

SCHOLARLY PAPER

Radical love as decolonial philosophy: In conversation with Khanyisile Mbongwa

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Abstract

Social unrest in South Africa has been characterised as nihilism. The injustice of racism and separatism in its historical and contemporary guises has diminished the sense of being fully human in the world. Racial and consumerist economic categories have become ways of determining the right and access to life. Such a dehumanising history, founded on hatred, can only be confronted through understanding the significance of justice. In this interview with renowned curator Khanyisile Mbongwa, we discuss the ways in which systemic violence and dispossession affect one's sense of being. Mbongwa argues that it is only through self-love and mass political action against racial injustice that black self-realisation and liberation can be achieved. In some ways, Mbongwa's work on South African townships as transitional spaces brings attention to the essence of South Africa's politics: the animosity arising from severed social bonds and the corrosion of the love ethic. Love, as decolonial philosophy, is key to political solidarity.

Keywords: love, decolonisation, student movements, race, collaborative practice.

Introduction

The paradox of education is precisely this – that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated. (*Baldwin 2005: 1*)

Over several months in 2016, the art campus at the University of Cape Town (UCT) was occupied by Umhlangano, a black-led student movement that challenged the conservatism of pedagogical practice in the creative disciplines and the internal racism that blocks the progress of black students. As a member of Umhlangano, Khanyisile Mbongwa became part of the initiatives toward

alternative creative pedagogies, collaborative creative practices and mediation with university staff. In a short time, Umhlangano became an important space for formulating ideas about curriculum change, institutional culture, the naming of buildings, student bursary schemes and, most significantly, articulating and understanding the politics of emotion – pain, anguish, anger and love – in the quest for decolonisation.

As Mbongwa suggests, post-Marikana protests arising from the violence of internalised and systemic colonialism were also ignited by a recognition that if one loves oneself, then injustice can no longer be tolerated.¹ Further, the protests showed that many black people carry years of suppressed emotions in institutions where ‘rational thinking’ leaves no place for emotions. Stubborn colonial customs and institutional cultures mean that most will feel out of place, alienated, hurt, mocked and humiliated. What are the consequences of showing anger or pain in formal institutional settings such as a university?

It is along these lines that ‘radical love’, as Mbongwa terms it, can be seen as a defiant political gesture entrenched in decolonial philosophy. As an independent curator, artist and activist, Mbongwa emphasises the historical denial of self-love through slavery, migrant labour systems, segregation policies and racist judicial systems which ruptured and continue to sever black family life. Colonial racism, class and gender oppression conspire to engender a plague of black self-hatred and low self-esteem. This is what Cornel West (1993: 18) calls nihilism among black communities: ‘a disease of the soul’ that ‘can never be completely cured’ and ‘is not overcome by arguments or analyses; it is tamed by love and care’. West (1993: 19) argues that ‘there is always a chance for conversion – a chance for people to believe that there is hope for the future and a meaning to struggle’ but that ‘turning is done through one’s own affirmation of one’s worth – an affirmation fuelled by the concern of others’. He states: ‘[a] love ethic must be at the center of a politics of conversion’. This ethic, he insists, is ‘a last attempt at generating a sense of agency among a downtrodden people’ (West 1993: 19). Using Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* as an example, he suggests that ‘self-love and love of others are both modes toward increasing self-evaluation and encouraging political resistance in one’s community’ (West 1993: 19).

In the essay ‘Love as the Practice of Freedom’, bell hooks (1994: 245) suggests that the love ethic must be integrated ‘into a vision of political decolonization that would provide a blueprint for the eradication of black self-hatred’. In her view,

[t]he absence of a sustained focus on love in progressive circles arises from a collective failure to acknowledge the needs of the spirit and an overdetermined emphasis on material concerns. Without love, our efforts to liberate ourselves and our world community from oppression and exploitation are doomed. As long as we refuse to address fully the place of love in struggles for liberation we will not be able to create a culture of conversion where there is a mass turning away from an ethic of domination. (*hooks 1994: 243*)

1 The Marikana mineworker strike took place in 2012 and resulted in 34 miners being killed by South African police. In this discussion, Marikana is regarded as a turning point in South Africa’s history. After 2012, the rise of service-delivery protests and student movements such as #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall changed the approach to the politics of reconciliation since 1994 in post-apartheid South Africa.

Love is rarely taken seriously as a political strategy in addressing the dire effects of colonialism and continued neocolonial domination and exploitation. Yet key political movements of black consciousness and black nationalism are centred on love to challenge self-hatred.

Black nationalists such as Martin Delaney, Edward Wilmot Blyden, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael, among others, promoted

self-determination, racial solidarity and group self-reliance, various forms of voluntary racial separation, pride in the historic achievements of people of African descent, a concerted effort to overcome racial self-hate and to instil black self-love. (Shelby 2005: 24)

These ideas, Tommie Shelby (2005: 25) notes, have been challenged by scholars such as Paul Gilroy as black essentialism. For Gilroy (1993: 4), 'the nationalistic focus [in English and American cultural studies] is antithetical to the rhizomorphic, fractural structure of the transcultural, international formation', which is the black Atlantic.

Focusing on South Africa, and Cape Town's urban social fabric in particular, Mbongwa's work *iRhanga* draws from local knowledge, her early years in Gugulethu and the theoretical underpinnings of black identity to understand the intricate nature of racial politics. In this work, she engages with the ways in which the historical, geographical, material conditions of black life and the current segregated spatial arrangements produce almost similar outcomes to those of apartheid South Africa, continuing to fragment black societies and reinforce nihilism and inferiorisation.

Her recent postgraduate research takes as its conceptual framework *iirhanga*: the corridors through which black people traverse between densely packed houses and shacks in a township. She extends this idea by suggesting that thousands of black workers travel between home and work in white areas through a corridor or passageway. As an in-between space, the passageway represents the bound and limited movements of labour migration as well as the possibility of liberation. It tracks the senses of 'public space', regulates mobility and how black people experience different spaces. It is in these social conditions that nihilism in black communities thrives, leading to depression, violence and anguish.

Mbongwa's keen sense of irony and insight leads her to reject the term 'performance' art since social interaction between white and black in South Africa is already a performed act with black bodies objectified. 'Black people in the world' are, in her words, in a 'perpetual state of performance'. She turns to the term 'demonstration': a double code for *showing* (the conditions of black life) and *protesting* (for social change).

Her work shows how malevolent Achille Mbembe's and Mondli Makhanya's acerbic commentary on black pain in South African anti-colonial politics is. For Mbembe, decolonisation in South Africa is a misnomer. In his view, the 'new cultural temperament [that] is gradually engulfing post-apartheid urban South Africa' is 'a *psychic state* more than a political project in the strict sense of the term' (Mbembe 2015, emphasis in original). He admonishes the #RhodesMustFall students who say 'I am my pain' and 'I am my suffering' and rallies against the 'fusion of self and suffering' in what he calls 'this astonishing age of solipsism and narcissism' (Mbembe 2015). He surmises that there is too much investment 'in turning whiteness, pain and suffering into such erotogenic objects'

and that this libido is 'typical of the narcissistic investments so privileged by this neoliberal age' (Mbembe 2015).

Likewise, Makhanya (2018) reprimands what he calls a 'category of woke black people who suffer from this debilitating disease of obsession with whites' who cannot 'define themselves independently of white people' and are 'so engrossed with the idea of whiteness that they are actually an impediment to decolonisation'. This was in response to an event at the Decolonial Winter School at UCT where a public invitation to dinner specified that the event was for 'people of colour only' to enable a safe space 'where black people can come together to communicate their experiences of the day without having to shelter white fragility'.² Overlooking the harmful effects on black life in all socioeconomic classes, both Mbembe and Makhanya neglect the significance of public sentiment in hardcore politics. Furthermore, the presumptuous assertion that to understand historical trauma and self-hatred is narcissistic aligns itself with the bigoted perception that black people do not feel. It also seems to ignore that racism has constructed an inextricable entanglement, a relationality between blackness and whiteness such that either category is dialectically bound to the other.

Mbongwa's curatorship, creative practice and activism critique this denial of basic human principles to feel, to think and to have perspectives on the experience of persistent overt and covert racism in South Africa. This conversation with Mbongwa is part of a broader discourse about the multifaceted nature of current racial politics in South Africa.



Nomusa Makhubu: Thank you again for making the time to discuss your ideas and your work. To begin the conversation, please describe yourself and what you do.

Khanyisile Mbongwa: I see myself as a curator. That is the space I have been working in: the creative social space. I am also a sociologist and that informs a huge part of my practice as a curator because that is where most of my work comes from. I am an independent curator, currently an adjunct curator for performative practices at the Norval Foundation. I also work with Cape Town Carnival as curatorial advisor.

Then there is my own research. In my independent curatorial work, I am really interested in black people and people of colour and the geographical locations that were specifically designed to kill them, globally.³ Since I grew up mostly *elokishini* [black townships] in Cape Town such as eGugulethu and in other townships within Cape Town, my focus or my interest is in how we are able to survive the violent structures of townships. In Brazil's favelas, for example, how are people still surviving the violent structures there? I also consider the [housing] projects in the United States of America.

In my research, I examine these forms of survival and engage with the ways in which performance art and performance theory, in my opinion, fail to provide a viable analytical framework for what black artists who are called performance artists do. I think there is a limitation in performance art theory

2 <https://www.politicsweb.co.za/news-and-analysis/ucts-poonly-dinners-organisers-remain-unapologeti>

3 Throughout the interview, Mbongwa refers to 'black people and people of colour'. In the transcription, 'black' has been used broadly to encompass 'people of colour', rather than using both categories side by side.

because in my experience, when performance theory fails in the process of analysing or interpreting an artist's work, it ritualises it [see Schechner 1988]. I have a reservation with that term 'ritual' and thinking about art as ritual, because as black people, we have actual rituals and so to ritualise art is to limit ways of understanding it. I accept that it draws from actual rituals but work itself is not a ritual, so I cannot ritualise it. So for my research it was quite hard to think through performance theory.

Looking back at my early work, I thought this is why I was interested in the word 'demonstration'. I think the people who are called performance artists and are black are actually demonstrating black lived experience.⁴ It is a demonstration. I know some people might have a reservation about saying that black live art is a demonstration since this term also refers to protesting. I think in actual fact that is where I locate artists who do performative creative practice. Recently, I was talking about the term 'activist' and I thought, actually there are social activists, political activists, economic activists, land activists and there are art activists. These are people in the creative space who are activists through their creative practice, critically voicing concerns by use of body as mode and material and this is why I think that they cannot be performing. Mass culture is westernised and thus either appropriates or consumes our bodies as available product, easily disposable. Therefore, as black people we find our bodies in a perpetual state of performance without consent, because the social structures at play generally dehumanise our bodies.

We are not seen as people therefore we are always reduced to bodies, black bodies, queer bodies, gay bodies, etc.; and this denial of our humanness, is exactly what demonstrating black lived experience confronts, articulates and imagines out from. Since we are in a perpetual state of performance, I do not see how in art space – if our life in itself is perpetual performance – we can talk about performance art without thinking through it critically in terms of race and black culture. How then, when we get into the art space, can we say that we are performing? This is why I use the term 'demonstrating' black lived experience as a black queer womxn.

In my curatorial practice, I explore these ideas through the intimate relationship between amnesia and remembrance. My interest in amnesia stems from feeling and seeing that we, as black people, are having ancestral shivers. We are going through intense remembrance. Also, since we have such a rich inheritance of historical violence, there are things that we cannot explain about our bodies and their distinct movements. There is a way in which our bodies are moving that tells us something about a time when our bodies were not physically present. Then again, we do not have a linear sense of time and our time has been truncated into physical labour time. Our past, present and future are always in conversation and I think this is why we are experiencing the world as we do. This is also why sometimes the linear perspective of time is so violent, or as David Harvey [1990] puts it, tyrannical, since it refers to history and how we are seen in it and are erased in that spectrum.

I am interested in the renewal of African and black spiritual and ancestral knowledge. Our knowledge production systems have been completely erased. When I say they have been erased, I also mean they are not being incorporated into the education system. So there is always a shadow

4 The notion of 'demonstrating black lived experience' is conceptualised by Mbongwa. This concept is an interpretation of the ways in which the black body is used in creative practice to intervene in time and space. Since the black body is geographically and political situated, demonstrations become a way of tracing and mapping how it is commodified, surveyed and policed. In effect, the concept pinpoints what it means to negotiate space as a black person living in racialised societies.

of yourself that you are not aware of because you are socialised and educated in a specific way that denies you yourself. I am interested in knowledge production and distribution systems within an African context, a black context.

NM: Do you see yourself as an activist?

KM: I think so. Reluctantly so.

NM: Why?

KM: Because, in general, when you say you are an activist the expectation is that you would forever be on the ground marching. While I have been involved in public demonstrations, I am reluctant to march. Every time I try to be in a march it just triggers so much violence that has happened to us as a nation of black people and also to our family institutions. The institution of black families has been in an entire collapse since we encountered and are in constant engagement with white oppression in its varied forms over 400 years. So when I've tried to go to a march, even the student marches, I then remember my uncle's experience and realise that there are too many triggers, too many other forms of violences. But, I still go, reluctantly – I am still there.

I had to find other ways of activating myself in the sociopolitical and economic space. I respect people who put their bodies on the line physically in a march. I am always in awe. For me, I think if I were to do that again, the context would have to be different. The context must not be one where I want to die for this revolution. People are already dying, in the townships, kwaLanga, in all the townships, in rural areas. Black people every day are systematically being killed. So for me to say *ndizoyifela le-way*, no, people around me are already dying. My practice has been informed by that a lot. If there's anything we know as black people ... we know how to die. We know how to negotiate ways of dying and so I am always thinking about what it means to *live* as a black person. For me that is a form of activism. Thinking about it theoretically (and acting from that imagination) and using the art space to test the theory is important because the creative practice has much to offer in understanding everyday life. Wanting a revolution that sees me alive.

NM: Which intervention or curatorial project would you see as your seminal work?

KM: *IRhanga*. A lot went into that and many people were involved in it. *IRhanga* is one of the works where I know I am not done. I know that I scratched the surface and there is so much more. I'm saying this because of the kinds of Facebook and text messages I received from people who were there witnessing the work. People came to me weeks later and cried. Most mentioned what the work provoked, what it opened in them, the possibilities, the potential that they saw in themselves and the platform for imagination it provided. The work also responds to the perception engendered by non-profit organisations that black people in townships, in rural areas, and in different parts of the continent have no sense of imagination because their situation is so devastating. This perception ignores the fundamental question that asks *how* the situation becomes so bad and how do people in these conditions find ways to create communal spaces for thinking, imagination and creating. Children

who are too poor to afford toys can imagine that a brick is a car and play. We are constantly being pushed into a place of non-imagination; it's like being dehumanised through the colonial and slavery project was not enough – we also have to be denied the right to imagine ourselves to existence. Having grown up *elokishini* and in the rural areas in KZN [KwaZulu-Natal], I survived every day out of pure imagination. Our parents, our grandparents, our family structures survived because of imagination and creating from it. Our mothers have always been futurist; that's partly how they survived (and continue to survive) the brutality of racist and structural violence. To imagine and to play as black people is political. Who gets to play, when they get to play, at what stage does a child stop playing because they need to step a level up within the household – these are questions indicating prevailing circumstances. Leisure is associated with whiteness. The adage 'white leisure, black labour' alludes to unequal distribution of labour time, where the time to play, think and imagine does not exist for the working class.

NM: Could you describe one or two works from *iRhanga*?

KM: One of the works that has been the starting point is *kuDanger*. In this work, three people throw empty beer crates to each other. There is a sound installation consisting of various songs and television sets showing different videos, talks and songs that are all based on blackness, black anxiety and black depression. I draw from Simphiwe Dana's song where she says: *uyinkwenkwezi* [you are a star] *khanya embumnyameni* [that shines in darkness] – *ubumnyama obungaka* [in such darkness]. There is something so magical and powerful about that song, especially when it plays simultaneously with Pastor Skosana's lecture video about the history of violence on black bodies. That work, for me, was a technological feat. The installation was in a furniture storeroom in the basement of the Ritchie Building at the University of Cape Town and so to physically move furniture and install screens in order to demonstrate township life was difficult yet poignant, demonstrating how narratives of space-making and reclaiming operate.

The people who were throwing the crates were not trained in theatre. They had to work with people who are theatre makers – who had to be 'de-theatred'. They had to transcend the theatre space and not *perform* throwing the crate. Generally, those who are trained in theatre know how to perform the act of doing a thing. In this instance, they had to do it without thinking or crafting it. I told them: 'I want you to think of all the men, womxn, girls and boys *elokishini* who are a symbol of what black depression looks like, of what black anxiety looks like when it has taken over your body physically, when the system has killed you and rendered your body useless. Think of what it looks like when men have to go into the mines at 4am and for the men and womxn who have to ride the first train out of *ilokishi* to be here and stand at a corner to wait for a pick-up truck. Think of precarious labour.'

This work also refers to my experience of a shebeen. I come from a shebeen culture. My uncle reluctantly owned a shebeen but had to balance the alcohol consumption in the evenings by welcoming young children in the shebeen during the day to play and learn. He taught young children games, especially pool. So during the day the youth visited kwaMalume to play ama-video games, pool, cards and dominoes. It became a space of playing and learning. His method of teaching was more about what he called 'life mathematics' where you need to think strategically about your life. He would tell them that it is better to get out from the squatter camp and that these games would help them augment their lives.

NM: You have discussed a few themes on the black experience in South Africa, mainly segregated location, the sense of mobility that the idea of *iRhanga* is based on, limited or regulated mobility. You have also discussed the importance of imagination. Keeping these themes in mind, what does decolonisation mean to you?

KM: The decolonising project, for me, keeps on failing me. At the centre of decolonisation is still the colonial. If we look at Botswana, Mozambique and South Africa and the process of democracy in these countries in particular, we look at how these democracies were negotiated and the outcome of the negotiation. In the South African context, what decolonisation symbolises (to some extent) is that we did not want to go into a violent civil war. This does not mean I call for a civil war, but I do know that the TRC [Truth and Reconciliation Commission], as per my conversation with Premesh Lalu, was more concerned about political shifts. To avoid civil war, whiteness maintained its status in post-apartheid, postcolonial and democratic South Africa, rather than embarking on strategies of meaningful change. What does this mean for us? Where are we then? When white people say 'I love Nelson Mandela', we begin to realise that it is about more self-preservation, and it has nothing to do with black people, it has nothing to do with the perspective of how whiteness has changed, shifted or evolved into how it sees black people. That is what it means when most make commentary about uMam'Winnie, asking: how did Nelson Mandela, such a peaceful man, marry such a violent womxn? The vilification of Winnie and the exaltation of Nelson are closely aligned to what was negotiated in the transition from apartheid to democratic South Africa. So for me decolonising and the decolonial context are located in that very uncomfortable space where certain narratives have tainted the discourse, so much so that I find it very hard to trust it.

When we are talking about racism today, we can't really pinpoint it all the time. It is so normalised that it has infiltrated our every way of existing and our daily lives such that it is difficult. As black people, we cannot express ourselves without being vilified or mocked. By expression, I also mean mourning, grieving, celebrating, thinking and processing who we are. The moment we gather by ourselves, the moment we articulate any form of self-love, we are called reverse racists. It is impossible. Decolonising strategies currently at play are not enough for me because we have already done that, we've already done the decolonising part and they are not interested. The coloniser is not interested to shift anything.

NM: When you say we have already done it, what do you mean?

KM: For instance, when a museum decides to have a decolonial moment and restructure their collection, they are not going to pursue justice and give back any of the works that were taken through violent and unethical means. They are not interested in repatriation of genocide collections, they are not interested in letting our bodies rest. Museums would typically organise talks where people will present papers about seemingly progressive things. It's nice but we are talking and talking while the world is continuing. That violent context is continuing. So those things are not enough. It is not enough. Institutions have power, they are cultural institutions, often influencing culture. Part of the cultural decolonising context is that the museum then becomes an articulation point. We have been having these conversations for a long time.

I am currently reading *Anti*colonial Fantasies, Decolonial Strategies* edited by Imayna Caceres, Sunanda Mesquita, Sophie Utikal. In it, Caceres [2017] argues that 'colonialism is an articulation of race and labour in the colonial period that is condensed into a power structure, continues in modern and contemporary times and operates through control of the economy through land appropriation, exploitation of labour, control of natural resources, of authority and institutions of gender and sexuality and of knowledge, epistemology, education and the formation of subjectivity'. They continue to kill us. This book points out the patterns and recurrences of the colonial within neoliberal democracies and in the decolonial aesthetic.

While I think it is important that decolonisation gives us a language to make sense of the historical foundations of current circumstances, I also feel that the decolonial discourse tends to be easily appropriated. Everyone speaks in this decolonial manner as a form of reimagining past and future. I feel that what we need to do is not to reimagine. I am sceptical of the prefix 're-' because, like 'de-' of decolonising, it basically means repositioning yourself in a system that knows how to kill you. What really needs to happen is a much deeper uprooting of the system, which means we have to imagine what kind of Africa we want, what kind of blackness we want. We want to imagine, not reimagine, and that imagination begins with knowing that these systems ultimately do not work for us.

NM: Considering the rise of the decolonial discourse in South Africa since 2015, do you think as a concept decolonisation is useful? Considering its roots in the 20th century, there is a particular significance and currency that it has gained in contemporary South Africa.

KM: Yes, I think as a concept it is useful because it enables people to critically engage with their own position. It enables people to see critically, differentiate what is happening in our communities and locate the violence. It enables us to articulate what became unspeakable under colonialism. It is useful in that it has given us a language to understand the hidden mechanisms of imperialism and oppression. Although we are still formulating that language, I think it is useful in that respect because now one can say *nayi*, here it is: here is the violence, here is the pain.

Even when we are talking about the curriculum, we are able to understand its colonial content because we are looking at it through the lens of decolonisation. Where I would like us to be, ideally, is where we can say that there is a colonial curriculum but to speak about ourselves in reflection without using the word 'decolonial'. Is there another term we can come up with that speaks more about us? Part of decolonisation and decolonial strategies is to constantly be in conversation, in relation and in response to the coloniser. It still has not gone to a place, I think, where you are speaking not in response, in reaction, but from your positionality, as yourself and not necessarily responding to oppressive whiteness in any form. Part of decolonisation is that by the time you need to start thinking about yourself, you are too exhausted. There is that sense that the decolonial discourse could also be a part of the distraction, distracting you from what you ought to be doing.

NM: Do you think the decolonial discourse at the moment effectively seeps across different class barriers and finds its meaning in the everyday life of a person who is not necessarily within the university structures? Is there a way, in our local knowledge and languages, to define this political moment?

KM: That is a difficult one. I am not sure how far the term and its meaning has worked its way through all class levels. What I know is that academics or institutions of higher learning always assume that people do not know. So they might not be using the terminology or have a word for it but people are fighting the structures in various ways and might not be using the word *siya-decoloniza*. That is always a very tricky question to respond to. I feel as though these things might also just be here in institutions of higher learning because we are having these conversations here. These conversations further the theory for the people who are engaged in this kind of set up to structure their lives but whether it goes down to the social collective, I am not sure. This is why there is a limitation to how these strategies are working.

NM: Could you tell us about your involvement in Umhlangano. Begin by describing it and then locate yourself within the broader movement.

KM: Umhlangano was primarily a student protest movement belonging to the UCT #RhodesMustFall but it was mainly about FKA [formerly known as] Hiddingh campus and focused on the types of violences that are happening here on this campus, since it is an art campus with specific types of intimacy – in terms of learning – that are required between the student and lecturer. So this was part of the conversation that acknowledged that there is violence here and because we are a satellite campus then it became important to start something here that addresses the specific issues on this campus.

I was a postgraduate student that had never really interacted with any of the lecturers here who are lecturing undergraduate courses. The programme is in some ways ahead of the institution in general in that it is interdisciplinary and there is a level of creative freedom that the students can engage with. There wasn't really something that directly affected what I was doing. I got involved because those who were affected were young people who look like me. I cannot continue writing my masters and doing research when people who look like me are in this very violently precarious position in this university. So I emailed my supervisors and informed them that I will not carry on until these things are resolved. I had to think of the risks of that because I am not an average student. I have a life outside the institution and working relationships. It did jeopardise many of my working relationships. It created a lot of tension between me and other people with whom I was working in other universities under different circumstances. Also, I was quite upset or annoyed at my cohorts for not participating because they were not directly affected.

I became a 'space-holder' for the younger students. I participated in debates about whether we were moving in the right direction or to question the direction we are taking. And sometimes I would provide some sort of financial assistance for food and just being physically present when anything is needed. I became part of the conversation which contextualised what people were feeling and I would contextualise that within the kind of language that the institution speaks. When we organised an assembly involving lecturers and all the professional, administrative and support staff here, I would be the person to open those conversations in some way. Songs were needed because songs, even though some people think we sang to be jolly, were significant vehicles for political messages and camaraderie. Through song, we are engaging with the pain. Songs allow us to feel, they articulate the pain and allow us to calm our spirits down so that we can engage. That was my role. Also, Umhlangano

wanted to situate and position the workers who are not academic to have better working relationships and conditions and to be seen and acknowledged for what they do. In the broader spectrum, the student movement was having a conversation about the working conditions of the people, meaning pay, time and their value in general since those people are our parents.

NM: What are the different strategies that Umhlangano deployed? There were gatherings in Hiddingh Hall but there were also a number of creative interventions on campus. What, in your opinion, were the most strategic moves by Umhlangano and what are the achievements today?

KM: I think the most strategic move was setting up an alternative decolonial school, sending a message to the university that we want to protest *and* pass. We want that knowledge to be meaningful. That was our main thing in Umhlangano, which set us apart from the broader decolonial movement on upper campus. Eventually people got to understand and see why it was necessary. Our thing was that the youth of 1976 already sacrificed their education. We cannot repeat that. Our parents do not send us here to come back and say I could not finish the degree because I protested. They want you to say, I protested and then I finished. Also, this was important for one's own self-worth and value, to face the system and to live (even though the system is designed to kill you). That was a very important part. If we are saying 'protest and pass', we cannot expect this campus and the people who are heads of departments here to come up with a plan that specifies how this is going to happen because they are not interested in our well-being. So we need to sit down and think about the kind of decolonial curriculum we want? We then planned and executed a counter-curriculum.

Then the other strategy was inviting a mediator, the clinical psychologist and human rights activist Nomfundo Walaza, to mediate between ourselves and the institution. I think that that was a very important part of it because we could call usis'Nomfundo to come and mediate even between us. One of the things I said to Umhlangano is that we must remember that we are all brought together by pain. When this is over, we might not even be able to be friends. This is very real. If it is only pain that has brought us together, when the markers of pain disappear, it might be too painful to have a conversation, not because we trigger something bad but because that is where we started. Nomfundo was very instrumental in helping us understand what we felt. Helping us articulate why we were feeling it and assisting us in tracing it in our bodies. That was a very important aspect of our strategies.

Another strategy involved the public interventions, on and off campus. Umhlangano contributed creative interventions during one of the art festivals. We were activating space such that even though the world is carrying on, it must know that this is what is happening. We were not even a big group; we were about 30 people. We chose locations specifically where there is a certain type of black presence – such as the taxi rank. Also, on Long Street there is that artwork by Jacques Coetzer called *Open House* that is aimed at celebrating South Africa's democracy. We used it as one of our locations for creative interventions. In relation to this work, we were looking at hierarchies of mobility because in Cape Town there are borders. When they say *Open House*, to whom is it open? It seems cynical considering the housing crisis in South Africa. There are a lot of questions. We walked through different spaces in the city. If you walk up from downtown Long Street, those areas are seen as the black areas and as you go higher up on Long Street into Kloof, it becomes whiter. That is, the environment, the architecture, what you find there, the kind of people you find there, the foot traffic and the prices differentiate

between spaces. It is also about how spaces are occupied at different times. At 5pm, black people from townships descend into downtown from work. When I hear the word 'downtown', I think yeah it is where all the black people are. You'll see maybe two or three white people. When we went all the way up to Kloof then came back to university – it felt very different.

So people think that when you protest or intervene in certain spaces you have to be seen by a big crowd. No, the fact that the energy has moved through there means something has happened. When we move through that space now there is a different memory. You can go move through that space because you want to remember the spirit of protest because you need it wherever you need to go. Amongst ourselves, we preached self-care and self-love and what it means in a space of protest. What does it mean to self-care in a time of protest? Writing and coming up with songs, taking old songs and working with them was important for this process.

One other significant intervention that we initiated was to have a symposium. Looking at the serious conversations within Umhlangano about the notion of naming and renaming, we organised a symposium with invited speakers and performances. Additionally, we made a short film that was shown at one of the events organised by the Institute of Creative Arts. It is very difficult to say what the successes of those things are, because we are not done.

Another very important thing is that we put together a proposal to the Michaelis School of Fine Art to create a sponsorship of Umhlangano funding for black students on this campus. This would support at least one to four students throughout their schooling. If it is four years of study, it is four years of financial support. We drafted this proposal and had worked hard on it because it was a way of addressing a key question in our struggle: after all of this, what is going to happen? It was important that we imagine the future. We are going to leave this institution so what is the kind of legacy we are going to leave? There are other students who are going to come and the institution will not tell them what happened here. We had to consider the ways in which we can tell those who will come after us, to let people know, to let them remember what happened here and the kind of work Umhlangano did here. So we thought that it was important to start a scholarship that would fund one to four students or assist them financially. The idea that we initiated was to auction artists' works. We invited well-known artists who agreed. I won't mention their names. Aspire Art Auctions had agreed to do the auction free of charge. All we needed was the go-ahead from the Michaelis School of Fine Art and we wanted to do the same thing for drama. All we needed was the go-ahead. So we started with Michaelis and we never received a response from the head of department. The next thing we know, the Michaelis School of Fine Art is sending out emails that look exactly like ours, explaining a fundraising strategy towards a scholarship where artists would be invited to donate works for an auction. It was exactly the same as the description in our scholarship project. We sent two of our members to find out what was happening, to follow up. We were told by the head of department that the staff members would not sign off on it if it was coming from Umhlangano, considering the kind of reputation Umhlangano has on this campus. We could have decided to challenge the veracity of this reasoning or reframe our position to say that the proposal is not an Umhlangano proposal but it is coming from individuals: myself, uBulumko Mbete and Gerald Machona. We were the people pushing it. Now the Michaelis School of Fine Art and the head of department are framing this publicly as if it was their idea to begin with. For me, this is where it hurts because it is about institutional violence and how the institution in the decolonising context can continue to rob us of our intellectual rights and erase us through no

form of acknowledgement. Then the institution comes out as heroic, out of something they did not really think about or even initiate.

NM: There are a few issues that came up earlier in relation to the black experience, which I had said I would come back to. These had to do with spatial politics, mobility and the regulation thereof, the experience of time and space, history and imagination. While we were talking about that (in relation to *iRhanga*), you mentioned depression among black people and intensified anxieties in spaces like these. In what ways do you feel that your experience in Umhlangano was able to address those and what do you think the current black experience in this institution and particularly this location is today after the occupation of Umhlangano?

KM: First let me speak about the depression. A lot of people who are black do not even realise they are depressed and when they do, they think it is many other things. They are depressed because they are black. As a black person, one is born on the 'wrong side of the tracks'. Recently, I have been thinking about the relationship between freedom and love and this is something I am going to write about extensively one day when I write a book. One of the things that Umhlangano highlighted about depression, and among black people, is the relationship between freedom and love. I have always been fascinated by love and always write about love. One day, I remember sitting with Umhlangano and thought: how many times have we heard people saying that it is difficult to love a black womxn? How many times have we heard people saying that it is difficult to love a black person? I thought: but why is that so? Then I realised that our depression as black people comes from the denial of love historically and how this denial continues today.

Every oppressive system that we have ever encountered denies us love, it denies us self-love and loving people who look like us. If you think of slavery and the colonial era, it exploited the human bond and severed the social relationship. Here on the continent, the first time we experienced the denial of love was when people were taken away from us, put on boats, kidnapped and enslaved. As a slave, your entire being can no longer be granted some of the fundamental aspects of being human – emotions of anger, love and care. It is not only your labour that the master owns, but they own everything, your possibility, your potential, your imagination, your womb, your sperm. How then do you love? How do you love when you know men and womxn are going to go to exile? How do you love when you know your children will be in prison for speaking out? How? Constantly, everywhere you go, you are denied love, you cannot even love yourself.

When I am talking about self-love, I am talking about how we are engineered to not love ourselves. In movies, for example, there is a standard of beauty that negates us. Oppressive structures have always been in control of the image and that image is never you. We have to fight. To me it then became clear that there is a relationship between love and freedom. It is only those who are oppressed who seek freedom. It is only those who cannot love who seek love. This continues in the present – our family structures have also become a form of denial of love. When it hit me, I fell into a depression. I realised that for over 400 years we have been denied. This is part of me, this is part of what I have inherited as someone who exists in ancestral and spiritual bonds.

A recent example, the most contemporary example of this denial and social detachment, is the separation between mother and child on the border between Mexico and America that resulted from

the tightened anti-migration policies of the [Donald] Trump administration. It is outrageous. For that child, their first knowledge of the denial of love is that mothers will be taken away. The second denial is that they will always be looked at as Mexican. The third, they have to fight for the right to be American. This is what is being fought for. Freedom and love are intertwined. To fight for one, you have to fight for the other.

What happens when a black child radically loves themselves? They get killed. We see it in America, we saw it here with the student movement. Our protest started because we realised ourselves; we love ourselves enough to say no more. This is what self-love does, it compels you to choose yourself, self-love has no space for any form of violence or abuse, racial, sexual, ethnic, cultural and religious. When we resist abuse, what happens? We are called terrorists, we are being killed, we are criminalised. Considering uMam Winnie Mandela's life, that is what I see. I see a complicated conversation of love and freedom that addresses a whole generation of black womxn and black families in this country.

NM: In what ways has Umhlangano radically changed the experience of black scholars on this campus but also UCT campus in general.

KM: I think the people who were involved in Umhlangano have changed more so than those who decided to stay on the fringes as black people. I think something happened to all of us. How we look at this campus, how we look at ourselves in relation to this campus and how we look at ourselves in relation to the institution moving forward. I think most of the people involved in Umhlangano will never be afraid to speak against any institution and pinpoint the forms of violence that affect them and their creative practice. If we're looking at the entire university, I can refer to the Faculty of Health Sciences because they liaised and collaborated with us. They invited me to speak with their first- and second-year students. They also invited me to mediate and conduct a collective therapy session. From this, I garnered responses from students there; they sent me about 15 or 20 of them – images of what the students felt. I think somehow, Umhlangano will continue to live on in various ways. Students on Upper Campus always comment about Umhlangano and while this won't happen now but many years to come, I think we will be one of the case studies in examining how students came together and tried to shift the ways in which the university works on a very small campus.

NM: What is your take on the continued racial segregation or the inherited segregated spatial geography in South Africa? I ask because your work focuses on the relationships that black townships have with the central business district [CBD] in Cape Town; they retain the apartheid status as labour reserves. What do you think would be the alternative to overcoming those spatial segregations in South Africa?

KM: That is a challenging question because 1) there is the thing of *uphumile ekasi*, getting out of the black township. I am always saying to my friends I have been living outside of *ilokishi*, the township, since 2008. I say to them no one gets out until they have taken their entire family out of it. So the changes for me would be that all the people who have received Reconstruction and Development Programme houses would need to own those houses but these houses also need to be located in areas close to the CBD, not solely in black townships. You cannot change your life if you do not have

the means to acquire more capital to do so. Black people need to be paid better for the quality of work they do, not for the colour of their skin. You cannot move when you do not have the money to do so.

Gentrification needs to stop. All the spaces surrounding the city that are considered prime property are not predominantly owned by us. Where there are some people of colour still living there, they will be pushed out through economic gentrification. Rent in Cape Town needs to change. Cape Town is one of the most expensive cities when it comes to rent. Why is that? To keep black people, who are predominantly paid less, out through the economy. We don't get paid enough to be able to afford to live in certain spaces. I live in Sea Point in an apartment block of ten. We are the only people who are black so I always feel like I am constantly protesting – I am occupying at a very high rent rate. That needs to change. We need a different transport system that is safe and secure. No one considered safety and security in relation to the public transportation between the township and the city. All this needs to change. Black people get moved to far places yet work still remains in CBD areas. Perhaps they need to look at what is happening in Sea Point regarding affordable housing. There is so much land and vacant spaces which are prime property in Cape Town that could be used more effectively. There are people who live in the township, working there, spend their entire lives there but are being denied the right to fully enjoy this place. So I think affordable housing in prime spaces is key.

White people often respond to this by saying, 'but then the crime rate will go up'. I think we are just seen as always illegitimate, always the criminal; we are criminalised just for being black people. There is a white psychological shift that needs to happen if we want this country to change. It is a hierarchy of mobility in post-apartheid South Africa that dictates who can move where, when and how. There are some people who have never been in town; there are some people who have never left Cape Town to go to Johannesburg; there are some people who have never been on an airplane. It is not that they do not want to nor have the ambition or the desire.

The Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Feasibility of Making High Education and Training Fee-free in South Africa, led by Honourable Justice Jonathan Arthur Heher, recommended funding for Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) students and cost-sharing models for university students. In some ways it overlooks the inequalities in that TVET colleges usually cater for black students while universities have become the prerogative of the wealthy, who are mostly white. This is a big problem because black students become skilled workers without theory. This again puts us in a position of just providing physical, inadequately compensated labour rather than being given the space to sharpen our intellect. It reproduces a system of cultural and social fear between a black person and a white person. We must automatically fear a white person because they know so much, they are so powerful, they have an omnipresence of knowledge and everything else. White people fear that we are dangerous and we are going to kill them if we are ever educated or have some relative power. This social imaginary needs to change. The question of land cannot be stated enough. Land needs to be returned. At this point, we have been talking but it seems really difficult to change the mindsets of South Africans. Those are my thoughts.

NM: Thank you so much for your time.



In conclusion

As Cornel West (in Dillon 2008) asserts, 'justice is what love looks like in public'. What lies at the core of social unrest in South Africa is the sense that the injustice of racism and separatism in its historical and contemporary guises has diminished the sense of being fully human in the world. Racial and consumerist economic categories have become ways of determining the right and access to life. Such a dehumanising history, founded on hatred, can only be confronted through understanding the significance of justice. Curators and artists like Mbongwa as well as student movements are pointing out the ways in which systemic violence and dispossession affect one's sense of being. Mbongwa's work on South African townships as transitional spaces brings attention to the essence of South Africa's politics: the animosity arising from severed social bonds. At the heart of public protests is the lost sense of human dignity which could be realised through just ways of reclaiming land, access to quality services, good education, health and security. A love ethic, as decolonial philosophy, is founded on what it is that makes us fully human. Advocating for change in the material conditions of enduring segregationist geography in South Africa, Mbongwa shows that it is only through self-love and mass political action against racial injustice that black self-realisation and liberation can be achieved.

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Nomusa Makhubu is an art historian based at the University of Cape Town. She is the recipient of the ABSA L'Atelier Gerard Sekoto Award (2006), the Prix du Studio National des Arts Contemporain, Le Fresnoy (2014) and the First Runner Up in the Department of Science and Technology Women in Science Awards (2017). Makhubu was a fellow of the American Council of Learned Societies and an African Studies Association Presidential Fellow in 2016. In 2017, she was a Mandela-Mellon Fellow at the Hutchins Centre for African and African American Studies, Harvard University. Her research interests include African popular culture and socially engaged art.

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Khanyisile Mbongwa is a renowned curator, artist and sociologist. She has been involved with different creative and development initiatives, such as the Gugulethu Youth Development Forum and the Dance4Life and Redzebra Percussion Workshops. She was among the founding members of the art collective Gugulethu, taking part in local and international exhibitions. She established THE BINARY (a discussion group critically engaging with the black condition and marginalisation), and was part of the 2009 Cape Africa Platform Biennial, the Fringe collective Artpay, and served on the Visual Arts Network of South Africa, Western Cape. In 2011, together with concerned students at Stellenbosch University, she formed UrbanScapes, which deals with radicalising spaces through art and academics. She is the 2012 MTN New Contemporary Award winner, together with Unathi Sigenu. Mbongwa is the former executive producer of the Handspring

Trust for Puppetry Arts. She is currently Adjunct Curator of Performance at Norval Foundation and Chief Curator of the Stellenbosch Triennial.

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