

Aesthetic Grammars of Social Justice: Sex Work Reimagined

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ABSTRACT Against a backdrop of the persistence of coloniality through structural forms of privilege and bias across socio-economic manifestations, inequality and racial stratification of labour in South Africa, creative activism offers a lens, voice and perspective of sex workers. We relate these glimpses to rehumanisation and re-membering, challenging historically distinct modes of turning humans into objects as part of decolonial possibilities. We seek to make decolonization a praxis of making human and hence we ask two central questions: what provocations arise from aesthetics of creative activism? And what might rehumanizing/re-membering concretely mean? We consider these questions through an analysis of the activism, exhibitions and performance with participant sex workers that formed part of the GlobalGRACE project launch in South Africa. Ultimately, we argue that art practices fundamentally engage the imagination and open up possibilities for re-imagining, re-storying and re-centering marginalized knowledges.

INTRODUCTION

Where Creative Activism and Aesthetic Grammars Meet

When we think of activism, particularly in South Africa, many images, moments, songs, theatrical pieces and people come to mind. The struggle against apartheid in particular involved a renowned number of activists, from famous political activists like Nelson and Winnie Mandela, Steve Biko, Walter Sisulu, and the many youth who protested in June 1976, to artists such as singer/song-writer/actress Miriam Makeba and theatre maker Winston Ntshona, to priests, mothers, grandmothers and members of the community at large. Activism takes on a myriad of forms and is concerned with social or political change. With a history like South Africa's, carved out by 400 years of colonialism and 50 years of apartheid – structural systems of injustice, oppression and inequality have created what bell hooks (2013: 3) refers to as the 'imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy' – to which we add heteronormative - system. We draw on hooks' original phrase, especially because the idea of a '[heteronormative] imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy' is useful precisely because it does not prioritize one system over another, but rather offers us a way to think about the interlocking systems that work together to uphold and maintain cultures of domination. Various forces of activism offer aspects of hope

in dismantling such systems and as we argue in this paper, re-humanise or offer moments of citizenship to those who have been rendered non-citizen/non-human by such systems. This is even more so because it speaks to a politics of empowerment from the 'bottom up' that has persisted under extreme situations in South Africa.

While activism can take many forms, here we are particularly interested in creative activism. Harrebye has defined creative activism as:

“a kind of meta activism that facilitates the engagement of active citizens in temporary, strategically manufactured, transformative interventions in order to change society for the better by communicating conflicts and/or solutions where no one else can or will in order to provoke reflection (and consequent behavioural changes) in an attempt to revitalize the political imagination” (Harrebye 2016: 25).

Here we are reminded of the words of Patricia Hill Collins (2019) during her public talk in Sao Paulo in October 2019, when she noted that art is political, and grows in times of repression. This rings true for South Africa, where the visibility of creative activism grew especially during the heavily repressive regime of apartheid. For instance, the world-renowned image that became vivid in many people's minds during the student protests in June 1976 is that of the body of Hector Pieterse being carried by a distraught Mbuyisa Makhubo with his crying sister running beside them. Hector was one of the casualties of the 1976 student uprising against the sole use of Afrikaans language in school, twelve years old at the time

of his death, killed by a shot fired directly at him by the police (South Africa History Online 2019). The photographer was Sam Nzima and this image was published around the world, adding to the various activist platforms raising awareness and working towards dismantling the repressive apartheid system.

Recalling what bell hooks (2013) refers to as an ‘imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy’, in South Africa today, those who bear the brunt of being relegated to the margins, almost rendered non-human, are sex workers, and especially street-based sex workers. South Africa’s Sexual Offences Act (Act 23 1957) – a remnant of apartheid – criminalises the exchange of sex for financial reward, further, this Act criminalises all activities related to the sale of sex, including living off the earnings of selling sex, persuading someone to become a sex worker, or keeping a brothel (Gould and Fick 2008). Gould and Fick’s (2008) study, commissioned by the Institute for Security Studies, sheds some light of the lives of street-based sex workers in Cape Town. They were able to highlight the various forms of physical abuse, violence and police corruption that street-based sex workers experience. According to their analysis, 47 percent of street-based sex workers had been threatened with violence by police, 12 percent had been raped by police officers and 28 percent had been asked for sex by policemen in exchange for release from custody (Gould and Fick 2008: 6). In a context where sex work is criminalised, coupled with this kind of relationship with the police, formal reporting of cases of abuse or exploitation rarely happens. This implies that sex workers who are already vulnerable to abuse by clients and other third parties, are made even more vulnerable as they have little or no recourse to state justice.

It is against this backdrop that the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Task Force (SWEAT) works with and for the rights of sex workers in South Africa. SWEAT is an NGO that champions the rights of sex workers, and has been doing so over a period of 20 years or so. Like most NGOs, SWEAT began as a small NGO in Cape Town, but has grown over the past two decades and expanded its work into national and continental contexts. Much of their advocacy work centres around radical creative activism aimed at the decriminalisation and de-stigmatisation of sex work. One illustration of

this is their #Postcards4thepresident campaign whereby a ‘postcard’ addressed to the president was posted on social media every day during a 16-day period. This campaign was led by Asijiki coalition¹ during the period of ‘16 days of activism against gender based violence’, an international campaign to challenge violence against women and girls. Each postcard was different, providing excerpts of sex workers everyday life experiences and social injustices. One postcard, for example, had a short write up of the moment a sex worker lost her friend, a fellow sex worker who was murdered by a client in Durban², while another featured the global mapping of laws in relation to the criminalisation and de-criminalisation of sex work³ and calling for decriminalisation of sex work in South Africa.

In this paper, we, the research team and co-authors, engage with the creative activism of the Sex Work Feminist Collective housed within SWEAT, Cape Town, South Africa. Often being an African, a sex worker and feminist are considered to be incongruent identities, whereas in certain embodiments, they intersect with each other (Yingwana 2018: 186). Indeed, sex work has had a complicated history with feminism and often polarises opinion between those who consider sex work as sexual exploitation (MacKinnon 2011) and those who see sex work as a form of labour (Nagle 1997; Jeffreys 2011). However, as Mgbako and Smith (2011) note, the complex realities of sex workers in South Africa cannot be neatly located at either of these polar extremes that reduce sex worker to either victims or agents. Mgbako and Smith (2011) call for a far more nuanced approach to understanding and contextualising sex work in South Africa, one that is cognisant of histories that have produced the non-citizen/non-human relegated to the zone of non-being through criminalisation, various forms of structural, economic and physical violence, high levels of unemployment, dominant forms of marginal labour markets. These are the complexities within which the sex workers feminist collective at SWEAT are situated- with experiences of homelessness, the fight for decriminalisation of sex work, the visibility of sex workers and their rights, and the recognition of those whose lived experiences produce knowledge on the intersections of feminism and sex work and whose creative activism is entangled.

This entanglement calls for an exploration of embodied activism through performance, where the aesthetic serves as an activator/agitator for activism. The idea of the aesthetic provoking activism draws from the concept of ‘enactivism’ (Varela et al. 1991; Thompson 2007). Enactivism contends that cognition emerges through a dynamic and affective interaction between humans and the environment. It is understood that a sensorimotor encounter with the environment enables humans to make sense of it with a view to potentially transforming it. Enactivism thus encapsulates the active sensorimotor engagement of humans with their environment and the ways that humans are able to potentially change their environments through forms of engagement (Durt et al. 2017). Enactivism therefore has sparked our interest in investigating the idea of embodied activism through performance. We are not proposing performance as activism in its didactic form, as observed in numerous public performances that employ participatory forms where the performance routinely has a predetermined message. Rather, we are proposing performances that are non-didactic, which by their aesthetic characteristics are provocative, where the aesthetic of the performance is the agitator for activism, and where the site of the performance converges with the content of the performance so as to generate a supplementary layer of meaning. The bodily-ness of the encounter is what produces a continued feeling of purpose and action in the world for both performers and audiences. Live performance has the ability to inspire a sense of profound contemplation: perhaps what we would term embodied reflection, where the bodies of those encountering the performance (both performers and audience) are affected. Corporeal feminist, Elizabeth Grosz’ (2008: 1-2) readings of Deleuze and Guattari’s writings on the connection between art, sensation and affect are pertinent here. Grosz states that

“[a]rt [...] produces sensations, affects, intensities as its mode of addressing problems, which sometimes align with and link to concepts, the object of philosophical production, which are how philosophy deals with or addresses problems.”

She goes on to state that “the arts produce and generate intensity, that which directly impacts the nervous system and intensifies sensation.

Art is the art of affect more than representation” (Grosz 2008.: 3).

Live performance as activism does not necessarily evoke the kind of mass rally activism that registers when one thinks of protest action globally, but rather incites conversations, discussions, dialogues and debates that stimulate people to consider their roles in the situation and how they are able to actuate it from a point of personal observation to personal action. Each repetition of a live performance is fashioned by the various responses from audience members as well as the different spaces in which it is performed. This references UK-based performer and researcher Emma Meehan’s idea that the process of co-creating actively incorporates the audience’s *own* experiences in a collaborative act of meaning-making (2013: 38). The notion of collaborative meaning-making is crucial to performance activism that strives to inspire a sense of embodied reflection that could lead to personal action or activism in the bodies of those who encounter it.

In the title of this paper we refer to the ‘aesthetic grammars’ of social justice, but what do we mean by this? For us, the aesthetic is what we imagine the encounter to be for the performers and the audience. It is about how we build a particular kind of space, a particular kind of atmosphere or feeling in our audiences and in the performers. For performance-makers, facilitators, and performers it is the grounds upon which we build for the intentions of what we want to achieve with the aesthetic. Composing space for a very distinct outcome is a powerful skill, necessitating performance-makers, facilitators and performers to be conscious of creating, provoking, and inciting change through a visceral encounter with an audience. It is not didactic, it is not message-driven, and it is not aimed at behavioural change. It is a bodily experience of what an exhibition or performers are trying to convey. Working with a pre-ordained message feels more fixed, as opposed to an aesthetic, which suggests a more mutable and malleable way of acknowledging and embracing individuals rather than contextual experience. An ‘aesthetic grammar’, or vocabulary, is then a provocation, a form of working that has the potential to affect individuals differently and one that recognises a diversity of experiences. The idea of provocation

is intriguing because provocation in and of itself does not point to a particular result. As a curator, facilitator, performance-maker or performer you are not certain where the provocation will lead because the aesthetic relies on the integrity of someone else's felt experiences as well as understanding of someone else's bodily experience. It therefore does not solely rely on the performers' or curators' comprehension of what they are offering, leaving a broader scope for experience and interpretation.

Drawing on these understandings of an 'aesthetic grammar' we present the glimpses that creative activism through embodiment offer in moments of 'humanization and re-membering' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018) of sex workers who have historically been marginalized and rendered almost 'non-human' and relegated to the zone of non-being. Processes of humanisation and re-membering are connected to the re-storying of the narratives of sex workers and the challenging of myths and stereotypes around sex work in ways that breaks away from what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2013) refers to as the 'single story'. We argue that the rehumanizing and re-membering can be achieved through the addressing of contested histories of sex workers in South Africa, thereby restructuring knowledge production on the narratives of sex workers.

Here we focus particularly on the creative activism produced through two particular events staged with sex workers: through SWEAT, the 'I AM WHAT I AM – PLACES, FACES AND SPACES' exhibition and the 'A likeness Embodied' performance by the newly formed sex workers theatre group at the launch of the GlobalGRACE project in Cape Town⁴. Through these illustrative events, we hope to show how creativity and art practices engage the imagination and open up possibilities for re-imagining or re-storying, in this case for street-based sex workers in South Africa.

CONTEXTUALISING SEX WORK IN CAPE TOWN – THE MAKING OF THE NON-HUMAN

Sex work in South Africa has a specific and situated history. What is known, and has been written about, as with most histories situated within modernity, only begins with the onset

of white settlement. There is a deafening yet common paucity of information prior to this period. Within this linear history, the history of sex work in South falls along two main trajectories. In Cape Town, the first record of sex work was during the earliest days of white settlement in the 17th and 18th century and the first mention of a brothel in Cape Town was recorded in 1681 (van Heyningen 1984). At the same time, the introduction of slaves produced various aspects of sexual labour through the sale of sex – then commonly referred to as prostitution. The second trajectory is located around industrialisation of South Africa during the 19th century. According to van Heyningen (1984), the male dominated mining industry in the Witwatersrand, which grew rapidly in the 1880s, encouraged a flourishing community of sex workers controlled by criminal organisations from America and Europe. This is in line with van Onselen's (1982) argument that sex work is one of the consequences of South Africa's colonial history and capitalist development. The history of sex work is thus embedded within South Africa's history of slavery, colonisation and capitalist development. Yet these very systems that create the conditions for sex work simultaneously situate it on the margins. In the Cape Colony sex work, long an entrenched part of the social order, became institutionalised when the first Contagious Diseases Act was passed in 1868 which was directly derived from legislation passed in Britain (van Heyningen 1984). The assumed connections implied by the 1868 Act between sex work and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases were not based on local experience but were largely shaped by a British colonial medical profession. Nevertheless, this could be signalled as the beginning of the stereotype that marks sex workers as 'diseased'. This form of surveillance by the colonists was deemed a necessary measure to safeguard public morals (that persists in the present), and therefore relegated sex workers to the zone of non-being.

We connect this making of the non-human or zone of non-being to Anibal Quijano's (2000: 535) key arguments on labour and capitalism when he states that "all forms of control and exploitation of labour and production, as well as the control of appropriation and distribution of products, revolved around the capital-salary relation and the world market". He then adds that:

“these forms of labour control included slavery among others, all of which nurtured world capitalism. The new historical identities produced around the foundation of the idea of race in the new global structure of the control of labour were associated with social roles and geohistorical places. In this way, both race and the division of labour remained structurally linked and mutually reinforcing, in spite of the fact that neither of them were necessarily dependent on the other in order to exist or change. In this way, a systematic racial division of labour was imposed” (Quijano 2000: 536).

We connect Quijano’s articulations to the production of sexual labour through sex work in South Africa. Decolonial theorists have also argued that being human itself suffered a form of colonization known as ‘coloniality of being’ (Maldonado-Torres 2007). At the centre of ‘coloniality of being’ is the consistent and systematic denial of humanity of those who became targets of enslavement and colonization (Ndlovu-Ghatseni 2018). The denial of humanity of others was a major technology of domination which enabled them to be pushed out of the human family into a subhuman category and a zone of non-being (Fanon 1968).

Even within the frame of choice and agency - where sex work is framed as labour - structural grammars of race, class, gender and sexuality situate sex work on the margins. In South Africa, street-based sex work especially thrives within these histories of structural marginality. Even within the context of one of the most progressive constitutions in the world like South Africa’s, full citizenship for (particularly) street-based sex workers remains aspirational. The statistics on various indicators for sex workers collated by Gould and Fick (2008) are troubling. In a study conducted by the University of Witwatersrand in 2002, almost a third of sex workers in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, reported that they had been raped within 6 months of the time of interview, and in a study conducted in Cape Town, 12 percent of street-based sex workers reported that they had been raped by a policeman (Gould and Fick 2008). In a more recent study, SANAC (2014) found that one in five female sex workers in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town had been sexually assaulted in the year prior to being interviewed. Moreover,

in addition to being vulnerable to HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, access to health and social services for sex workers is rendered more difficult due to criminalisation and stigma based on moral judgement. Sex workers in Cape Town, as elsewhere, continue to face extreme socio-economic precarity, indeed, most of the members of the Sex Workers Feminist Collective in the exhibition of ‘I AM WHAT I AM – PLACES, FACES AND SPACES’ as well as some members of the sex workers theatre group are homeless. This is the backdrop that frames street-based sex workers’ lives. It is this backdrop filled with violence and dispossession that especially situates street-based sex workers in South Africa in the zone of non-being as non-citizen, non-human.

The I AM WHAT I AM – PLACES, FACES AND SPACES Exhibition

This exhibition was a result of a collaboration between SWEAT’s Sex Workers Feminist Collective and a postgraduate student from Stellenbosch University. This student was working on an action research project with a group of sex workers from Woodstock in Cape Town investigating the subjectivities of street-based sex workers from their own perspectives and based on their lived experiences (Grobbelaar-Lenoble 2018). Grobbelaar-Lenoble (2018: 3) notes how she did not want to reinforce moralistic discourses but rather worked in “a way that place/space embodiment has a direct influence on how humans negotiate conceptions of themselves when engaging with sex as a form of labour and a source of income”. This exhibition was a combination of portrait images of members of the Sex Workers Feminist Collective with handwritten moments from their life experience as street-based sex workers who identify as a cis gender women, trans-women and queer. The Sex Workers Feminist Collective led the curation of the exhibition, deciding how photographs and portraits were to be taken and presented or displayed as well as which life experiences they decided to share. Grobbelaar-Lenoble notes how consideration was given to the sensitivity of individuals giving viewers access to very private memories and spaces because

“historically, it is a well-recorded fact that the history of sex work in South Africa, both written and visual, is arguably biased against

them, mediated by state authorities and forms of censorship, and this history largely denies or constrains the agency of sex-workers within the public sphere" (Grobelaar-Lenoble 2018: 5).

Grobelaar-Lenoble wanted her study to stand against forms of oppression and censorship while allowing sex workers to decide how they wished to represent themselves in image and voice.

The 'I AM WHAT I AM – PLACES, FACES AND SPACES' exhibition was first launched at Iziko Slave Lodge Museum, from 5th April to 2nd September 2018. The caption on the website about this exhibition in combination with the actual exhibition itself make profound historical connections. The first connection is the historical connection that points out that the Iziko Slave Lodge was an 'unofficial slave brothel' (Iziko Museums of South Africa 2018a). Elsewhere on the Iziko Slave Lodge website historical information notes how it was allowed to function as a brothel: "The Slave Lodge was open to free men every night between eight and nine" (Iziko Museums of South Africa 2018a). The website notes that it is difficult to know how the lodge women felt about their role in prostitution and quotes Ambrose Cowley and Otto Mentzel mentioning that women were forced by their male partners to sleep with the visitors (Iziko Museums of South Africa 2018b).

Secondly, the overt connections made through this exhibition between contemporary sex work in Cape Town and South Africa's history of slavery echoes our discussion in the previous section, where we argued that sex work was embedded within historical structures of colonialism, capitalism and industrialisation in South Africa. We also see here clear links to structural marginality. The 'coloniality of being' for both slaves and sex workers is marked by marginality, abjection and non-being. The captivity and dehumanization of slaves through various modes of violence is well documented elsewhere (Hartman, 1997). Similarly, street-based sex workers in South Africa are subject to extreme forms of violence - from judicial, economic, and structural, to physical and sexual violence.

What is clear here is that sexual labour through the form of selling sex has a long history in Cape Town, and this history became more profound with the 'I AM WHAT I AM – PLACES, FACES AND SPACES' exhibition at Iziko Slave Lodge. The exhibition was a multi-disciplinary

collection – photography, video, and writing, with the main aim of challenging stigma around sex work in South Africa. The rooms in which the exhibition was displayed were painted in black. The portraits were large and life-like, with the background black and the image in colour. The displays on the wall were either singular or in pairs, with the both the handwritten write up and the caption on the extreme end of the double displays. The display was also curated in such a way that there was a spotlight on the portraits, which magnified the life-like aspect. Some of those who participated wore make-up. The images were flawless (Fig. 1).

The introduction to the exhibition is so profound, pointing to how this exhibition works towards 'undoing' or a response to exclusions. In this case, the exclusion of sex workers from feminism or feminist spaces in South Africa. We read this exhibition was an 'aesthetic grammar' in challenging the notion that sex work and feminism are incompatible in South Africa. A grammar in a sense that it resists the doxa (Bourdieu 1977) on feminism that colludes in painting sex work as oppressive to women rather than recognising the agency of sex workers who sell sex, even within a historical framing of structural inequality in South Africa. A grammar that offers a more nuanced approach to the complexities of sex work and sex workers in South Africa beyond the polar ends of sex work as sexual exploitation and sex work as labour.



Fig. 1. Opening excerpt to the exhibition of 'I AM WHAT I AM – PLACES, FACES AND SPACES.'

Source: SWEAT

In this aesthetic grammar, we see street-based sex workers who are cis gender women, trans women and queer, some of whom are homeless, showing the intersections of sex work and feminism in fighting for equality and decriminalisation of sex work. Moreover, the way the images were displayed in a life-like manner (Fig. 2), one is provoked to see a human being, to see wholeness and not the invisible, yet visibly stereotyped, street sex workers. The exhibition lends itself to one engaging with not only vision but also the affect, as one reads real-life excerpts of sex workers lives. This aesthetic is ephemeral, with a sustained provocation on sex work and feminism in South Africa.

The A likeness Embodied Exhibition

The 'I AM WHAT I AM – PLACES, FACES AND SPACES' exhibition has since been exhibited in many spaces, including at the launch of the South Africa-based element of the GlobalGRACE project⁵. It also formed part of an exhibition entitled "A likeness Embodied" curated by sex workers⁶. It comprised of a mixture of I AM WHAT I AM plus other exhibitions from SWEAT as well as an image performance by the newly formed sex workers theatre group, directed by Dr Sara Matchett. The images from the performance were based on



Fig. 2. Showing one of the display walls of 'I AM WHAT I AM – PLACES, FACES AND SPACES.

Source: SWEAT

moments of sex workers lives. It is important to note that some of the members of the SWEAT feminist collective featured in the I AM WHAT I AM exhibition are also members of the newly formed sex work (Fig. 3) theatre group that partook in the image theatre. We will engage here with the interface of the performance from Boal's image theatre and I AM WHAT I AM exhibition.

Matchett worked with the sex workers theatre group over four sessions of several hours. The sessions involved the participants creating timelines that reflected moments in their lives from birth to present. Participants worked in pairs, with one person populating the time-line based on the information their partner gave them. Thereafter, everyone looked at their own timelines and chose a moment that they considered to be a turning point moment. They then created three still body/physical images that reflected the beginning, middle and end of the moment. Matchett drew from Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal's

'Image Theatre' that forms part of his Theatre of the Oppressed methodology (Boal 1985; 1995; 2006). In Image Theatre participants create still images, using their bodies, to depict a moment or tell a story. According to Boal, the act of creating bodily images enables participants to move beyond the cognitive meaning of each image and instead, through an embodied engagement with the story, feel the image at the level of felt sensation/perception and "let [...] memories and [the] imagination wander" (Boal 2006: 175).

Once they had created the still bodily images, participants were then asked to 'dynamise' their images, a term used by Boal that asks participants to find a repetitive physical gesture and accompanying sound that emerges out of each image. Once they had dynamised each image, they were asked to find a way of linking the images with the dynamised gestures and sounds to create a two-minute scene. Thereafter participants worked in small groups and selected aspects of everyone's dynamised scene



Fig. 3. The newly formed sex workers theatre group performing an image in front of a live audience with the I AM WHAT I AM exhibition in the background

Source: GlobalGrace, Work-package 1

to create a collective scene that combined aspects from everyone's turning point moments. The scene had to include still physical images, bodies moving in space, a melody, sounds and at least four words. A cloth was also introduced into the scenes and each group was asked to find a way of incorporating it. Sarah Matchett, one of the lead researchers and director, spent time developing these scenes that eventually became performed installations that formed part of the exhibition at the launch of the South African element of the GlobalGRACE project. The scenes were not narrative/story based, with a set beginning, middle and end, but rather combined images from different turning point moments in individual group members' lives. The idea of combining moments from different experiences was a deliberate choice. It was felt that it would serve to work against what could potentially have turned into a series of didactic, message-driven performances. The choice not to include large spoken text in the form of fully formed sentences, but rather to use individual words and sounds to accompany the physical images, was also a deliberate choice to avert any temptation on the part of the performers to create didactic narrative/story-based performances.

The way the performance installations were structured within the A likeness Embodied exhibition was that they were looped. Each piece lasted roughly five minutes. Once it got to the end it started again. This continued for approximately thirty minutes while the audience walked through the exhibition. This was an attempt to offer the audience a visceral experience of the performance where they would be able to make sense of the performances through bodily responses, inspired the decision to combine various ingredients such as physical images, bodies moving in space, a melody, sounds and single words with the exhibition in the background. In this way it was hoped that the aesthetic choices or provocation would affect the audience at the level of felt perception and would thus engage their bodies in informing cognitive meaning-making processes. In Matchett's opinion, this opens up space for critical reflection that lends itself to practical activist engagement. Matchett believes that the process of meaning-making that this inspires draws the audience 'in' as opposed to didactic messaging that potentially pushes them 'away'.

CREATIVE ACTIVISM AS A DECOLONIAL FRAME – SEX WORK REIMAGINED

Ndlovu-Ghatseni (2018) posits how colonial 'humanizing' was determined by the logic of capital and has perpetuated processes of 'dehumanizing' into postcolonial contexts, as we have argued has been the case for sex workers. For Ngugi wa Thiong'o (2009: 25) re-humanizing entailed 're-membering' as a decolonial act underpinned by a 'quest for wholeness'. A process of re-remembering could manifest in refusal to be determined by race, capitalism or patriarchal structures that consistently locate certain bodies at the margins. Zimitri Erasmus (2017: xxiii) in her book entitled *Race Otherwise: Forging a New Humanism for South Africa* articulates one such refusal of being determined by race even though we are immersed in it within modernity, noting:

"All of us live in amongst racialised structures of social meaning. We cannot live outside, above, or beyond the past and the present. Nor can we be outside, above, or beyond the race. Because we are embedded in a racialised world, its ways of seeing and its injustices can be apparent to us, and we can be inspired to change it [...] In the ongoing process of our liberation we must create openings in the racial house. We must refuse to live by its rules of dominance and its significations."

We argue that creative activism can be a vehicle that creates such openings, such moments of liberation or resistance, of making whole and of re-storying and reimagining the othered. The I AM WHAT I AM – PLACES, FACES AND SPACES exhibition offers glimpses of this through presenting these portraits of sex workers from the feminist collective. As presented earlier, portraits are so large and sharply shot that one cannot help but take a moment to have a look and really see the people in the images, and to see that they are just that – people – and not sex workers, or homeless people, or people who have experienced various forms of violence. They are just people, and hence, for those moments, humanized. Moreover, the written narratives alongside the images add to the wholeness by offering a narrative around the image beyond the stereotype of a street-based sex worker – that is, diseased, drug addict, dirty and socially suspect. The narrative erases that single story and offers

a more rounded, nuanced, complex story that makes up who that sex worker, that person, is. This narrative also negates the prevailing discourse in South Africa at that time which excluded sex workers from being feminist. These are moments of humanization and re-remembering what has previously been dis-membered, thereby offering agential knowledge on the lives represented in the exhibition.

The A likeness Embodied Exhibition which worked with the sex worker theatre group drawing on Boal's Image Theatre afforded the sex workers with an opportunity to both remember moments from their lives, and to physically re-member or piece together a particular turning point moment. This embodied experience gave them the opportunity to make sense of the moment at the level of felt perception or bodily feeling. Matchett believes that this experience potentially afforded the sex workers the possibility of imagining and enacting moments differently. This speaks to the idea of re-imagining or what she refers to as 're-storying moments' from their lived experiences. The subjectivity of memory is such that it allows space for re-imagination, re-interpretation and re-storying. There are no rules that bind one to the original story and theatre and performance, because of its embodied-ness, affords one the opportunity of changing aspects of the story or moment. The embodied-ness of the kind of theatre and performance that is driven by aesthetics rather than by a message further allows the audience space to engage with the performance through felt-perception. Matchett argues that a performance with a pre-determined message tends to engage a cognitive process that relies primarily on the brain to make sense of what is being experienced. Whereas performance that employs an aesthetic as its chief means of communication provides space for the audience to interpret meaning that has its roots in body-based feeling. This allows for a process of embodied cognition where the body influences the mind in making meaning. This is particularly pertinent when one considers the etymology of the word 'aesthetic' that comes from the Greek word 'aisthetikos', meaning perception by the senses. The audience members, in this way, become active agents in the process of interpreting what is being presented to them. They derive meaning from what they experience. How the meaning unfolds for the

audience is based on their individual experiences of the aesthetic that the performance employs. The audience are thus poised to become active agents for activism and social justice.

For Matchett, the embodied aspect of the process, that engaged the experience of the moment at the level of feeling, contributed towards beginning a process of re-connection with self for the sex workers in the group. The extreme trauma faced by sex workers, particularly street-based sex workers, has the potential to result in a numbing of the body or a disconnection from feeling in the body. Matchett believes that when one awakens feeling in the body, one creates an opportunity for starting the process of reconnecting mind and body. This then assists in re-connecting the self from an otherwise disconnected state and begins the process of rehumanisation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the 'I AM WHAT I AM' exhibition and the coming together of this exhibition as part of 'A likeness Embodied' with Boal's image performance are likely to have resulted in several provocations of social justice, we reflect on two here. First of all, it is important to note that currently in South Africa, feminist spaces have opened up more to sex workers since exhibition in 2018. For instance, the last couple of years have witnessed sex workers presenting in various public encounters at the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town, including giving guest lectures on sex work and labour, in a process of recognition and rehumanisation.

Secondly, the image theatre performances that formed part of the A likeness Embodied exhibition, provided sex workers with the opportunity to express their stories in ways that opened up space for interpretation. The performance installations, in their employment of aesthetics to communicate meaning as opposed to message-driven narratives, provided both the performers and audience members opportunities to derive meaning each time the pieces were performed. Placing the performance installations alongside visual, still images and videos that were installed in the exhibition space created an interesting juxtaposition. The tension between live performance and pre-recorded video or visual images, brought up questions of how the audience viewed both forms, that is, live

performance and visual art. This tension lent itself to audience members/viewers being able to make sense of and read the performances through the aesthetic: something that is common in how viewers make sense of visual art works, but perhaps less common in how audience members makes sense of more traditional narrative/story-based theatre. Our hunch, as researchers, is that the freedom that this provided audience members and performers to choose how they made sense of the work and how it spoke to them contributed to how the work ‘touched’ or ‘reached’ them, and landed in their bodies and then their minds. We hope that through being ‘touched’ in this way the audience members were moved to contemplate the lived experiences of sex workers.

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NOTES

- 1 Asijiki coalition is housed under SWEAT. Asijiki coalition for the Decriminalisation of Sex Work (“Asijiki”) is a group of sex workers, activists, advocates and human rights defenders who advocate for law reform for the decriminalisation of sex work in South Africa. Becoming a supporter is open to organisations and individuals and targeted at members of civil society from all sectors including gender, women’s rights, human rights, legal and public health. Asijiki’s principal aim is the decriminalisation of sex work in South Africa. Currently, full criminalisation is the law – this has been in place since 1957, with clients being specifically criminalised since 2007. This has resulted in high levels of violence, a lack of access to basic services including health services and abuse of sex workers, including by police officers (Asijiki 2019).
- 2 See: <https://www.facebook.com/asijikicoalition/photos/a.1701239883437758/2582362511992153/?type=3andtheater>
- 3 See: <https://www.facebook.com/asijikicoalition/photos/a.1701239883437758/2588469858048085/?type=3andtheater>
- 4 Global Gender and Cultures of Equality (GlobalGRACE) is a programme of research and capacity strengthening funded by the UKRI’s Global Challenge Research Fund (GCRF) delivered through the Arts and Humanities Research Council. GlobalGRACE employs arts-based practices and multi-sensory research to investigate the

production of cultures of equality and enable gender positive approaches to wellbeing internationally.

- 5 Workpackage 1 of the GlobalGRACE project – the Global Gender and Cultures of Equality project is a collaborative research with the African Gender Institute and the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies at the University of Cape Town as well as the NGO SWEAT. The title of the research is: ‘Theatre and the Production of Cultures of Equality amongst Sex Workers’. The workpackage was officially launched on the 19th and 20th March 2019. For more information, see globalgrace.net
- 6 Workpackage 1 works with a governance body referred to as the sex workers steering committee, who offer guidance on the day to day running of the project.

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