

Conversations We Do Not Have

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For: Voices of Women Museum

In this edition of the *Conversations We Do Not Have* exhibition series, my intention is to highlight voices lost, gained or contained. The Voices of Women (Amazwi) Collection has at its core a collective of women's voices portrayed through text and embroidery. These narrations reflect the daily experiences that span the multiple discourses and events that shape our minds and our lives; stories that are also reflected upon in the narratives of our popular media. These works speak clearly and in an unconstrained personal manner that are mostly free of deliberate political opinion. They are stories told by women that reflect upon their deepest concerns. We should pay careful attention.

At the time of writing this, during Human Rights month, South Africans are debating heritage and history. The *Conversations We Do Not Have* has made its way to the North West Province, amidst recent convulsions around racism and national outrage against Colonial edifices that still contextualise our public spaces. Amidst these passionate public discourses, I reflect on what we as the Voices of Women can bring to this discourse. I reflect as well on Margaret Lesoma's 'broken chains' as the *Day she Will Never Forget*. The euphoric moment is captured by her very symbolic rendering of the broken 'Apartheid chains' and I wonder what became of her life.

This exhibition series takes on different personas depending on the context of each province, as well as being responsive to specific venues that frame the exhibition. The initial *Conversations We Do Not Have* exhibition of 2012, was hosted in the Alhambra room, at the Playhouse Theatre in Durban. It was a room fit for a Viennese ball, with chandeliers dripping crystal, highly polished floors and mirrored walls at the pinnacle of a wide winding red curved and carpeted staircase, reminiscent of 'Cinderella's ballroom' as the backdrop to the memories of ordinary women, defining the ultimate South African paradox of 'poverty amongst plenty'.¹ However, the presence of the women who had contributed to those embroidered narratives was significant, affirming the presence and gravity of their voices as integral to the discourse of a complex South African history.

The cornerstone of this Collection references the matter-of-fact creative narratives of ordinary women in the form of vibrantly coloured embroidery and text in a range of South African languages. This particular exhibition has the Afrikaans voice as subject. Interestingly enough the Afrikaans works currently in the Amazwi Collection are submitted by predominantly Black Afrikaans-speaking women. I hesitate to call this group, *Afrikaners*, particularly when viewed in the long historical shadow of Apartheid policies of racial exclusion. This exhibition affords another lens to re-examine this identity which is also deeply etched into the North West Province psyche. A white memory cloth with 'whites only' emblazoned across it by Zama Mthethwa: a poignant reminder that in the not so distant past, we emphasised our difference and not our similarity as ordinary people. The many narratives built into the fibre of what we collectively call: society, country, a people are recorded by women made invisible by exclusion.

Re-interrogating our individual and collective past through the locus of these and other selected artworks, focuses our attention on multiple binaries including oppressor/oppression and subjugation; ordinary and extra-ordinary; survival or quality of life; equality, democracy, colonialism, tribalism, despotism, sexism. These are portentous contestations that defy simplistic narratives in the direct, powerful narrative by Manzane Mngoma² where recounts her experience with a spitting cobra while drawing water from the river. Despite her failing eyesight she still has to draw water from the river on a daily basis. Bongie Kasikie³ speaks about her encounter with a cobra who bit her on the ankle. That

was *A Day She Will Never Forget*. Community members killed it, she recalls. She had problems with her leg, but she is fine now.

Gretta Nkosi 'talks' about her early school years learning under the trees. Her embroidery dances with light and beauty. She shares with us how she enjoyed this learning experience and that they did so well that no-one believed that they were taught under a tree. She says that they were used to it. She says that children were seldom absent from school, but were allowed to stay away on rainy days. Ms Nkosi has passed on. Significantly, her granddaughter now attends a Model C school, but has not passed her last exam.

Juxtaposing these narratives, written at different times after 1994 and as recent as 2014 within the broader context of contemporary reporting, discussion and political rhetoric, it becomes clear to me that the continued subordination of the feminine remains the subtext of our South African experience. This was once more affirmed by the predominant female audience who were engaged in discussions on the status of various gender matters at the recent Gender Summit held in Cape Town, April 2015.

There are few narratives recording rape in this Collection, yet we are repeatedly reminded of the shocking prevalence of rape throughout our social and cultural structures. The raped victim has to account for her (his) behaviour and attitude more so than the perpetrator, and women are denied the existence of their sexual self, unless it is defined and interpreted by men. Mathombi Nxumalo speaks about her experience of rape as the 'useful role of women in South Africa' and Zanele Mkhize who speaks graphically through her embroidery, painstakingly and in fine stitches, depicting her assailant who overpowers her; hovering above her, a beautifully adorned tree. (Fig x) Traditional practises has much to do with this attitude where women need to negate or subvert their true nature in order to enjoy support and nurturing within their communities; be it Christian, African traditional, Muslim or in most Western patriarchal dominated social structures.

With so many discourses on feminism written from Foucault and Freud to Woolf and MacFadden, I question where these gender practises began and if there is a single historical moment that can be declared the catalyst to this deeply etched social and cultural practise of subordination. At what point did the feminine become complicit in this complex game of deception that affirms masculine gender superiority.

The *conversation* in this exhibition is contextualised by an early 20th century *Kpan Kpan* mask resembling a market curio and representing the *Mami Wata* goddess (fig. X) as with most African artefacts, the artist is 'unknown'. The *Mami Wata* refers to the water goddess of ancient African, Egyptian mythology, referencing Eastern practises, and spiritual philosophy that embraces *the feminine* as a philosophical principle. This goddess is at once kind and gentle, sensual, as well as having the ability to inflict harm and punish when necessary. It also represents good fortune and is still deified by peoples in many West African countries and in African Atlantic areas such as Haiti. The presence of the *Mami Wata* in this exhibition attempts to regain a voice lost that is unashamedly African and *female*. These cultural and mythic ideas resonate and links to the Voices of Women embroideries that reference the daily and often traumatising rigours of life in Apartheid South Africa and beyond. They find strength and context in survival and in affirming the female voice or historical account without comprising the urgency of the larger call for the constitutional demand for equality before the law.

The metaphor of the *Mami Wata* mask is also invoked by and in conversation with, a work of Mary Stainbank: *Medusa* (fig. x). Both works speak to the prowess of *the feminine* and employ powerful, yet contained snake images. Allina Ndebele's *Tree of Life* also makes reference to the 'snake' metaphor

that emerges out of the river as symbols of wickedness or 'bad spirits' that are shown as *tokoloshes* and water snakes^[4]. While Hobbs believes that Ndebele's *Tree of Life* does not 'follow a Christian theme (but that) there are some congruencies between her Zulu saga and a Biblical narrative', that which Ndebele had revealed to her in one of many interviews^[5] on the subject. One can however, not ignore that Ndebele's missionary upbringing and traditional Zulu heritage are conflated as metaphor in this work. Images of 'snake', which references wickedness and sin as well as making oblique reference to sexuality in Christian practise, has repeated itself as a motif.

Philosophies and iconography embedded in the *Mami Wata* and *Medusa* works challenge the traditional tendency of Christianity that relegated the snake as an embodiment of evil, wickedness and sin, and instead emphasizes and affirms its traditional mystical power. It is a reminder that there will always be oppositional philosophies. The structured assault on the female and feminine principle is embodied in the gradual decline of the status of the female in general Western social and cultural structures, as well as in Africa and can be argued to run concurrent with the ascendancy of Colonial and Christian influences on the continent.

The *Conversation* exhibition series revisits the 'feminine voice' that articulates personal experience as integral to the historical narrative as a process of 'reclaiming' authority. The mythic presence of the African deity *Mami Wata* as integrated, holistic earth female metaphor of community, affirms balance as a philosophical principle; good/ evil, light/ dark, power/ economy, strength/ weakness. Concomitantly, the Christian Mary deity represents the personification of goodness as fair skinned, blue eyed, virginal, pure, untouched and above the visceral rigours of sexuality – omitting essential elements of female humanity. Contemporary manifestations of the *Mami Wata* are more overtly erotic, often represented with snake imagery or as a prostitutes, with specific reference or emphasis on sexuality and the relationships between men and women.

In a previous essay on the *Conversations We Do Not Have*, I considered the notion of the *acquiescence* of ordinary people in affirming social and cultural stereotypes of what *women are supposed to be*, where their hierarchical statuses are restricted to specific roles. Upon reflection, the complexity of this 'acquiescence' is much deeper and more layered than I imagined. Contemporary Christian influence has permeated African traditions and rendered snakes as fearsome, referencing wickedness or 'bad spirits'. In *Mami Wata* and *Medusa* the 'snake' metaphor is affirmed and powerful but entirely contained by the rendered female presence. Whereas the metaphor of 'Eve's' wickedness and subsequent guilt as a consequence of her biblical snake encounter defines another more complex and debilitating identity that plays itself out in the arcadia of the *Garden of Eden* as deceptive.

Casually examining some of the materials used by the Voices of Women in conducting its *Story Gathering Campaign*^[6], I became conscious of the sewing kits that included the *Sewing Susan* (Fig x) cards filled with differently sized needles. Another needle card features the British Navy, with *for Queen and Country* type logos. *Sewing Susan* reveals a 1940's scene of happy housewives in a group doing what they should have been doing (then). The other needle set reflects a scene of the (British) navy, emphasizing how tough these needles are. The cards are revealing within a particular cultural context and unpack the text of *women at work*, which provides an interesting contextualised gender narrative. More revealing however, is that the retro advertising prevails today. So too, the many women who have recorded their personal narratives here who continue to narrate their story, surviving their lives and raising questions that simply led to discontent and little much else.

^[5] From numerous interviews by Hobbs between 1999 and 2014

^[6] The Voices of Women (in the Story Gathering Campaign) has continued expanding their Collection to eventually have a diverse representation of women's narratives best reflecting South Africa.

Kasikie and Mngoma both remember their encounter with 'snake' as fearsome in their *Day they Will Never Forget* documents. In both instances, it is clear to the viewer that these were painful memories with serious consequences. Few are interested to hear their stories. These *Sewing Susan's* created contexts to narrate their (painful) experiences. Now everyone can hear their stories. Upon reflection these women seem not to be empowered by their experiences and are rather resigned to their lives. The element of blame has been directed at the snake. Mngoma, for instance does not question why she still has to collect water from the river where most places have running water from a tap. Instead, she focusses on her affected vision, which she believes was caused by the snake.

According to Hobbs, Ndebele's memory of lessons learned from her mother over fireside storytelling was the only opportunity and space for empowered discussion. However, what is clearly absent from our contemporary more empowered lives is the strong affirmed female presence, which assists the young to become fully articulated adults in community. Ndebele's *Tree of Life* now hovers between the two worlds of Christian and Traditional African. The labelling of the feminine knowledge base as *pagan* and *tribal* frames the larger hierarchical cultural construct and debate around greater and lesser human values and beings.

The Biblical Adam and Eve^[7] story as in *Tree of Life*, *Mami Wata* and *Medusa* philosophy, which attracted the attention of the early feminist discourse, embodies the snake metaphor of the sensual and sexual, where sexuality is openly denied and is articulated as desired social and cultural form. Considering then, this current collection of women's narratives framed by many representations of violence, grief, hardship and abuse, denied or hidden women's sexuality and pleasure persists as a hidden or repressed social form. Perhaps when asked about a *Day You Will Never Forget*, sensuality might not be considered of great importance when measuring the not so ordinary challenges of daily life.

MacFadden in her *Standpoint*^[8] essay indicates that Black women in particular do not often make the connection between their sexuality and power and as such are immersed in their own oppression, where "all too often they find themselves in a dark, dreadful place, windowless and airless, with seemingly no way out"^[9] Women, in general may find themselves repeatedly in this airless place and so to contemplate *their snake* again as integral to their narratives and voices as instruments and acknowledgement of the full-blooded women-ness, may well be premature or undesirable.

While many contemporary African spiritual practises may have retained aspects of traditional belief systems, the influence of Christianity has negated or eroded the integrity of these. These practises and often labelled as tribal, pagan and even evil. The Colonial assault on traditional belief systems and subsequent erosion of personal and collective identities is well documented. The rendition of the gender or racial *other* as dangerous, alien and to be feared, lies deep in the heart of ailing Post - Apartheid South Africans. From within these emotional and psychological chasms we are only able to view each other through vignettes and across chasms of difference.

[7] Genesis: Chapter 1- verse:)

[8] Standpoint essay

[9] MacFadden: Standpoint essay.

For instance, is Mookho Evodia Sebothelo's^[10] desire for peace (reflected through her stories of violence) any different from mine, ours or yours? In what way is Tivamile Sifundza's story of her journey in confronting the father of her baby, which he denies as a result of family pressure, any different from the many women, who raise their children alone? Do we look the other way, grateful that 'I am ok', and 'not like *her*' and 'she should have known better' and that 'school girls who fall pregnant must go away to be educated', without any mention of what the boys/men must do. Do we acquiesce and continue to create the obvious societal dis(ac)cord.

Yinka Sonibare in *Diaries of a Victorian Dandy* speaks to the Colonial adventure and alludes to the contested relationship between the traditional African and a Colonial Empire world view. This construction contributes to this complex menagerie of subjugation and loss of identity. Just twenty one (21) years after coming of age as a democracy, South Africa continues to reflect on Post-Apartheid. Various provinces, institutions, even school and here at the North West University campus continues to experience racist attacks by students upon each other.

Harkening back to the early days of the emergent Afrikaner voice, we realise that it was that which fostered the all-consuming nationalist mind-set of Apartheid. Du Toit^[11] refers in his paper on Andries Botha's *Afrikaander circa 1600: Reflections and Suggestions Regarding the Origins and Fate of Afrikaner Nationalism* to the "gutless demise of the NP only a few years after the 1994 election". He questions the absence of significant dissent or backlash from the 'ultra-right factions', which raises the questions as to whether Afrikaner nationalism was in fact really that strong and sustainable. This in turn, invokes questions about the campuses racist reactions relative to a politically transformed constitutional space. Viljoen^[12] proposes that the Afrikaner considered themselves colonised by the British and who then was cloaked with a double persona of being both colonised as well as being the colonisers during the Apartheid era. Afrikaners are thus posturing as an identity in distress, caught up in the quagmire of necessity, change and survival. In fact, if there is a South African identity, it is also in question. Recent Xenophobic attacks speak to this confusion as an inarticulate new identity captured within the *rainbow nation* cliché. Similarly the gender discourse embodies a dynamic struggling in search of a voice that is respectful of similarities and celebratory about difference.

Significantly, the absence of the female Afrikaner voice draws to attention the missing narrative of the voice then too within the Afrikaner social and political narrative. Botha, who had initiated the Amazwi Abesifazane-Voices of Women project, interrogates Afrikaner patriarchy in his work *Afrikaander circa 1600*. His preoccupation with the social discord that exists in socially constructed relationships and the abuses with which women have been dealt, especially in the lower rungs of society, draws to attention that the Voices of Women Collection began its journey with Black African women. Dr. Valerie Leigh^[13] highlights Botha's concerns of the social order when she speaks of his "site of influence as the land of the dispossessed". An often heard critique during the *Conversations* exhibitions and of the Voices of Women Collection is that the reference to these many often sad and violent stories seems to be the premise only of Black women. Reflecting on the Afrikaans narratives and work in the Collection and here on exhibition, we note that once more these pieces are of Black Afrikaans-speaking women. It is this that prompted the workshop during this period to include the voices of

[10] Mookho Evodia Sebothelo is a contributor to the Voices of Women Collection. Her story is reflected in the First edition catalogue, *Conversations We Do Not Have*, published, 2014

[11] André Du Toit (2008) 'Afrikaander circa 1600': Reflections and Suggestions Regarding the Origins and Fate of Afrikaner Nationalism, *South African Historical Journal*, 60:4, 562-578, DOI: 10.1080/02582470802622586 To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10>

[12] Viljoen, Louise: POSTCOLONIALISM AND RECENT WOMEN'S WRITING IN AFRIKAANS, Stellenboch University

[13] Dr. Valerie Leigh: Phd: Andries Botha-Creativity in a context of change

Afrikaner women. These women are also conscious of their absent narrative here, though Afrikaans women have been substantially represented by writers such as Elsa Joubert, Ingrid Jonker and Antjie Krog, amongst others.

Reflecting on Botha's *Bloodlines* portfolio, we cannot but be made conscious of the distinct and particular social experience of predominantly Black women where the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) provided a political vehicle for testimony of some of the horrendous crimes committed against men and women during the Apartheid era. These were torturous inscriptions reminiscent of horror movie stories while many South Africans continued to live in ignorance of these deadly tragedies. Botha displays the negated faces of the 'five men of Vlakplaas' which echo the eerie reality and contradiction of white men so needlessly oppressing and violating the women who so often nurtured them. These self-destructive tendencies reveal the very heart of this never-ending South African tragedy. Reading this work in the collective space, shared with Siopis's *Baartman* and Kasikie's and Mngoma's narrations, amongst others, they speak simultaneously and equally about that which should never have happened and reflect on the impact of unfettered power and of ignorance chosen or imposed.

The *Conversations* series can quite easily become morose and defeatist, but closer examination of Memorial Biyela's *Victory*, leads one to conclude that there is strength and victory that emanates from discord and the right to speak and create exists, even as a process of reclamation. This imposing work, *Victory* is compelling as a journey reflected in its contours; fearsome as it embodies the pain and torment that accompanies anyone on an introspective, reflective process. Biyela, a middle-aged woman living in rural KwaZulu Natal, has strong Christian beliefs. She has celebrated the crucifixion metaphor through the outstretched arms of her victorious woman-cum-creature. The dismembered bowels are reminiscent of extreme pain and loss, asking the viewer to share or reflect on either their own or her understandings of trauma. The embodiment of the animal in the ostrich type legs and butterfly wings rendered in metal, speak to the close association with the natural environment and the use of the African totemic animal metaphor to denote identity as strength, speed and agility as well as transformation.

Distortion is at once a point of fascination and abhorrence where we are once again confronted with *the other* in Penny Siopis' eulogy to Saartje Baartman - *Prospect: Saartje Baartman*. In contrast to previous turn of the century renditions of Baartman, this work venerates her, appraising her dignity, despite the heavily textured surface that contemplates wounded-ness with its overlaid lines of identity like fingerprints.

This shared metaphorical space of memory and visual creativity reminds us of who we are and could become and is creatively transcribed by ordinary women and established artists alike. This equal space considers a land we all share and occupy in all of its complexity. Memory serves to record, commemorate and remind us of who we were and can be.

Should we pay careful attention?

References available on request