All rivers flow to the sea, and the sea is believed to contain all curative powers that humans are in need of. In terms of African indigenous systems, I am interested in the curative powers of sea water, the sea as an ancestral realm and therefore a giver of life. Credo Mutwa states that gods came from the sky and landed on the sea, and it is our duty as humans to respect our gods and the sea as a space (Chidester 2002:69), a space which is tied to the origins of humans. There are however a range of other approaches that think about water in different ways[7] but the above are specifically chosen as they contribute directly to my journey back to water, to my heritage.

[7] These are a range of scholars who explore water in different ways such as black feminist (Christina Sharpe), post-human feminist (Astrida Neimanis), approaches drawing on North American indigenous traditions (Yates) but I am interested in thinking about water through AIKS.

Firstly, I explore African indigenous thought and practice around the ocean followed by a comparative section on Caribbean and South African discussions and debates on the ocean and histories of slavery. Arguing from the African world view, Seepe (2000: online) states that "the African Indigenous Knowledge Systems is a counter-hegemonic discourse in the context of African renaissance. This discourse is a reaction against a Western, colonial discourse that completely dismissed African indigenous knowledge systems, as they were posited in reductionist terms and relegated to the realm of insignificance". This amounts to denying African Indigenous Knowledge Systems a genealogy that predates colonialism and that surpasses reactions to colonialism. I am inspired by Seepe's words above to a large extent how African indigenous knowledge can be employed in decolonial humanities. Drawing largely from oral traditions, sea water is another way in which we as black people connect with our ancestors through the rituals that are performed at the sea and using sea water.

It is important to state that the popularity of sea water is taken from the traditional context because both secular and religious people are attracted to sea water as a body with curative powers. This knowledge of the sea as an ancestral was and is still passed down from generation to generation through oral traditions, and this is how the knowledge has been documented. Emeagwali (2003: online) supports the above when she says that "the African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) is a reaction to disinformation embedded in Eurocentric colonial and post-colonial education, including the selective omission of non-European achievements, inventions and technologies, the distortion of data, and several other strategies of colonization and recolonization".

Caribbean cultural and literary traditions have established the sea as a site of archive and memory which hold out strong comparative possibilities for southern Africa and its histories of slavery. My project and experimenting with bottled sea water is conscious of the ways in which ideas about the southern African oceans are different and point to the sea as the realm of the ancestors rather than just as the domain of drowned slave bodies. This project explores intersections in these traditions, looking at whether those who take sea water ever think of it as encompassing both ancestral and slave histories. In reading the ocean as an ancestral realm one

also questions the link between the ancestors and the bodies that drowned at sea. The ocean is an unmarked grave but yet a history that affects both the Caribbean and the Southern African waters because of slavery and the many people who died at sea. As such, by remembering drowned slaves as ancestors, many Africans celebrate and connect with our ancestors and the many bodies lost at sea.

Unlike inland, where one can visit one's loved ones' graves, the sea is a grave that we go to for cleansing and to please our ancestors. The sea in this case is seen as a borderless archive, a site for memory and a grave that is also acknowledged as a prerequisite for life, both as water and as an ancestral territory. Elizabeth Deloughrey states that, "in the Caribbean the enormity of the transoceanic history of slavery and indenture has created an aesthetics that imaginatively populates the sea in an act of regional historiography and ancestral memory" (2017:35). Or put differently, we can use the title of Derek Walcott's famous poem, "The Sea is History". The comparative reading of the Caribbean and South African oceanic views teaches us to mourn drowned bodies but more importantly the importance of upholding the sea as historical monument.

I borrow from African indigenous rituals key principles of performance. Performance allows us as humans to re-evaluate that which we think we know and learn new things. However, the important thing is to facilitate critical cultural exchange while also discovering new cultures and knowledge surrounding sea water in bottles. While this is the methodology I employ, it is largely influenced by African indigenous rituals as a way to depart from logical, empirical, technological forms of documenting and qualifying knowledge surrounding sea water. This project forms part of the opening up of the self as a social process; the opening up of the self cannot happen within the shell of solipsism. Interaction creates the space for both vulnerability and perspective. And when an idea or experience, through its realization into an art piece finds recognition or brews a disturbance in someone external to itself, in some measure it succeeds as a work of art and holds the capacity to survive and enable survival. Art is not simply the making of "a thing", or "a something". For me art is something that is not fully articulated, that transcends explication and hangs above language, an entity that can at best be intangibly experienced. Thus, this research is

relevant and crucial for me as an artist and as a researcher and the proposed 'method' of the performance aims to instantiate these ideas.

1.2 African Indigenous Knowledge-Oceanic Views

It is through African indigenous knowledge that I come to understand and unpack oceanic humanities. It is also through African indigenous knowledge that I locate and borrow key elements of performance especially in relation to ritual and communal performances, theatre in the round, site-specific performances and the exchange of cultural knowledge in a shared communal space. This is important as it transmits and conserves the accumulated wisdom of the family, the clan and the ethnic group (Nguni) by allowing my artistic practice to be morphed and reshaped, almost in a way that bottled seawater takes on the shape of varying vessels.

Given the complex aesthetic modalities that inhere in Ngoma practices, I am committed to the task of finding a methodology that moulds my character and morals combined with this intellectual exercise influenced largely by African Indigenous Knowledge. This is in line with Micere Mugo's (1999:222) view that African orature is "the creative and imaginative art of composition that relies on verbal art for communication and that culminates in performance". And this is where my project is grounded and the various definitions of African indigenous knowledge below attest to Mugo's view.

African indigenous knowledge is a form of knowledge that is formulated, centered and originates from an African context, a collective that shares values and ethics of an African point of view as opposed for instance to a Western or Eurocentric view. For instance, a Eurocentric perspective involving the sea and its impact on humanity could involve scientific or technological research carried out in a hierarchal system by the researcher: it objectifies and distances the sea from a society by, for instance, studying sea currents, sea species, oceanography and other scientific oceanic studies. "Thinking *of* or *about* water in these ways may nonetheless repeat the assumption that water is a resource needing to be managed and organized" (Chen 2013:03).

Mkhabela notes that an Afrocentric perspective "should be understood in the context of multicultural realities of South Africa, as the African paradigm serves as a liberating intellectual movement towards a pluriversal perspective in research. Afrocentrists argue for pluralism in philosophical views without hierarchy" (Mkhabela 2005:180). African indigenous knowledge is sensitive towards social contexts and is driven by pluralism for purposes of knowledge production and consumption. The main aim of African indigenous knowledge in the context of this dissertation in its two parts (essay and performance) and through my upbringing is to produce a fully socialized and emotionally fit person to face challenges of life. The text below signifies the cyclical aspect in African life and especially that one is never dead as one's spirit looks upon those who are still living. "What I mean here is that Africans have a common general orientation and perception of reality. They have an important component to their conception of reality, a domain whose existence is explained mystically and not empirically" (Mawere 2011:19). This is one of the Africans strongest beliefs in their cosmology.

Cry, cry, cry for life

For the courage, for the hope

For the forest, for the stream

Bodies may die, spirit never dies

In our struggle, we burst in songs

As a new day dawns, we will shout in joy

(A statement from the Third General Assembly of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians., January 5-6, 1992, Nairobi, Kenya.)

African indigenous knowledge surrounding the relationship between humans and the ocean in this context is best understood by locating the people of water rather than those of the forest. For the people of water, usually water-based diviners, the sea is a realm of ancestors, a site for spiritual cleansing and grounding; the sea holds potential to heal and its curative powers live in

the water. These are people schooled in the ways of water and thus to anthropologists, African Indigenous knowledge is regarded as enculturation, that is, the process and product of learning cultural traditions throughout one's life so as to enable a person to adjust to his or her environment (Phillipson, 1993). In African indigenous knowledge the emphasis is on life-long learning, where you study and do not graduate but rather move from one phase of learning to another. Many writers (Kelly 1999, Bray *et al.,* 1986**;** Ngulube, 1989**;** Bogonko 1992) have shown that the education acquired through these systems was morally progressive, gradual and very practical.

On the other hand, the diviners of nature are those who are schooled in the forest and they often prescribe herbs, rituals in forests and can be found inland more than on the coast like the diviners of water. The AIKS also had their indigenous technology for manufacturing such products as soap, cream and other cosmetics, hoes and axes, cloth, salt to mention but a few (Ngulube, 1989; Semali, 1993; Omolewa, 2001). Concerning health care, the traditional African doctor is a very knowledgeable man or woman who handles many cases, including even surgery in some cases. He or she knows the roots, the herbs required for the healing of the community. "Hence in the narratives of orature, humans, birds, animals and plants interact freely, they often assume each others' forms, including language" (Ngugi 2010:05).

However, this is not to say that these diviners do not live together or work together; in fact, they help people by recommending what is best for them through consultations with each other. And thus, sociologists define indigenous knowledge as a process of becoming a member of a society (Ocitti 1973; Morgan 2005). For instance, the Nguni people who live in the Eastern Cape and believe in water gods, frequently visit the ocean for health and spiritual reason and still visit the Gompo Rock, near East London. As Julia Wells explains, "At this spot, two huge rocks project from the sea, about 14 metres high, with a channel between them" (Wells 2012:31). Gompo Rock is a sacred site, a rite of passage site for black people who have callings to be diviners of water, a place for training accompanied by an elder and water diviner. So indigenous knowledge is the socialisation process, the learning by doing and the learning through oral literature and rites (Odora 1994; Quiroz 1999). Part of what people with callings to traditional healing learn is to communicate with their ancestors that live in the water.

Ancestors in the Nguni and other tribes in South Africa are people who come before us and they are the communicators between the living and God. According to Julia Wells, "the Xhosa spiritual hierarchy puts Qamata (God), to whom only the spirits of the ancestors have access, at the top. The ancestral spirits are seen to have a direct interest in and impact on all aspects of the daily lives of the living, from harvests to sicknesses and other forms of good or bad fortune" (2012:30). This is the same belief that those who bottle seawater and carry it inland believe, that bottled seawater heals and helps them in times of need. This is true considering Smith's definition (1934:319) of African indigenous knowledge as a system of knowledge comprising realities and survival skills of a given people in relation of their day to day life.

According to African indigenous knowledge, the sea is not only a site of the ancestors, it is also a site of memory for those who died at sea before us and they are treated as if they are still alive, they continue as spiritual beings in the ocean.[8] The sea hence holds the potential to be explored as an archive, a site for our cultural background and lastly to be viewed as a 'character' that influences humanity. Astrida Neimanis states, "just as the deep oceans harbor particulate records of former geological eras, water retains our more anthropomorphic secrets, even when we would rather forget. Our distant and more immediate pasts are returned to us in both trickles and floods" (2012: 98).

For the Xhosa people in Makhanda in the Eastern Cape, the sea holds a history that has given them their identity, cultural grounding and a close relationship to the marine environment. On April 22, 1819, Chief Makhanda of the Eastern Cape led the people of Grahamstown to war against British colonials (Mukhuthu, 2013). Makhanda Nxele or Makhanda the prophet (also spelled Makana) (1790 to 1820) was a Xhosa warrior and prophet who trained at Gompo Rock and because of his wisdom was military advisor to Xhosa Chief Ndlambe. Makhanda was arrested and imprisoned on Robben Island where he later escaped with 30 other prisoners who

[8] The articulation of Julia Wells attests to the fact that the sea is a realm of ancestors and this is true when coupled with the rite of passage at Gompo Rock.

unfortunately all drowned when their boat capsized on their way to Bloubergstrand, Cape Town (Mukhuthu 2013). Makhanda's body has never been found.

In April 2013, a traditional underwater repatriation ritual was performed at Bloubergstrand beach led by water diviners and parliamentary dignitaries to return the spirit of Makhanda. Although it is called an 'underwater' repatriation, it does not involve people physically going underwater but refers to retrieving the spirit of the dead from below the water to earth. In addition, repatriating a spirit of a dead person at sea or anywhere, involves leaves of trees (often palm leaves or fern tree leaves) and coins, both of which are thrown underwater, the leaf being a carrier of the spirit.[9] The spirit (leaf) was transported in a coffin from the beach to Tshabo village near King William's Town and buried there (Mukhuthu 2013). The Xhosa people of the Eastern Cape were very happy that the spirit of their Chief was buried amongst them and he has returned home.

Equally, the relevance of mentioning the event above is to not only to root my project of bottling seawater and carrying it inland as an act to honor those who have died at sea but also to appease ancestors so that we carry them and live with them. In addition, history is passed on from one generation to the other. According to Herbert Cole, "African indigenous knowledge comes with transmission over time, a handing down from generation to generation of something in words, practice, or style and form" (1985: 14). The Makhanda underwater repatriation was led by elders who educated the younger generation on how to perform underwater repatriations or rituals involving sea water or the sea itself.

[9] This knowledge is derived from personal experience having witnessed the repatriation of a spirit of a late person.



Figure 1 Igagasi, 2015 by Buhlebezwe Siwani

An example of the handing down from one generation to another of a practice, style and form is that of Buhlebezwe Siwani's performance at sea in Cape Town, a video titled *Igagasi* (2015). See figure 1. Siwani is a water diviner and performance artist working in the fine arts, with her work mostly centered around the complexities of multiple subjectivities (female, diviner, artist and scholar). She works across mediums from film, performance installations, sculpture and photography. In *Igagasi* (2015), Siwani approaches the sea dressed in a white dress with a rope attached to her waist, wrists and ankles as she slowly walks into the water. A group of people led by an elder are holding the rope for fear her ancestors will pull her in; she is saying something as she walks in and the elderly women behind her keep giving her instructions to edge forward into the water until only her head is seen. It is important to note that Siwani performs a personally invented ritual but she is influenced by the past rituals that have been performed at sea.As such, Siwani is improvising and skinning the cat in her own way.

Moreover, in this project, I draw from the theory of Astrida Neimanis especially that, "water connects the human scale to other scales of life, both unfathomable and imperceptible...Water as body; water as communicator between bodies; water as facilitating bodies into being" (Neimanis 2012:99). Similarly, the word spirit is an acknowledgement that human life is propelled by a

principle beyond human power and knowledge. The Makhanda spirit repatriation ceremony highlighted underwater rituals or practices such as water diviners visiting the sea to converse with the ancestors and in turn throwing in silver coins in the water as a sign that their ancestors are happy. In this chapter, I will keep referring to the case of Makhanda and Siwani more especially when it comes to rituals or put differently African indigenous rituals.

However, as a result of migrant labor and post-apartheid South Africa, people of colour no longer see the need to be at the sea to perform underwater rituals but can do so inland, in the city and anywhere they find themselves in need of the curative powers of sea water. This is proof that African indigenous knowledge has failed to die despite the racial and colonial onslaughts that they have suffered at the hands of Western imperialism and arrogance (Mawere 2010:213). In addition, because of financial strains, people have now improvised ways of still believing in the powers of seawater by getting their family members, friends and any other person traveling to the coast to bring them water or they buy this water inland.

Indeed, the above raises the question if underwater or sea-related rituals are still authentic even though they are performed inland. Can bought or carried seawater inland be a sea and still hold much cultural weight for those who use the water? Are we still people of the sea or has each person recreated their own sea?

1.3 Caribbean and South African oceanic perspectives

> I love Deleuze's swimming, dancing expression of haecceity, where the language of dreams dissolves with the language of description and experience, where everything is lost, found and becomes something new in a pure crystal moment of sensation. In these floating spaces life is event, it is event/ful and always never fixed, ceaselessly becoming —event/ual? So what are the senses that become in our writing, what is the sensation of living in our writing? I am fascinated as we move into the spaces we inhabit now!!

(Gale and Pineau 2011:321).

This section is motivated by the need to expand the reading of comparative dimensions between the Caribbean and South Africa, more especially the way in which they deal with histories of slavery and the ocean. According to Gabeba Baderoon (2009:89) "turning one's gaze to the sea recovers evidence of slave lives otherwise erased from folk memory". I further explore the possibility of recovering memories of slavery by reading images of the sea anew in recent literature from South Africa specifically Koleka Putuma's poem *Water* (2017).

Elizabeth Deloughrey states that, "in the Caribbean the enormity of the transoceanic history of slavery and indenture has created an aesthetics that imaginatively populates the sea in an act of regional historiography and ancestral memory" (Deloughrey 2017:35). Or put differently, we can use the title of Derek Walcott's famous poem, "The Sea is History". In the opening of the poem, Walcott writes:

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?

Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,

in that grey vault. The sea. The sea

has locked them up. The sea is history.

Firstly, the phrase 'the sea is history' questions whether history should be defined as only as that which is documented. The phrase should be viewed as a means of decolonization and rewriting, especially in relation to the ocean. We need to think about the sea both in its material forms while also paying attention to the bodies that have gone below. The Caribbean consciousness of the sea propels us to acknowledge the ocean as a middle passage relating to the transoceanic history of slavery. "Here the Atlantic Ocean is figuratively sounded as a space of black diaspora origins and world modernity" (Braithwaite 1994:52).

Moreover, in the opening of Walcott's poem, "The Sea is History", it is evident that the prevailing stereotype is that history is valid only when it exists in a book or monument. Generally, African indigenous knowledge is considered to be very rigid and unwritten, backward and superstitious. To early missionaries and the colonial masters, African indigenous knowledge existed in a vacuum and that it never even belonged to the community (Ocitti, 1973; Ngulube, 1989). However, referring to the sea as history signals the fluidity and ever-changing nature of the sea. The sea is a form of historical monument or text that organizes itself, it reveals and conceals what it wishes; but to those who have an experience of losing their loved ones at sea as a result of slavery, the sea is their tribal memory. In Walcott's poem there is evidence of violence which alludes to slavery through the line, "Then there were the packed cries, the shit, the moaning". As a result of violence, slavery and forced migration, the sea is a historical monument for the people of the Caribbean but equally to the Nguni as mentioned in the section above.

Given its Caribbean context, Walcott's poem is about the shortcomings of tribal memory, or indeed any memory with a fixed origin. Walcott is interested in both the traumatic loss but equally the liberatory possibilities of history without origin and one that is hence open to multiple forms of belonging. The Caribbean has never regarded itself as 'tribal' – also the idea of the 'nation' did not exist in pre-colonial Africa so the idea that people forced into slavery travelled with an idea of 'nation' is not correct. The point about the Walcott poem is that there is no 'tribal' origin given the slave trade. In the case of the slave trade, no one knows exactly where they came from; they lost their languages and religions. "This concern with cognitive (re)mapping, or imaginatively occupying Caribbean and Atlantic seascapes, differs from other theories of reterritorialization because tidalectics are concerned with the fluidity of water as a shifting site of history and invoke the peoples who navigated or were coerced into transoceanic migrations" (Braithwaite 1994:52).

Furthermore, the opening stanza problematizes the idea of history as something associated with land and those who are securely in power. Walcott is interested in history without origin; slaves did not know exactly which region they came from, they lost their language and their religion. How then is it possible to have history without a known landed origin? "Turning from terrestrial

landscapes to the alterity of the ocean raises questions as to how one may localize and thus historicize fluid space" (Braithwaite 1994:52). This point is important because by attempting to create a history without origin Walcott opens up the possibility of multiple belonging as set out below in relation to South African histories of slavery.

The Atlantic slave trade is a unifying aspect that creates solidarity amongst black people in the world. Black identity is and has been shaped by slavery. According to Chen (2010:04):

> We – in the broadest of senses – all have water in common. If we think of politics as the practice of speaking and acting together on matters of common concern, then water may be the most exemplary of political substances; it is an intimately and continuously shared "matter," in both senses of the term.

Looking at the sea as history is important in understanding the heart and past of the people. Furthermore, Elizabeth DeLoughrey describes the Atlantic as 'Heavy Water', made heavy by drowned slave bodies and more recently by the militarization of the ocean and the dumping of waste in the ocean (Deloughrey 2010:705).

Walcott's idea of the ocean as a 'grey vault' of memory is relevant here as it provides a point of intersection with Nguni ideas of the sea and spiritual healing. Equally, this Caribbean view of the ocean and the drowned opens up comparative resonances with Nguni traditions and southern African traditions more generally. "The Atlantic and the Indian Oceans are the oceans of middle passage, but also of cosmology, memory, and desire, tracked in the movement, language, and culture of enslaved and dominated people" (Baderoon 2009:91). As we have seen, the marine environment is peopled by ancestors and functions as type of a 'grave' where one can go for cleansing and to please our ancestors.

Similarly, a further comparison with the Caribbean view pertains to histories of slavery and other forms of unfree labour. A number of slaves transported by the Dutch in the seventieth century across the Indian Ocean from South Asia and Southeast Asia must have drowned either through their own volition or by being thrown overboard. "If Paul Gilroy's conception of the Black

Atlantic leaves Africa largely untouched, due to its own slave culture, a South African view of the Black Atlantic recovers a memory of loss, as slaves are transported from Asia and Africa to the Americas, but also of return, exemplified by the return of Sarah Baartman's body from France in 2002 to be buried in South Africa" (Baderoon 2009:91). Likewise, prisoners like Makhanda have drowned off the coast of the Cape and only recently his spirit was returned to his birth place, Makhanda. An interesting question is whether slaves were ever remembered as a type of ancestor. While this may seem unlikely given that ancestors are lineage-based, the repatriation of Makhanda from an underwater world points to a wider appropriation of this drowned hero as an 'ancestor' for a range of communities.

As noted above, *Bottled Seawater: A Sea Inland* (2018) is an on-going mixed media exhibition premised on the fact that the sea is history. This is partly informed by my own experience growing up in a household that was protected from ill fortune by bathing and cleansing with seawater. Firstly, it was my grandmother's belief that having seawater in her house meant that her ancestors are looking upon her. Equally to Braithwaite's (1994:53) interest in the *Middle Passage*, "I explore how localizing maritime space is the process by which one establishes that "the sea is history". To further cement the view that the sea is history, I turn to Cape Town-based poet Koleka Putuma and her poem *Water* (2017) from which I quote a few stanzas, mainly the ones speaking about reclaiming and validating the sea as a sacred space for the people of color. Putuma goes as far as challenging the consumerism and capitalization of the sea by other races and she regenerates and transmits the sea as history through performative language. "A focus on performance brings out the obvious: that much of our relationship to reality, even to the everyday, is negotiated through performance. The invisible is often made visible through performance" (Ngugi 2010:04).

Whole as they had boarded, sailed and sunk

Their tears are what have turned the ocean salty,

This is why our irises burn every time we go under.

Every December sixteenth, December 24th and December 31st

Our skin re-traumatises the sea

They mock us

For not being able to throw ourselves into something that was instrumental in trying to execute our extinction.

For you, the ocean is for surf boards, boats and tans

And all the cool stuff you do under there in your bathing suits and goggles

But we, we have come to be baptized here

We have come to stir the other world here

We have come to cleanse ourselves here

We have come to connect our living to the dead here

Our respect for water is what you have termed fear

The audacity to trade and murder us over water

Putuma's poem offers an Afrocentric perspective in that it disseminates, facilitates and reflects what the sea is to a black humanity. Putuma opens up with her own experience and memory of herself as a young girl playing at the sea and her elders shouting at her to be careful because the sea is not just a medium to play with but it has the power to take her to the world of the non-human, the world of ancestors. The elders have passed on to her a wealth of knowledge and she acknowledges the way in which we go to the sea for rituals of cleansing, to embody our spiritual identities and it reminds us of the history the sea carries. In the next chapter, I will unpack Putuma's work further, especially when it comes to the language of the sea, the performances our bodies embody at sea and how her writing is performative. After all, this is my tradition; "the idea of tradition is often also the culmination, or centre-piece, of a rhetorical gesture that asserts the legitimacy of black political culture locked in a defensive posture against the unjust powers of white supremacy" (Gilroy 1993:189).

Furthermore, in deciphering the wealth of history that the sea comes with, as illustrated in the above paragraphs, I locate my work in the urban setting, in Johannesburg, thousands of

kilometers from the sea but nonetheless a place to which people bring seawater, creating a type of sea inland. While people over time have extracted sea water from its source, does bottled seawater inland allow us to view the sea as history, as an unmarked grave, as culturally heavy water? According to Chen (2013:06) "we come to identify with, or are touched and moved in different ways, by the waters that we experience. Situating water therefore requires that we become more aware of the daily practices and repeated encounters through which we locate ourselves in relation to water".

I am of the view that the sea inland created through bottled water, has encouraged people to rewrite history, to write their own individual history, to understand an independent nation's history writing itself. "In orature, godhood is treated as the ideal spiritual expression of nature and nurture. The major generic elements of orature – riddle, proverb, story, song, poetry, drama and dance – are an imaginative attempt to explain the universe" (Ngugi 2010:06). For instance, in my project through the use of humor and everyday language, in the medium of text and sound, I write sms-style phrases put up on posters to explore ways in which people in the city have personalized their ocean through seawater they buy or get themselves. Examples of the texts are below:

-Do you need a job? Get seawater.

-Do you want to know your history? Get Seawater.

-Do you want to know your ancestors? Get Seawater.

-Tired of your neighbors' night barking dog? Get Seawater.

-Are you going through a tough break up? Get seawater.

-Tired of reading history books? Get Seawater.

The text in *Bottled Seawater: A Sea Inland* (2018-ongoing) is informed by my personal experience having been a common customer of buying seawater and listening to everyday experiences of people who also buy and use seawater. Equally, Pelias (1998) notes, "the self can

be a place where tensions are felt and uncovered, a place of discovery, a place of power, of political action and resistance. One often knows what matters by recognizing what the body feels" (1998:11). My body connects me with my culture, history and identity through engaging with seawater. This is one way of exploring and engaging knowledge that exists surrounding the sea and its water. When people approach *Bottled Seawater: A Sea Inland* (2018-ongoing) and *Black is Blue* (2019), they approach it with pre-existing cultural knowledge and then they are confronted to engage with contemporary articulations about the sea in the exhibition room. After all, according to Pitika Ntuli, a South African poet, sculptor and storyteller, "orature is more than the fusion of all art forms. It is the conception and reality of a total view of life. It is the capsule of feeling, thinking, imagination, taste and hearing. It is the flow of a creative spirit" (1988: 215).

In experimenting with bottled seawater I am conscious of the ways in which ideas about the southern African oceans are different from scientific oceanographic discourses or Eurocentric accounts of the ocean. The dissertation explores intersections between the Caribbean and Nguni oceanic traditions. African indigenous knowledge has been described as a desperate and irreconcilable system of thought which is unstructured, unscientific and a myth. The argument is that no education could belong to a tribe (Ocitti, 1973; Omolewa, 2001). The assumption is that, unlike western knowledge, which is ever being constructed, African indigenous knowledge is always there waiting to be passed on from generation to generation, hence old, and not universal. Bringing us to the question, if those who take seawater ever think of it as encompassing both ancestral and slave histories? In reading the ocean as an ancestral realm one also questions the link between the ancestors and the bodies that drowned at sea.

1.5 Ritual



Oupa Sibeko, Bottled Seawater: A Sea Inland (2018-ongoing)

In the traditional or African indigenous world-view there is no such thing as chance or magic.[10] Anything which disturbs the harmony of the well-being of people is connected to how they personally live, how they interact with others and how they continue to uphold and honor their world-view. In a case where one is personally and interpersonally conflicted, one visits a diviner (a person who prescribes an act to restore harmony in oneself) or based on their culture one has to perform a ritual. "Anything which disturbs the harmony has a cause to be accounted for. Divination is used to interpret the cause of misfortune and to prescribe the means of restoring the harmony" (Hodgson 1982: 32).

A ritual is hence an act carried out by an individual or group of people to restore or balance themselves. A ritual is preceded by a set of rules and values that one has to follow. In a Southern African (Nguni) context for instance, this could include waking up every second week and pouring a drop of sea water onto a bathing container and lighting herbs such as Impepho, turning bathing into a ritual. This water-related ritual cleanses one from misfortune, sickness and restores harmony. Carried out inland it is contextualized, structured and has its own meaning. It is a ritual

[10] This information is derived from personal experience as taught by my late grandmother Mary Ngomi Sibeko.

because it happens every two weeks, mixing sea water with normal tap water is calling upon the ancestors (sea water is the realm of ancestors) to cleanse you, and the lit herbs are there to cast away bad spirits in that space and to transform the space into a sacred space of ritual. One advantage is that ritual sometimes has an invariant sequence of actions, a kind of "script" guiding the performer so that the rite can be repeated the same way each time (Kyriakidis 2007:60).

Moreover, cultural and traditional practices such as rituals of cleansing and healing give people a sense and narrative of belonging and the will to adapt to their environments. According to Schechner (2006) and Turner (1969) a ritual often finds its form through secular or sacred characteristics which ultimately creates its structure and meaning. In contrast, as an artist, I embody my own advocacy and question existing rituals through creating my own structure for rituals that are performed in a white cube (gallery), inland (site-specific) and allow the structure to create its own meaning. It is important to note that one of the key components of ritual is having one or more performers and in this case my task is to sanctify a sea inland to nourish my creative aspirations as a black artist. I am interested in performance as a methodology engaging social practices and as an artistic practice. *Bottled Seawater: A Sea Inland* (2018-ongoing) is a body-centered method of knowing how people recreate their cultures through embodied, reflexive and collaborative ways, one of those ways being improvising through play. This is in line with the Afrocentric movement. "The Afrocentric movement appears to rely upon a linear idea of time that is enclosed at each end by the grand narrative of African advancement. This is momentarily interrupted by slavery and colonialism, which make no substantial impact upon African tradition or the capacity of black intellectuals to align themselves with it" (Gilroy 1993:190)

Scholars have noted a similarity between ritual and play which likewise follows a more or less fixed set of formulas. According to one scholar of play, Johan Huizinga, the activity is "a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary life' as being 'not serious'…It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from common world by disguise or other means" (1955: 13). Huizinga speaks about play as separate from real life, as a social aspect, and as an experience governed by rules and

order of play. Similarly, I am working with these definitions in *Bottled Seawater: A Sea Inland (2018-ongoing)*. My interest lies in making up my own rules in my rituals, giving people an embodied experience as they touch seawater and lastly asking how the experience critiques social practices such as using bottled seawater for health and spiritual purposes inland.

As an illustration, rituals involving the presence and use of sea water are set. If you are a traditional healer you cannot go and be alone at sea, you need a prophet to pray and accompany you because that is the correct way to communicate and please the ancestors. Consequently, my performance work complicates these views. “Tension helps to concentrate the force and power of ritual and heighten the memories. The mixing of things brings about energy and an awareness of greater powers” (Kyriakidis 1993:112). *In Bottled Seawater: A Sea Inland* (2018-ongoing) performance in WSOA, I used an old antique telephone dipping it in a bowl of seawater to try to communicate with my ancestors and also handing over the telephone to the people in the room to try to reach out to their ancestors. I do not intend to be transgressive but in the words of performance scholar, Dwight Conquergood, a performance project should lead to “detachment, respect rather than selfishness, dialogue rather than exhibitionism, mutuality rather than infatuation” (Jones, 2002:11).

Consequently, through play this research essay and its accompanying performance is intended to decipher and interpret cultural narratives that come with the sea, with bottled seawater. Urban migration is one of the factors that have resulted in people improvising and playing with cultural conventions to cast away bad luck but also to stay in contact with their culture of respecting and living with the sea and/or its water. I am aware of traditional definitions of ritual such as that it exists to maintain the religious and sociopolitical order, to convert secular space to sacred space, to promote social cohesion in times of disaster and uncertainty, to explain the cosmos and its natural forces, to communicate with ancestors or deities, to petition for help from benevolent supernaturals or appease malevolent ones, or to cure illness and ease anxiety. But to what extent does imaginative play allow us to stretch these definitions to a point that we can still perform rituals in the contemporary world in the midst of western hegemonic thought?

In the anthropological tradition, rituals have historically been divided into three phases: separation, transition (liminality), and reintegration (Turner 1969). As mentioned above in the African indigenous section, when someone has a calling to be a diviner they leave to undergo training either in the forest or in water (Gompo Rock), basically they go to a secluded place out of their ordinary life in the community. The landscape is animated through interactions with the living, due to the ancestral spirits that have dominion over the earth. This is the separation stage.

The second stage is the transition period and this is where one is taught to awaken and communicate with their ancestors. To awaken the ancestors, one has to learn their totems, clan names and be able to recite praise songs for one's ancestors.[11] This is basically the stage in which one sheds one's old identity of being a 'commoner' to being a diviner. "Ritual is one of the meaningful links (signification) between things and people, between the physical and the symbolic" (Kyriakidis 2007:92). The third stage is the reintegration phase, which is only granted after the diviner comes back to the society. They are given a new and well-respected identity of a diviner to help and be of service to the society.

However, in *Bottled Seawater: A Sea Inland* (2018-ongoing), I seek to create my own definitions of ritual. While I may create all three phases of a ritual, I do so through play and interpersonal interaction with the people in the room. I use Kyriakidis definition of ritual as activities linked to collective beliefs, regardless of how these beliefs are experienced by the participants and make it clear that associated meanings of ritual are not fixed but are reconstituted within the minds of the participants in each specific recurrence (2007:92). Firstly, I do not set my ritual in a forest or sea but I create my own sea by pouring water in a bowl and having a sea soundscape in a room, basically a sea away from the actual sea. For instance, in one of the performances of *Bottled Seawater: A Sea Inland* (2018-ongoing), I pour water in a bowl and pass it around the room for people to wash their hands. The act of washing hands is to separate the people from the everyday life while inviting them into this world.[12]

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[11] As mentioned above that my grandmother taught me to recite my clan names, Maziya, Gembe, Ncusi as part of making sure that I know how to communicate with my ancestors in any cultural ceremony we had at home.

[12] Not only was this an act of activating the space for ritual but it was to collect data, more especially in line with Kyriakidis idea of ritual as not fixed but each participant make meaning based on their own experiences.

Secondly, the transition stage is carried out by flow (by flow I am referring to actions that are evoked and interpreted while playing), by requiring participants to think about what they have just touched, to think about the smell of the sea from sniffing hands (witnessed during the performance in WSOA) thereby traveling to the sea with their imagination. What would be a traditional underwater repatriation is done inland, in a room and in a bowl passed around the room from person to person. I created an ambience of community and inclusion, allowing all who attended to gain a sense of membership from the event.[13] Also in performing a ritual, Atkinson (1989:15) states that, "a set of ritual actions and associated objects are available to ritual performers to be used within each ritual setting, promoting the performers' qualifications and authenticity with each use". Every ritual is characterized by having a flow, passing the bowl around provides such flow and more than anything, it is the contract that all parties at the space of ritual agree on. The best way to engage the participants in a ritual is to play, play to question the authenticity of the ritual itself. "I propose that within marked spaces and prescribed sequences of actions, rituals constructed a kind of society whose events were remembered and referred to later in daily and domestic contexts, extending the place of ritual throughout society" (Kyriakidis 2007:79).

[13] It is upon this lesson from the proposal phase that prompts my performance aesthetic in Black is Blue that it should be about encouraging community as I am a vehicle for that community to engage.

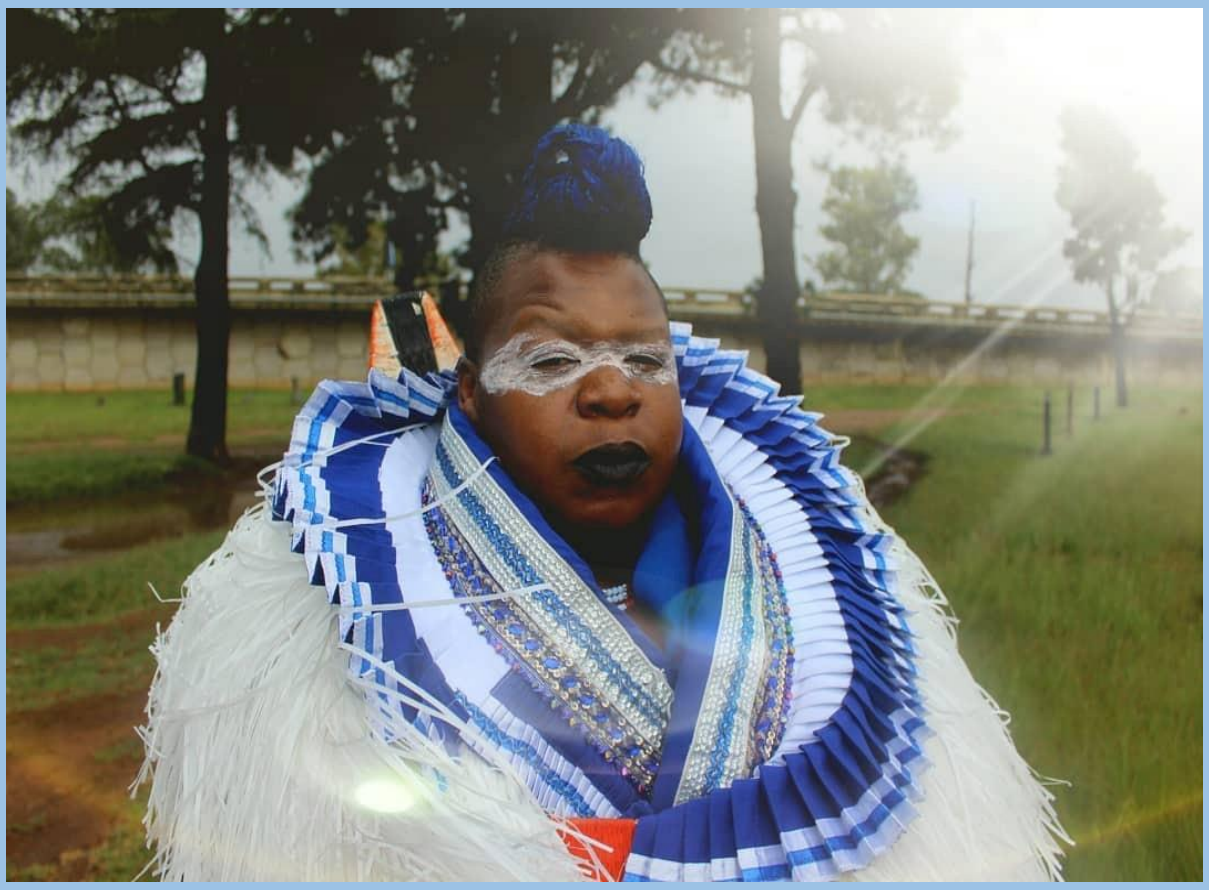


Figure 2. Albert Ibokwe Khoza in Take In, Take Out 2015.

One South African artist who uses performance art to challenge conventions of African indigenous rituals relating to diviners staying in contact with their ancestors is Albert Ibokwe Khoza. Soweto born, he is a forest diviner and performance artist who works in the medium of theatre and performance art in various sites such as galleries, public spaces, theatre and photography. Khoza lives and works in Johannesburg. Khoza is highly involved in social activism, community engagement through indigenous knowledge - specifically ritualistic performances. According to Turner (1969):

> Another dimension of ritual experience is focused in community maintenance and neutralzing political difference. *Communitas* entails a reaffirmation of the group and its membership through transformation, consumption, and group membership. These relationships are highlighted in performance rituals, through strong physical sensations,

> including eating and drinking, the loud sound of musical instruments, singing, calling, hearing stories, drumming, smelling pungent smells of incense and food.

In one of his performances at the ICA Live Art Festival in Cape Town 2015, titled *Take In, Take Out (2015)* (figure 2), Khoza performs a traditional ritual of cleansing the inside of a diviner. Often this ritual is performed in a sacred hut built where the diviner lives or in a forest. People use memories of previous ritual experiences to create new enactments of rites which help restructure society, and this is what Khoza enacts. Performance rituals involve higher beings (ancestors), requiring transformative acts by individual ritual leaders (Turner 1974). In his performance, Khoza lights up herbs (impepho) and strips naked and takes a bucket of water and drinks the water which has traditional herbs in it. Following the action of drinking, he puts his fingers down his throat and vomits in front of everyone. Following this, Khoza puts on a white costume with white draping around the shoulders and neck, and while in trance he takes a modern landline telephone and calls his ancestors and informs them that he is now clean. “Purity to the Xhosa is the symbolic cleanliness of objects and behavior. Cleanliness according to the Xhosa is defined by the ancestors who consider it the proper way of behaving” (Mavundla 2009: 401).

In our rituals, both Khoza and I use the telephone as a contemporary popular mode that everyone can identify with and it is a comic prop that best portrays the importance of keeping contact with ancestors as one would do with one’s loved ones. “These rituals require an audience, where mundane perspective is suspended, as the ritual leaders hope to convince the viewers of their authenticity. The participants are to believe, or at least act as if they believe, the transformation that is occurring before them” (Kyriakidis 2007:80). Also, what is emphasized by both Khoza and I is the repetition of rituals to keep one in harmony with their ancestors. Repetition is an important ingredient in ritual and helps us see the links between material and meaning. Rituals are formed of a conservatism that gives them strength through tradition. But they also have an innovative potential that recalibrates them in each new setting (Kertzer 1988:12).

Furthermore, it is important to note that through performance art, Khoza performs a sacred ritual in public, in a public gathering. His transition happens through the incorporation of costume and a telephone and it is himself who re-integrates his identity through the help of his ancestors. He calls on people to look deep into their flaws, into ways of appeasing their ancestors and to make place for that transition to happen. He does this without prescribing the best way to do it but he knows what helps him personally. Our artistic productions track ritual in a world that is animated and filled with meaning, built upon cultural memories that link individual humans to the spirits of the landscape, earth, water, and sky through remembered rituals.

Additionally, the reason I mention the above scenarios is to link this research essay to play as a methodology encompassing alternative ways of accessing the knowledge possessed by the sea. Taking the water out of its source and praying for it in the city is a performance in its own right. This is a performance in a sense that it involves more than one person and hence has a cast of characters and objects (seawater, elders and traditional healers). Also “song, playing instruments, costumes, processions, ingestion of hallucinogens, voices, and dance all create a theatre that allows participants to enter another world” (Atkinson 1989).

Lastly, the final stage of the ritual is the reintegration phase which I interpret differently to the normal anthropological meaning which understands this stage as one in which the initiate-diviner is welcomed back into society and their new role is recognized. Although my performance was borrowing from traditional definitions of ritual, it was not necessarily for Nguni people but for people of all cultural backgrounds as witnessed in WSOA where the audience was multicultural with people of all ages and sex, therefore, the reintegration stage is about each person’s experience from playing and interacting with others. Each person hence invents their own form of reintegration. One should remember that play is a social experience; as such the proposition is for each audience member to define their own sea as a result of touching the same bottled sea. Both the audience and I occupy the same status of a participant and observer. “The construction of society through the form and content of these liturgies can tell us something about the shape that society has taken. For example, rituals can be inclusionary or exclusionary, with differing concepts of participation and community that speak to the social

realities of the time. These participatory shapes inform us about the shape and goals of society, and through that we can learn about general social structures" (Geertz 1980; Ortner 1978).

Nevertheless, while the bottled seawater in the exhibition room is largely influenced by African indigenous knowledge systems, the aim is also to look at water and know seawater beyond just one world-view, be it, African indigenous, Eurocentric or any other view. My position is that the sea belongs to all of us.

Chapter 2: Performative Methodologies

"concepts are the tools of intersubjectivity: They facilitate discussion on the basis of a common language. But concepts are not fixed. They travel between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods and between geographically dispersed academic communities. Between disciplines, their meaning, reach and operational value differ"

*(*Bal *2009:20).*

2.1 Play

In March 2004, my body moved, my ocean moved, my ocean crossed. I woke up early on a Saturday morning excited that I was not going to school. This meant I could spend the whole day with my grandmother who had just been discharged from Leratong hospital after being admitted for suffering a stroke. Unfortunately I couldn't spend the whole Saturday with her, she needed to rest and so I prepared to leave for the soccer fields. Before leaving I went to her room and lying in bed looking up, she said to me, "Ungakhohlwa ukudlala"[14]. Those were her only and last words as she left this world and into the world of ancestors. And in the words of Liliana Coutinho (2013:53):

> "Memory concerns the past, but the selection procedure that is implied in the construction of each and every memory expresses how we deal with the past in a very pragmatic way concerning present needs and future aims".

The performance/installation, *Black is Blue* (2019) presents embodied and oral histories as a means through which one can start to artistically explore and practice rituals associated with the sea. Bottled seawater has been used as an entry point to oceanic studies, as a link to memories of my grandmother and also as a tool to navigate these other knowledges as well as to imagine

[14] Ungakhohlwa ukudlala loosely translated means 'do not forget to play'. I was 10 years old when she passed on. Her words resound in my head everyday and they are what inspire me to employ play as methodology for this dissertation. My definition of play is deeply rooted to my upbringing, playing with my grandmother as she bathed me with seawater and praying after every bath.

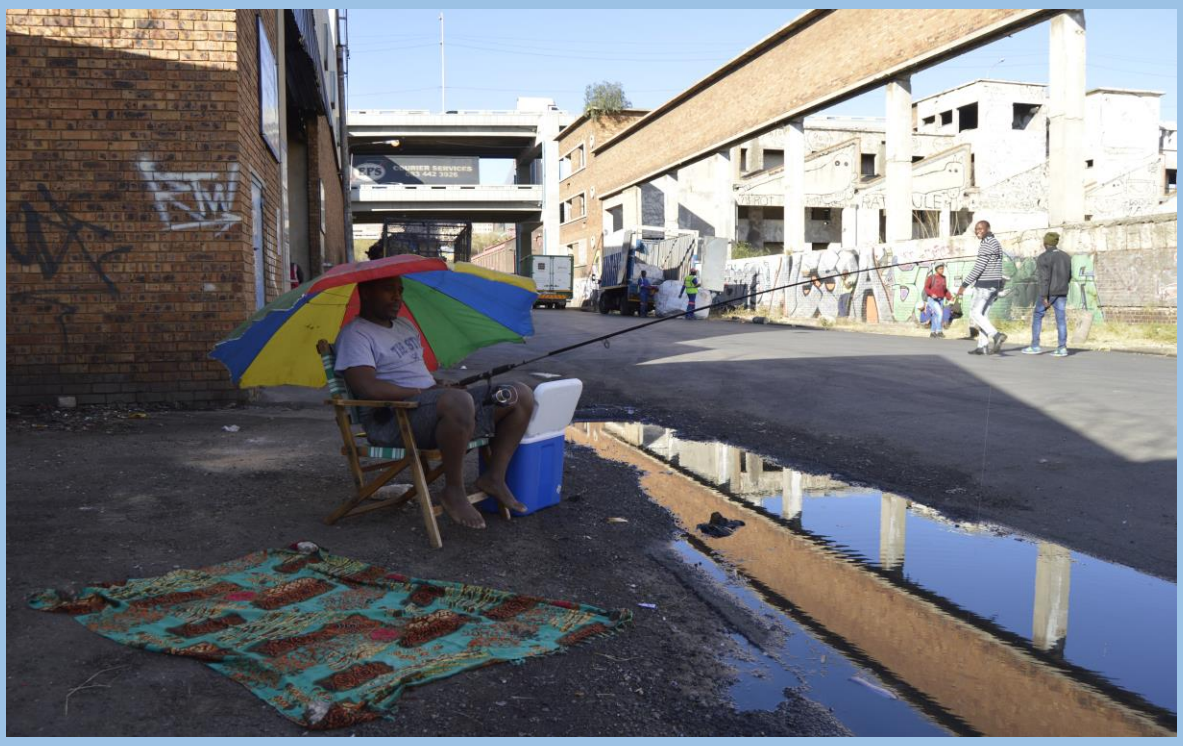
performed realities through ritual and play. The traveling concept is central to my methodology, because even 'ritual' and 'play' as concepts are transported from what they are understood to mean in the everyday into something that exists in the realm of the performances and installations. I think deeply about the theory of lived experience, my grandmother's theorizing, and it is from this well of knowledge that I draw inspiration and source material for my performative research and writing[15]. She gave me an aesthetic. According to Katherine Bursch, ''artistic practice is more than just an application of theory and that theory is more than a mere reflection on practice" (2009:01). One of my grandmother's teachings was that people's bodies are storages for oral history or culture and its continuity rests in practice.

My practice as a performer with a dance/theatre background extends beyond its origins on stage, to invent new rituals (in the same way bottling seawater does) that exist in other public spaces and extend and expand on the relationship between ritual and play, and between performer and audience/participant. In the words of Busch (2009:02), "the art world seems to have become a 'field of possibilities, of exchange and comparative analysis' in which different 'modes of perception and thinking' are investigated. Because this changed concept of art now touches upon developments of processes and capacities that are very different to those traditionally taught at art academies, the wish to institutionally anchor work methods based on investigation or research to new curricula is fully justified".

The movement of play has seven rhetorics, defining play as either "progress, fate, power, identity, the imaginary, the self or as frivolous" (1997: 10-11). My own conception of 'play' begins with the movement or tension between personal experience, memory, and culture, reconfigured through a creative process that often involves performance. In *Bottled Seawater: A Sea Inland* (2018-ongoing) and *Black is Blue* (2019), play cannot be neutrally interpreted like

[15]As part of my research methodology, I have embarked on a journey to write with the body. Pelias Ronald states that, "performative writing is not only about the self and yet the self can never be left out of it; the self can be a place where tensions are felt and uncovered, a place of discovery, a place of power, of political actions and resistance. One often knows what matters by recognizing what the body feels" (Pelias 1998:11).

any cultural form. The sea is always viewed as a protagonist that allows us to survive and live our daily lives protected as we practice and reinvent our water rituals.



Oupa Sibeko, A Sea Inland, 2019, (still)

Deleuze (2008:12) states that "it is the sign that constitutes the accident of an encounter and works this violence upon us. It is the accident of the encounter that guarantees the necessity of what is thought". The video (refer to attached still image above for reference) of fishing at a puddle at 102 Barney Simon Road in Fordsburg and behind is a recycling building nearby; brings to mind questions of polluted oceans and rivers. It makes one wonder if we are practicing our rituals on dirty water and what that implies to our ancestors who lay in this very same water. It is this encounter with this water puddle for the whole month of July during my residency at Bag factory Artist Studios that I started to imagine my water related rituals in this water puddle.



Oupa Sibeko, Bottled Seawater: A Sea Inland, 2019 (Proposal presentation)

As witnessed in, *Bottled Seawater: A Sea Inland (2018-ongoing)*, the audience walks into a dark room with walls covered with papers bearing text. Some of this text is drawn from Derek Walcott's poem[16], "The Sea is History" and it confronts the audience to engage their own meanings of how they compare their sea with that of fiction and non-fiction. Each person uses their own cell phone torch to light up text on the wall, which is the process of self-discovery and dialogue. This kind of approach in play advocates for honesty, vulnerability, and intuitive responses. It is evocative in that it defamiliarizes the audience with their knowledge surrounding the sea, putting notions of play into action.

In order to enact play, I create an environment for engagement and exploration, located within a specific cultural context. The context is built through the scientific lens of my people, the people

[16] In the Carribean and South African oceanic perspectives I extensively unpack Derek Walcott's poem "The Sea is History. Please refer to the section 1.3 in the first chapter.

of water (the Nguni), and from my position and perspective as an artist. The art is the science. "This is where art and science begin to blur, insofar as scientific argumentation and artistic criterion are seamlessly intertwined, and artistic work does not claim to produce a 'work' in the classic sense of the term, but rather (often critical) knowledge, so as to use artistic means to analyze the present day and its social conditions and their structures" (Busch 2009:03). Although Busch's reference is to western conceptions of science, to push boundaries of this science even though I agree with her main points; I approached this research from a humanities perspective with particular focus on interactive art, mainly employing play as a methodology for exploration, inquiry, creation and engaging with the wealth of knowledge surrounding the sea and seawater in art making.

Bottled Seawater: A Sea Inland (2018-ongoing) dramatizes practices surrounding the storing of seawater and what gives this water prestige amongst the people of color. Inland seawater is often kept wrapped in a newspaper so that it stays protected. I unwrapped newspapers which had covered the bought seawater and used the newspaper as a straw mat people usually sit on when they visit diviners or at their own homes. The act of unwrapping signals a way in which seawater is respected inland and this is different from the way in which people on the coast carry seawater, where it is usually not wrapped because it is kept in their yards and not apartments, shacks, or houses, like inland. The water (bottled seawater) is not authentic if it does not have the sand at the bottom of the bottle. The sand is there to give it grounding and to make sure that its life-force continues beyond it being extracted from its origins and sold inland[17]. It is common knowledge that before one can consume seawater inland, one has to shake the water and make sure the water mixes with the sand. In *Bottled Seawater: A Sea Inland (2018-ongoing),* I separate the water from the sand.

Through play, I question the boundaries that are transgressed using seawater, challenging us to imagine possibilities for reinventing the use of seawater inland. For instance, by transporting the water from its conventional use, marrying it with the telephone, which is also relocated from its

[17] It is only after my grandmother's passing when I was 12 years old that I started getting seawater myself and delved deeper into how the water is stored. It has never been a conversation we had with my grandmother about how this water is prepared because of respect and not meaning to question her teachings.

conventional use, I am putting to 'play' the tensions between personal experience and culture, reconfigured through a creative process that often involves performance[18]. In separating the water from the sand, I am using my memory as a source to reinvent ideas of 'ritual' that can be applied as a metaphor for the necessary time spent in separating dirt from what is essential.

"While one of cultural studies' major innovations has been to pay attention to a different kind of object, as a new field averse to traditional approaches it has not been successful (enough) in developing a methodology to counter the exclusionary methods of the separate disciplines. More often than not, the methods have not changed"

(Bal 2009:03).

Although presented as separate categories, play and ritual are interrelated, co-dependent aspects of my practice and research. I will therefore use the terms interchangeably at times, as a tool to counter the ideas of methods or concepts as exclusionary, and as a way to also present this research as located within interdisciplinary practices (across visual art and oceanic studies) and informed by ancient sciences and cultural practices that are traditionally located outside of these disciplines.

2.2 Ritual-as-Play-as-Ritual

Some of the most popular rituals involving seawater inland include drinking the water to cleanse the inner body, as well as sprinkling seawater in the yard, house, and car and elsewhere to cast away bad spirits. My grandmother used seawater specifically for bathing, drinking and sprinkling it in the yard[19]. Inland people protect and use seawater for important purposes only. It is

[18] I was taught ukuphahla by my grandmother. Ukuphahla refers to the act of, greeting and conversing with ancestors by way of lighting up impepho, a candle and snuff. However, these are but a few of the ways of ukuphahla. In all my years of communicating with my ancestors, it has never been through a telephone or any mobile device.

[19]The other use of seawater in my household is to clean my son's nostrils. We spray the water nto his nostrils and he sneezes out mucus. This is essential as he is still an infant and cannot blow his nose. This is a recent practice that I have added onto our uses of seawater taught by my late grandmother.

forbidden to play with seawater inland as the water is culturally loaded. In being cognizant of the fact that the objects of study for the disciplines that comprise the humanities belong to culture but do not, together, constitute it, my views resonate with Mieke Bal when she further states that, "this means they are not seen as isolated jewels, but as things always-already engaged, as interlocutors, within the larger culture from which they have emerged. It also means that 'analysis' looks to issues of cultural relevance and aims to articulate how the object contributes to cultural debates" (2009:05). In this regard we are looking at bottled seawater as an object of cultural debate in humanities.

As stated in the above chapter, Turner (1969) states rituals are secular and sacred, comprising of three phases which are separation, transition and reintegration. According to Turner, it is these three phases that make a ritual to be sacred as they work towards personal and interpersonal stability. However, my practice goes further than these three phases but into the multidimensionality of ritual as something that is cyclic in nature and cannot be explained through the limitations of academic language or linear thinking. My references are located elsewhere. I hear the words of Munyaradzi Mawere: "fundamentally, the African traditional customs and practices emphasize the close connections between the empirical world and the cosmos. Parallels can be drawn between the consequences of good and bad, given that the cosmological world (vadzimu and musikavanhu) (ancestors and God/ the creator, respectively) govern the empirical world, and in consequence, judges humanity according to the virtue of their deeds" (Mawere 2010:04). Given the complexity of rituals, I am not limiting myself to the confines of the three phases of ritual but I am looking at the possibilities they offer to escape or reconfigure everyday reality over time.

In thinking of the intersections between ritual and play, I wish to focus on the status we embody when we undergo a ritual of play. In play, one takes on a status that is not embodied every day. Just as in a ritual, one ultimately steps out of the everyday self in order to embody a seeking of harmony or a need to bring balance, for example. The phase of separation exists both in play and in ritual, and marrying the two (ritual and play) is crucial in my practice, despite the fact that a ritual is perceived to be sacred while a play is usually seen as frivolous.

Useful in this regard is Siwani, a water diviner and performance artist, whose work is mostly centered on the complexities of multiple subjectivities (female, diviner, artist and scholar). She works across mediums from film, performance, installations, sculpture, and photography. As noted above, in *Igagasi* (2015), Siwani approaches the sea dressed in a white dress with a rope attached to her waist, wrists and ankles as she slowly walks into the water. It is worth noting that she and I separate from society in two different ways. Siwani's ritual and presence at sea is sacred in that she separates from the everyday by embodying her divinity status before her artistic status. In *Igagasi (2015),* Siwani is at sea to communicate, pay homage to her ancestors who have accepted her into the world of water-divinity as she trained at sea to be a diviner. Siwani presents a sacred practice firstly through her white dress which signifies purity as she approaches the world of ancestors, with respect and not through a lens of play. The way, in which she walks, slow and tense, speaks to the vulnerability and humility one embodies in the world of ancestors as a way of showing respect. Her physicality is not that of someone who is out to play at sea.

On the contrary, my way of separating from the real world is through inviting the audience to be players with me, to be in the same world as I am. Khoza, Soweto born, is a forest diviner and performance artist who works in the medium of theatre and performance art in various sites such as galleries, public spaces, theatre as well as photography. Khoza lives and works in Johannesburg. Khoza is highly involved in social activism, community engagement through indigenous knowledge- specifically ritualistic performances. Khoza invites us to cross from the everyday world into the world of play with him by means of involving the audience to help with tasks (lighting candles) in his rituals, thereby making the rituals about us and not just him. In his performance *Take In, Take Out (2015)*, Khoza invites the audience to clap along with him as he chants and invites his ancestors to be with him, making us part of his world not just spectators. In this research, the option to combine ritual with play dismantles the idea of ritual following the three steps as defined by Turner. Instead the entire experience (both performer and audience) becomes unpredictable and interdependent.

In following Turner's definition of ritual, the second phase is transition. Transition follows once we have fully given in to the world of the ritual. This is the phase in which Siwani converses with her ancestors, and this is the phase in which Malidoma Some (1994:16), a diviner from West Africa speaks of the underwater where we are wet in the world of ancestors. However, for me, this is the stage in which the game has started and we interact with others in play. It is important to note that when we play, we play within a context in which we find ourselves in a transitional phase as informed by Nguni people of water.

With regard to reintegration, in strictly ritual terms this would involve the person undergoing a ritual to be reintegrated into a community that would recognize their changed status. In my performance practice, I seek to question and complicate this stage of the process, preferring instead to work with an open-ended set of methods in which one performance intervention suggests or opens up the possibilities of others. There is not final ending; rather it is a research process that reflects on our own unending becoming. The work *is* the research. The result of this research can assume such diverse forms as symposia, services, publications or interventions. Here, artistic research and its product are one and the same. These might not claim to be scientific methods, but rather to be "an enlightening and critical production of knowledge" (Busch 2009:03).

Black is Blue becomes a meditation on play. It uses ideas and methodologies of play and performance as ways to reflect on "improvisation", "make-believe", and "staging" as modes of survival, and ways in which people have historically recreated cultures through embodied, reflexive, and collaborative ways. The notion of "play" within the performance and installation goes beyond the assumed frivolity associated with the term, and instead activates multiple levels of reading, where the presentation of an embodied knowledge about the ocean is centralized, and the mapping out of how seawater travels inland is sketched out through "threads" that are present yet not immediately visible or readable. These are visual texts. According to Bal, "the advantage of speaking of 'visual texts' is that it reminds the analyst that lines, motifs, colours and surfaces, like words, contribute to the production of meaning; hence, that form and meaning cannot be

disentangled. Neither texts nor images yield their meanings immediately. They are not transparent, so that images, like texts, require the labour of reading" (2009:18).

Chapter 3: The Body in Ritual-Play: Black is Blue (The Writing of a Sea Inland)



Oupa Sibeko, Black is Blue, 2019 (image by Reshma Chibba)

In "Black is Blue" the body is a site of making meaning, ideological struggle and performative resistance. Emphasis is placed on the body; its power, vulnerability, sexuality, objectification; its memory and its capacity for violence or intimacy; the body as it exists or is represented publicly and privately, symbolically and commercially. In *Black is Blue* (2019), I explore the tensions that exist between ritual and play as encompassing us to understand the deeply woven relationship people have with seawater. *Black is Blue* (2019), is a ritual in celebration of my grandmother, my ocean in which I play with all the wealth of knowledge she shared with me[20]. It is almost like a reckoning, if you cannot reckon with my body, then you can reckon with other senses. The video

[20]As mentioned above that there are different kinds of rituals, we buried my grandmother and at home we have never had a ritual to celebrate her life by unveiling a tombstone as is generally the case amongst most Nguni and other clans inland.

in *Black is Blue* (2019) bridges the gap between past and present and serves as a reminder that we visited the sea inland.

The overall work is an invitation for people to be immersed in a sensory exploration through a durational performance where I lied on two deck-chairs facing down, with four fish hooks attached to my back, in a blue lit room, with a floor covered in sea salt. The work sought to inspire people to embrace the myth of an inland sea and to rethink the ways in which urban space is occupied by revealing who belongs in it, and how they occupy it. Bourriaud (1998:19) states that "every artist whose work stems from relational aesthetics has a world of forms, a set of problems and a trajectory which are all his own. Their works involve methods of social exchanges, interactivity with the viewer within the aesthetic experience being offered to him/her, and the various communication processes, in their tangible dimension as tools *serving to* link individuals and human groups together".

In *Black is Blue* (2019) the dialogue is initiated by the audience. The Point of Order, the space in which the work is presented, is transformed with a blue light and a floor covered in sea salt, playfully transporting the audience to, by, or under the sea. The sea is inland. The audience sits and waits for the performance to begin. After realizing that the performance began long before their arrival and occupation of the space, they interact with the installation in relation to my body, which oscillates between ritual and play. It is the audience that populates the space with their own movement. The audience is called upon to interact, engage and interpret the space relying on their embodied knowledge to transport them to a sea inland, or elsewhere. Overall, play as a methodology employed seeks to make connections between existing solutions and new personal approaches in relation to the sea. I think of Bourriaud's (1998:19) words that sum up the above:

> "Because art is made of the same material as the social exchanges, it has a special place in the collective production process...The work of art actually shows (or suggests) not only its manufacturing and production process, its position within the set of exchanges, and the place, or function, it allocates to the beholder, but also the creative behaviour of

> the artist (otherwise put, the sequence of postures and gestures which make up his/her work, and which each individual work passes on like a sample or marker)".

Central to this work is also the bodies that transport this bottled seawater inland, as well as hinting at materials related to divinity. It is a process of "fishing" for information that is "unwritten", yet present. "Art as a different form of knowledge permits, therefore, a subversion of science when it refers to the exclusions inherent in scientific knowledge production. According to this, its significance is less about '…showing the invisible, but rather showing the extent to which the invisibility of the visible is invisible'. Art can thus reveal the concealed, flipside of knowledge" (Busch 2009:04).

Black is Blue is the naked testing of academic language beyond the book onto a stage. "My interest was in developing concepts we could all agree on and use, or at the very least disagree on, in order to make what has become labelled 'theory' accessible to every participant in cultural analysis, both within and outside the academy" (Bal 2009:18). In challenging existing modes of academic research, a central concern of the project is to present different ways of knowing seawater, in order to shift away from the modes in which the most prominent discourses around sea water (oceanography, science, and engineering) are spaces in which water is objectified as something alien and far from the human. The work instead presents one of multiples of ways of consuming history in the contemporary, and in this "playing out" of Histories, the material employed, as well as the audience members, hold the potential to reactivate moments of the past, and the tension between humor and violence is constantly present.

The material (candles, seawater, fishing rod and sea salt) used in *Black is Blue* (2019), bring to the fore the entanglements of historical, physical, metaphysical and existential spheres of our existence. There are different relations to the materials but more diverse relations to the ocean and this encourages individual and collective engagement with questions, traumas and concerns to delve into their own articulation of spiritual healing or ritual. Basically, this approach is in tension with using seawater specifically for cultural reasons such as a ritual of cleansing, or rite of passage but playing with seawater breaks racial and cultural boundaries. In turn this becomes

an interpretive analysis of existing knowledge surrounding the sea and its water, a comparative reading of other races, cultures and artists who borrow from the sea for the artistic creation process.

Within one of the moments within the performance, a member of the audience decided to "study" what was presented to him through fiddling with the fishing rods, the candles, and the hooks, in an activated "play" that was violent in its dismissal of my body as "human", whilst centering his own inscription within the space, in a sense colonizing a moment that was functioning, by imposing his "know-how". Within my meditative process, it was important to take in the life of materials surrounding me (fire, sea salt, seawater) as forms of resisting whichever imposed or external approaches or engagements with knowledge that may or may not have been presented.

Black is Blue is therefore a staging of an altered history. I am interested in the idea that as humanity, historically, ecologically and spiritually we are also implicated in one another's stories, through the sea. Like Bal, I personally took the concept of intersubjectivity with me and cherished it for its insistence on the democratic distribution of knowledge (2009:18).

Symbols-as-concepts

Firstly, it is important to note that the title, *Black is Blue*, is a statement that engages the public imaginatively to look at that which they have known through different eyes. "Concepts, I found over the years, are the sites of debate, awareness of difference, and tentative exchange. Agreeing does not mean agreeing on content, but agreeing on the basic rules of the game: If you use a concept at all, you use it in a particular way, so that you can meaningfully disagree on content" (Bal, M. 2009:18). I associate the colour blue with a desire to dream, play, imagine and the mystery and enchantment of the colour has always captivated human beings. These colors are concepts that travel. *Black is Blue* pays homage to this heavily symbolic colour through playing as a way to decolonize the sea but more importantly to understand the relationship black people have with the sea, the water.

Generally, people associate black with evil, death and mystery and associate blue with health, healing and the sea (Ngubane 1977:117). As such, the title is an invitation to dream and play through accessing our associations to black and blue as prominent colors in Nguni and other African indigenous rituals. Our (audience and myself) task in reflecting on the ritual we have undergone is to interpret the expressive use of symbols in terms of the actions and emotions which the participants invest in them in the course of the ritual. As Bal (2004:05) argues, it is particular viewers who activate the potential of artworks within specific circumstances. The viewer who is an activating agent in the ritual, needs to fill in the gaps between what is seen and what is evoked in order to make sense of what is being presented. According to African indigenous knowledge systems in relation to symbolism, rituals express the unity of the "psycho-spiritual and physical realms of human existence" (Dube 1994: 108). The unity between the two realms is a continuous production and consumption of spiritual goods. In this case, candles, seawater and sea salt are some of the spiritual goods that keep black people of the Nguni tribe (as in my case) grounded.

The use of bottled seawater in *Black is Blue* (2019), placed around and under the two deck-chairs that I lie on, provides a spiritual meditative space that in turn allows me to be able to endure physical strength for the durational performance. The bottled seawater surrounding me was bought at a traditional herbs shop next to Bree taxi rank. At TPO while setting up for my exhibition, I unwrapped the water while calling out my ancient guides clan names and praise songs as a way to invite them to be part of the performance, the ritual. "There is nothing ostensibly mysterious about water. The mystery and the power enter only when certain words are pronounced over it. The power of air, breath, voice, word, is mysteriously transmitted to the water which is then suffused with the power of sprit" (Kiernan 1990: 107).

"Candles represent fire and light. Fire is associated with power and strength. The burning candle, therefore, symbolizes the presence and the activity of the Spirit who gives power" (Kiernan, J. 1990:110). The use of blue candles refers directly to my ancestors who lie at sea, in water; and the candles are lit just before the doors open. The lighting of candles is a way of strengthening the space (TPO) against evil in the space and from anyone who enters the space with bad

intentions. Bad energies linger in dark spaces but the lit candle gives light but more importantly it invites good fortune and positive energy in the space. “Good things of life, good health and good fortune are here associated with light” (Ngubane 1977: 115). Furthermore, the candles are placed under the fishing rod to allow for the fire to burn the fishing thread at its ‘own timing’; but more than this, the fire is there as a form of resistance, a ‘strength-enabling’ device that I rely on to keep warm and spiritually balanced as I am lying on the chairs.

(Puddles of) Knowledge



Oupa Sibeko, Black is Blue, 2019 (Still)

Black is Blue calls on humanity to return to the sea to repair wounds and for spiritual grounding. My decision to perform near an existing puddle of water at 102 Barney Simon Road in Fordsburg would include the Recycling building nearby (having it as a part of the larger commonly known conversation around the sea and its pollution) but at the same time to reflect on ideas of how indigenous knowledge, even at times where it may have been dislocated, watered down, or erased, continues to re-emerge. “The term documentation in a performance

context often refers to photos or video recordings. The latter, especially, is widely considered to faithfully capture the live moment" (Muller, I. 2013:26).

My work is about reclaiming my authentic voice, digging deep within me and going back to my African traditional treasures to find that which speaks to me. Through the video projection and live performance at TPO, I am building a new image that is representative of my thoughts and ideas as a black African man in a contemporary setting. The larger projection plays with the placement of a black shadow cast from my body into the water, where the "fishing" happens. This speaks to a continued search for information that is right in front of one's eyes, yet is perceived as "missing" from existing bodies of research.

The seemingly playful process off "writing" by "fishing" in the water puddle was a reflection on the issues above, and the water puddle on the floor of the installation at TPO is a continuation of the same reflective process and this compilation interrogates the politics of recognition through a myriad of visual articulations. It is the unspoken and unwritten word that wins in moments when words fail. On the 25 November 2019, for the first time in four years I visited the sea. But this was not just any sea; in fact, it is the place where the Indian and Atlantic oceans meet.[21] The water was clear, warm and calm just like the way my grandmother was. She, my grandmother, the one who introduced me to the sea opened her arms through the warm and calm water and welcomed me. Looking south, I stood for hours in the same spot without uttering a word as none could come but I could feel her presence. My intention visiting Cape L'Agulhas was to complete my thesis paper but I could not utter or put a word down. Except, I stood in front of the sea and asked her for healing - to heal all my wounds and all fears I have lived with and one of them being afraid of the sea, in front of her. I left behind everything that no longer served me and asked for their (ancestors) lessons to become clearer like the water I am in.

For the first time in four years, I allowed myself to release the hurt and stagnant energy that has found home in my being, which is behind me. I made prayers for this next cycle of life, prayers of further healing, happiness, wisdom, prosperity and ultimately spiritual steadfastness that is not

[21] L'Agulhas is the Southernmost tip of the African continent, found in the Western Cape

wavering but still flexible to adapt to the ever evolving world. Looking south, I could see, hear and feel her presence waving goodbye for now. The sea is never static but forever in motion and perhaps I could not complete my thesis on paper as the sea is something that can never be completed and thus we reach moments where the unwritten and unspoken word wins.

Salt - Navigating a Sacred Ground

The main objective of having seasalt as a carpet at TPO was to enable a common or rather universalist imagination that travels across divided histories and spaces. The salt is presented as a geographical imaginary space where similarities and differences overlap in relation to the sea. For instance, there is connection between the people in the room, built through them walking on the salt and creating an unchoreographed soundscape. More importantly, there is the task of negotiating common ground by means of making space for everyone to move around the room.

Also, the sea salt reminds us of our wounds, it burns wounds when directly applied, the salt reminds us of where ‘we have been’ and ‘where we are’ especially when it comes into contact with hands, clothes and shoes. My work is tied to where people belong and how people have been, based on their culture, history, traditions, spirituality and land. This is especially important in our context because we can commune with our ancestors on sacred land. Also if meaning can be found in the interplay between objects, spaces and human actors, it is through the choices of the viewer and performer that deeper understanding of the sea can be accomplished.



Oupa Sibeko, Black is Blue, 2019 (Image by Donna Kukama)

The ‘presence’ of sea salt in *Black is Blue* (2019), was referencing its ritualistic role in casting away ill-fortune on the land that we walk on, and this land, imagined as a sea, presented itself as an ice floor to be walked on. Basically, the salt is there to foster one imagined watered humanity in which we touch and play together as a way of healing and moving on from the proliferation of apartheid or colonialism which separated humanity. The sea salt creates access to the world of metaphor and imagination where we can have a broad discourse when it comes to different ways of knowing water.

At the end of *Black is Blue* (2019), the audience is led out after washing their hands with seawater provided by the technical assistant, Mduduzi Gift Mabaso. I was taught by my

grandmother that after each and every visit to the graveyards, one must wash their hands with water often with aloe leaves. The dish or bowl containing this water is placed at the gate. This same ritual is adopted in *Black is Blue* (2019) to re-integrate the audience back to society and that they leave cleansed as this was a ritual for them but more importantly for me paying homage to my grandmother. In contrast at the end of *Bottled Seawater: A Sea inland* (2018-ongoing) there was a discussion at the end of the presentation. I switched the lights back onto general house lights and people started giving feedback for the proposal and much of the feedback was rooted in sustained reading and writing of academic work.

In conclusion, *my creative research* cannot be read through a single temporality, as the crux of the work lies in the complexity of the contradictions, congruencies and differences evident in the work in relation to my and other's relationship to the sea. "Even those concepts that are tenuously established, suspended between questioning and certainty, hovering between ordinary word and theoretical tool, constitute the backbone of the interdisciplinary study of culture – primarily because of their potential intersubjectivity. Not because they mean the same thing for everyone, but because they do not" (Bal, M. 2009:17). These contradictions and differences deeply reflect the divided times we live in. However, the work insists and invites us to consume and invest in a playful methodology that surfs the different materials. The work's practice of connection is rejoining the realm of pain with that of pleasure, and this is important in understanding that the work is situated between several discourses, issues and agendas in relation to different ways of knowing water. Slavery and colonialism disturbed authentic development and growth of the African continent. It disturbed the process of growing organically to reach its full potential and success. At some point, due to the influence of Western ideologies and demonizing of African culture, a large number of black people experienced an identity crisis. Most lost their identity completely and their minds were colonized. Fortunately there is a wave of young black creatives in the continent and the diaspora who are now changing that narrative.

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