Towards a Decolonial Feminist Performance Praxis: An Exploration of Performance and Women's Leadership in Botswana

by

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Abstract:

This dissertation reflects on a research process that explores how performance can foster women's leadership in Botswana. The process began with the question, "where are the women," which in turn grew out of curiosity about what happens to women between the time they leave the classroom and the time they enter the workplace that stops them from ascending to leadership positions. In its 2019 report, Emang Basadi found that social responsibilities, socialization, lack of financial support, the electoral system (first-past-the-post) and ambivalence in the constitution worked together to diminish women's capacity to participate in political leadership specifically. The research process focused on issues of socialization, taking a particular interest in the narratives around women and leadership, and women's voice.

To explore how performance can foster women's leadership the process used performance-as-research, incorporating performance creation, interviews and focus groups. The performance creation resulted in five performances that investigated different themes related to the question, "where are the women?" Performance creation also allowed for the exploration of this question with other women. Interviews, focus groups, and post-performance discussions to were conducted between 2018 and 2020 to unpack issues of gender equity with a broader cross section of people. The common issues discussed in these platforms were cultural oppression and socialization, as well as financial support (or lack thereof), and playing multiple roles. Another recurring issue was that of women not supporting each other. This issue was addressed by working with women-only groups, a strategy I started employing in 2017.

The performance creation also explored the use of traditional performance forms to foster intergenerational dialogue and develop a deeper understanding of Botswana cultural beliefs and practices. This stemmed from Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí's seminal research, in which she asserts that

gender stratification as we understand it today is a colonial inheritance. Oyěwùmí's assertions challenged the assumption that African cultures necessarily oppress women, and to try to understand my culture from its own perspective. A core part of the research process was developing a decolonial feminist performance praxis which is a way of being and doing in the world that is cognizant of how the intersections of race, gender, colonization, and imperialism impact gender equity in Botswana as a post-colonial country. Looking at Botswana culture and trying to understand it from its own perspective calls for a consideration of how the history of women's leadership may have been erased. Thus, a decolonial feminist performance praxis provided is a lens through which to see the ways that culture intermeshes with colonial domination to erase women's spaces and women's leadership, casting women as perpetual victims in the post-colonial state.

By exploring the question "where are the women?" through performance-as-research, this research process focused on the ephemeral aspects of gender inequity, to find the things women feel and experience but cannot always name or touch, and to connect those things to language. This dissertation reflects on the process of developing a decolonial feminist performance praxis, which involves telling women's stories, creating women's spaces, and conducting an intersectional analysis of the barriers that women face to find agency and sovereignty amongst women. That is, to allow women to speak about themselves, for themselves and as themselves.

Preface

This dissertation is an original work by Lebogang Disele-Pitso. The research project, of which this dissertation is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name: TOWARDS A DECOLONIAL FEMINIST PERFORMANCE PRAXIS, no. Pro00081686, August 14, 2018.

Dedications

To my grandmother, Keikitse Disele and my mother-in-law, Gladys Mali Pitso, it breaks my heart that you did not live to see this moment. But since you both taught me the power of resilience, let me rather say, by way of E.E. Cummings:

> "i carry your heart with me (i carry it in my heart)
> i am never without it (anywhere i go you go, my dear[s]);
> and whatever is done by only me is your doing, my darling[s]…" (source: poetryfoundation.org, retrieved 30 April 2020)

To my mother, Keresepe Badisa, I love you. Thank you for everything.

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Zooming Out

Late 2015: students at the University of Cape Town successfully petition for the removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes from UCT's upper campus, #RhodesMustFall. I am impressed but also mildly disappointed. I feel that they are addressing a symptom of, rather than the disease (dis-ease) that is structural racism. I am wrong. Later in the same year, they start the #FeesMustFall campaign, which turns into a nationwide protest against the increase of tuition fees at major tertiary education institutions. The rage has finally burst.

In Durban the rage bursts through violent attacks on Black African foreign nationals. Although xenophobia-related violence is not new, these attacks make news headlines because of their country-wide scale and orchestration.

In response to #FeesMustFall the government steps in to cover the tuition shortfall for 2016. Universities begin to reflect on systemic barriers to access to education for Black students. You can't talk about systemic barriers and not talk about racism. The conversation turns to decolonization.

2016: I observe from Canada as another round of #FeesMustFall protests erupt in response to proposed fee increases for the 2017 academic year. This time, the students are met with police brutality. It's the 40th anniversary of the 1976 Soweto Student Uprising, 22 years into South Africa's Democracy.

In Botswana a young girl is impregnated by a ruling party councillor, leading to the #IShallNotForget campaign and march (the same Councillor ran for elections again in 2019 — clearly, we forgot). It's the 50th anniversary of Botswana's independence.

In the United States Donald Trump is elected president. It feels like democracy is failing.

2017: #MenAreTrash explodes onto Facebook following the killing of a young, South African woman, Karabo, by her partner in April. The campaign starts in South Africa, but quickly spreads to Botswana. Not all men get it, they say #NotAllMen and that men are our fathers. We know.

A young woman is assaulted at the Gaborone bus rank for not being dressed "appropriately." There is no political response. Some women and allies take to the streets with #IwearWhatIWant.

Contrary to popular opinion, Trump lasts more than 100 days in office (in fact he survived impeachment charges to serve a full term, and then later survived impeachment charges for inciting riots at the White House (Kendall). #MeToo leads to numerous disclosures about sexual assault and rape, both in the United States, and around the world.

2018: The year of the woman.

Zimbabweans go to the polls to elect a new president after long time ruler, Robert Mugabe is ousted in a coup. His former vice-president, Emerson Mnangagwa, wins the election. So much for a coup.

South African women activists organize #TheTotalShutdown, a nationwide campaign to shut down economic activity on August 1st , South African women's month, to protest increasing violence against women.

Botswana political parties host primary elections in preparation for the 2019 elections. Pelonomi Venson-Moitoi, one of only five women MPs, says she is retiring, then decides she wants to be President. Bogolo Kenewendo, another of the five female MPs, does not contest for a ticket much to the disappointment of youth and women (or maybe it's just my disappointment as a youth and a woman?) The Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) Women's Wing say they endorse the current President, Dr. Mokgweetsi Eric Masisi.

2019: Cyril Ramaphosa is elected President of South Africa.

The current and the former Presidents of Botswana become embroiled in a public battle. Dr. Moitoi loses her campaign for BDP party chairmanship. Former President, Dr. Lieutenant General Seretse Khama Ian Khama leaves the ruling party to endorse a new party, the Botswana Patriotic Front, which allies itself with the Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC). I am disappointed by this move. To my mind it diminishes the credibility of the UDC. I ask myself what the women in the UDC have to say about all this—they seem oddly quiet. The political landscape seems chaotic. I watch from Canada as I try to make sense of it all.

September is a dramatic month for the SADC region. The World Economic Forum takes place in Cape Town. Women protest outside the headquarters. Amid the protests, the rape and murder of Uyinene Mrwetyana makes headlines: she was locked in the post office in broad daylight. The post office is next to a police station. A memorial is held for her at UCT, my alma mater. In Johannesburg, another round of xenophobic attacks breaks out. There are reports of people being burned alive in the streets, being attacked in the city center. That is new.

President Cyril Ramaphosa comes on the news saying rapists should get life sentences. I am annoyed. It seems very little. But since it is more progressive than anything happening in my own country, perhaps I should take several seats…?

Robert Mugabe passes away. I am not sure how to react. "Rest in Peace" seems like a betrayal of all the people who have suffered under his regime; not to say it seems to go against not speaking ill of the dead. I keep quiet. The Zimbabwean economy is grinding to a halt due to uncontrolled inflation.

2020: SARS-CoV-2 aka Coronavirus aka Covid-19. The world all but shuts down as numerous countries declare states of emergency and/or go into lockdown to "flatten the curve" i.e., reduce the spread of the disease.

The pandemic finds me in Botswana, the lockdown starts at the beginning of April. Within a few days the government extends the state of emergency from 21 days to six months. By the end of May everybody seems to have given up on flattening the curve and begin to lift restrictions as economic needs start to override health concerns. I am glad my kids are in Canada where online schooling continues but am worried about nieces, nephews and siblings who must return to brick and mortar schooling in Botswana. I think about the many women who work long hours and use public transport—what will the extended commute times mean for them?

2020 is turning out to be a busy year. A video of another Black man, George Floyd, being killed by police in the US goes viral, sparking protests against systemic racism, anti-Black violence and police brutality in the US and other Western countries.

I am amused by an article stating that Serena Williams' husband is relinquishing his seat on the board of Reddit and calling for the company to replace him with a Black member (Hatmaker and Lunden). Right. Tokenism is the answer to systemic racism, right? He is also reported to be donating money to Know Your Rights, an organization founded by Colin Kaepernick—the NFL

player who has been unemployed since 2017 because he refused to stand during the American National Anthem, instead taking a knee in protest of police brutality (Streeter). I don't mean to come for this guy, but George Floyd's death comes 8 years after the murder of Trayvon Martin (CNN). I feel like Black people been outchea, and only now corporates are starting to "take action." I am even more amused by a L'Oréal Instagram post: "Speaking out is Worth It" (L'Oréal Paris). The same L'Oréal that fired Black, trans model, Munro Bergdof, for speaking out against white supremacy and systemic racism. Waitse kana… Leso legolo ditshego[1]*. #RememberMunro. #BlackLivesMatter.*

I am less amused by the silence from African governments on this matter… #DecolonialityAMust.

July: Botswana's Leader of Opposition, Dumelang Saleshando, is suspended from the National Assembly for a week following his refusal to recant a statement in which he accused the president of corrupt practices in the awarding of national tenders during the nationwide lockdown that took place in April 2020. The following day Opposition MPs, except Wynter Mmolotsi of the Alliance for Progressives, boycott the National Assembly (Lebanna 2020). The National Assembly continues without opposition MPs, despite Honourable Mmolotsi's attempts to highlight why his colleagues in the opposition are boycotting parliamentary proceedings—namely that the national assembly is undemocratic because the ruling party can pass motions without the input of opposition MPs since they hold a voting majority. Mmolotsi's words seem to fall on deaf ears.

August: Honourable Yandani Boko tables a motion to request that "the President set up a commission of inquiry on gender-based violence, rape and other sexual violences". Minister of Nationality, Immigration and Gender Affairs, Annah Mokgethi, requests that the motion be debated the following week and the rest of the session is spent debating whether or not to defer the motion (Motlhoka; Nchunga, "Gender-Based Violence Urgent").

2021: Finally! A regime change in America, but not without more Trump drama, including refusing to leave office and inciting a riot. I think that he went too far, but even then, the riots at Capitol Hill were not enough to take (decisive) action against him. Is American democracy dead? Was it ever real?

Yoweri Museveni is "re-elected" president of Uganda. Maybe it's not just American democracy that is dead…? The good news in all this mess is that Kamala Harris is elected vice president of the United States, one in a series of historical wins in US politics in 2020 (Haynes).

April: Back in Botswana, the new financial year begins with a third State of Emergency, an increase in Value Added Tax (VAT), the introduction of a sugar tax, an increase in the fuel levy, an increase in electricity tariffs, and an increase in the petrol price. I want to cry. Making Botswana a high-income country seems to be premised on charging citizens more. Nothing about providing more jobs though. Or improving health care. Or improving education. At least they are rolling out Covid-19 vaccinations…

As I head back to Canada, Derek Chauvin is convicted for the murder of George Floyd (Shapiro). It's a small victory, but a victory nonetheless. A new Covid-19 variant, the Delta Variant, sends India into a crisis, and by default all other countries because India is a major producer of vaccines. Botswana's vaccination campaign hits a halt.

[1] Roughly, "You know… We laugh so we don't cry"

May: Israel launches fresh attacks on Gaza (BBC News). The fighting results in the deaths of at least 67 children (El-Naggar et al.). Once again, there is not much of a response besides condemnation, reminding me how small a victory Chauvin's conviction was. I long for a similar response to George Floyd's death—#NoJusticeNoPeace must extend beyond anti-Black racism.

In Canada, I am able to get vaccinated whereas in Botswana my age group is yet to qualify. Here, they must incentivize people to get vaccinated. There, teachers have not been vaccinated, despite their being listed as essential service workers and their increased exposure due to contact with students. We are starting to count the people we know who have died from Covid-19.

The remains of 215 children are found at the site of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School. I am stunned into silence. I am particularly disappointed by reports that the federal government rejected a funding request to identify burial site locations for children who went to residential schools (Dangerfield). A coordinated effort such as this, and knowledge of ongoing investigations, could have better prepared Indigenous communities for these kinds of findings. The discovery leads to renewed calls to locate and identify burial sites. There is also renewed energy amongst Indigenous communities to make sure this work is done.

July: Alberta is "Open for Summer." Ok, but why are masks no longer mandatory when being vaccinated does not stop us from getting Covid and children under 12 do not yet qualify for vaccination? I go through the summer with bated breath, but it is also hard to stay vigilant. While I cautiously enjoy the summer in Alberta, my people in Botswana are living in a State of Emergency and under constant threat of lockdown.

Former South African President, Jacob Zuma, hands himself over to the police and is arrested for being in contempt of court (Everatt). Protests break out in South Africa, especially Kwa-Zulu Natal, leading to looting and xenophobic attacks. Some analysts start to suspect that such violence is not "spontaneous," and should not only be blamed on poverty and unemployment.

The African Union marks the 18th year anniversary of the Maputo Protocol (Equality Now).

September: President Mokgweetsi Masisi does not extend the State of Emergency. He also leaves no restrictions in place. Apparently, Botswana is also open for the summer.

November: South African scientists identify a new variant of Covid-19. It is labelled Omicron. Western countries react quickly, banning travel from countries in the Southern African region even though cases are identified in other countries without travel to that region. Hmmm…

2022: Already? As we approach the second-year anniversary of the pandemic, the endlessness of it makes it difficult to feel a transition from 2021 to 2022.

January: The UK lifts the restrictions they had put in place to curb the spread of Covid-19. Ummmm….?

February: A convoy of truckers travels through Canada to Ottawa in protest of new vaccine mandates. The Alberta government starts lifting Covid-19 restrictions in the province. A wave of strikes by university staff also takes over the province as the government proposes further cuts in post-secondary funding.

Russia invades Ukraine. The US, UK, and EU impose sanctions and "send help" but otherwise do not get directly involved…

March: We mark the second-year anniversary of WHO declaring Covid-19 a pandemic with the lifting of most restrictions, including mask mandates. I am holding my breath hoping that this does not backfire on us…

April: the war in Ukraine is still ongoing. Fuel prices are a mess, food prices are going up. The Bank of Canada increases the interest rates in response to high inflation.

In Botswana, the President announces new ministries and ministry portfolios as part of a rationalization process. The gender portfolio moves from Labour and Home Affairs to join Youth, Sport, and Culture. It feels like a big portfolio has been added to a ministry with three big portfolios, but I guess the devil is in the detail. We will see how the implementation goes.

June: It's all but back to business as usual – covid protocols have gone from mandates to strong recommendations. It is hard not to be afraid. There is a new illness making the rounds: Monkeypox. When will it end?

The US Supreme Court overturns Roe vs. Wade. It strikes me that although Trump was not re-elected, his legacy remains. Saying that aloud makes it seem obvious.

July: The pope visits Canada on a "penitential pilgrimage" "to encounter, to listen, to apologize". It is seen as an important step, but also as just that – a step. (Jamieson)
British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson resigns following outrage for his appointment of a politician who was accused of sexual misconduct (Kirka et al.)

August: Donald Trump is back in the headlines, this time for holding classified documents at a private residence. How is this possible?

September: Queen Elizabeth dies at the age of 96, after 70 years as Queen. I am ambivalent about her actual passing. I am disappointed by comments about her "global impact," and remarks about her relationship with Africa without any acknowledgement of the atrocities that were carried out by colonial regimes under her reign. The failure to see and understand that racialization, racism, imperialism, and colonialism are intertwined and play out in very real ways in people's lives is overwhelming.

October: Liz Truss resigns as British Prime Minister, 44 days after being elected. Rishi Sunak is elected in her place, becoming the first British Asian and racialized person to hold the position (Reid and Ward-Glenton; CBC News; A. Smith). Trevor Noah has a lot to say about this. I love it, but not everyone does and the first thing they do is compare him to his white predecessor, hmmm…

November: Did Donald Trump really just announce that he will run for president again? REALLY?!

December: China announces an end to their "Zero-Covid" policy and begin lifting restrictions.

The House select committee investigating the January 6, 2021, attack on Capitol Hill (dubbed the January 6th Committee) release their report and refer Trump to the justice department. They also recommend barring him from ever holding office again (Cohen et al.) - thank goodness! Perhaps democracy will prevail…

2023: How?! Time is such a lie.

January: China opens its boarders for international travel. On the one hand they are criticized, on the other tourism and hospitality operators are hopeful for the boost this can bring to their enterprises.

It comes to light that classified documents were found at one of Joe Biden's private offices in November. A second batch is found at a different location (Zurcher). And a third batch at yet

another. Really Joe?! SMH. Oh, but that's not all, classified files are found at former Vice President, Mike Pence's home (Gangel et al.). Is this some kind of joke? Any other country…

Meanwhile, in the midst of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Ukrainian officials have found ways to profit.

Zooming In: Working Through

I am trying to work through how personal and public narratives, cultural beliefs, political interests intermesh to impede women's political participation and representation, how advances in women's rights inform advances in women's leadership, and how we seem to have reached a stalemate. I hate to quote Shakespeare but, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." What is it?

Chapter 1: Introduction

This study began with the question, "Where are the women," and an impulse to understand the lack of female representation in positions of power, especially in parliament, in Botswana. Despite notes by political commentators that women make up the majority of the electorate in Botswana, the 2019 election featured only 11 female parliamentary candidates out of a total of 210 candidates. Out of the 11 that contested, only three were elected while an additional four were appointed as specially elected members of parliament (Chikura, para.6). This brought the number of women MPs to 7 out of 63 parliamentarians (11.1%), a marginal increase from 8.7% following the 2014 elections (Chikura, para.5), and a continued drop since the late 90s and early 2000s when women's representation in parliament reached 15-18% (Bauer 25; Mmeso, para.4). All the women elected were from the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP), confirming Ntibiyane's observation that no women from opposition parties have ever won a seat in parliament (para.8).

Noting the lack of improvement in women's representation, Emang Basadi, the organization associated with the women's movement in Botswana, asked a similar question to mine in their 2019 report, "Mme O Kae?" (Where is the woman?). They found that while women account for 55% of registered voters and tend to be at the forefront of grassroots campaigning, a lack of funding resources, cultural limitations, an unfavourable electoral system, and an ambivalent constitution make it difficult to get women running for office (4–10; Genderlinks, "Women's Fight for Equal Representation," para.5; Ntibiyane, paras.9–10). Emang Basadi further point to a lack of willingness, both by Government and individual parties, to address

these barriers. In response, Emang Basadi and other advocate groups have called for the use of gender quotas and a change in the electoral system from first-past-the-post (FPTP) to proportional representation because countries that use such measures have higher numbers of female representation (Genderlinks, "Women's Fight for Equal Representation," para.5). However, these measures are not sufficient as political representation alone is not enough to address systemic barriers, especially where they emanate from cultural limitations. To do so requires continuous action and advocacy. Francesca Polleta suggests as much when she states:

> The achievement of political representation for members of an aggrieved group, whether women, African Americans, lesbians or people with disabilities, is widely viewed as an indicator of movement success. And yet, challengers are inevitably disappointed by the yields of institutional participation. Representatives often find themselves fighting off criticism by activists who allege their cooptation. At the same time, they must persuade, cajole, and challenge their political colleagues to implement policies that benefit a constituency with little clout. (434)

The situation in Botswana is a good example of this. In 1986 when Emang Basadi was founded it was due to the realization of the ways Botswana laws discriminated against women, especially the Citizenship Act of 1982 (Leslie 50; Bauer 28; Van Allen, "What Are Women's Rights Good For?" 100). Emang Basadi was also founded out of a desire to politicize women's issues (Molokomme 848). While Emang Basadi was successful in advocating for legal reform the organization "later encountered serious difficulties when they tried to use the law to challenge personal power relations between men and women" (Van Allen, "What Are Women's Rights Good For?" 98). Further, several Emang Basadi activists were later absorbed into government (Bauer 30). Despite the formation of the Department of Gender Affairs and the introduction of a

gender policy, there has been very little change by way of structural reforms. Echoing Polletta above, van Allen warns that given the social status of the women who have since been involved in government, they could act to preserve their own class interests rather than using their position to advance women's rights ("Bad Future Things" 162). This is reflected in political parties' failure to include women's issues in their campaign manifestoes since the early 2000s. The inability of women to influence party agendas in the political sphere means that women are physically present but are not necessarily speaking about issues that affect them in national politics. As such quotas and programs that have been put in place to get more women into political leadership are not sufficient as a gender-balanced cabinet does not necessarily guarantee respect for women's rights and agency. The high levels of rape and gender-based violence in neighbouring South Africa, despite the high proportion of women members of parliament and cabinet ministers, are a clear example of this. Thus, for there to be societal and political change we need to go beyond having women physically present in leadership to make sure women have a *voice* in the positions they hold.

Ida Mokeretane attributes Botswana women politicians' inability to address gender issues to the lack of autonomy of political party women's wings. This lack of autonomy means that women's wings are unable to include issues in their parties' election campaign manifestoes. The inability of women's wings to influence party manifestoes also means there is a lack of support for women candidates within party structures. To date, no political party has a definitive gender policy to ensure that women are nominated to represent the party in either council or parliamentary elections (Emang Basadi 5; Mokeretane). While women mobilize politically, it appears that we have not been able to mobilize as a political group since the late 90s to early 2000s, resulting in a downward trend for women's representation (Bauer 25).

Another reason for a lack of (a unified) voice is the inability of women to network across party lines. At the height of Emang Basadi's activism it was able to influence the Botswana National Front (BNF) to include women's issues in its manifesto (Leslie 55), while in 2004 the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) included women's issues in theirs. Emang Basadi accomplished this by producing electoral manifestoes prioritizing women's issues (Bauer 28), resulting in a strong women's plank on the BNF manifesto and the election of four women MPs in 1994 (Van Allen, "Bad Future Things" 156). The 1999 electoral manifesto was strengthened by the launch of an annual women's conference which encouraged women to vote for women or candidates who supported women's issues (Van Allen, "Bad Future Things" 160). Emang Basadi's activism also included training workshops to encourage women to run for office. These were later handed over to the Botswana Caucus of Women in Politics (BCWP), however, over time they did not achieve the desired outcomes as participation began to dwindle due to tensions about the perceived dominance of Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) members (Bauer 29). Bauer also notes how, at the last BCWP meeting she attended, a male politician all but blamed the women for not running for office (46). This is a prevailing narrative, reflected in statements such as, "women outnumber men." However, this does not account for the structural barriers that women face, in Botswana and elsewhere.

I believe that getting women's voices in leadership can be aided by inserting their narratives into public spaces. Women's movements are an example of how inserting women's narratives into public spaces can foster women's leadership. Since Emang Basadi has been in abeyance (Bauer 36) there has been a downward trend in not only the representation of women in parliament but of women's issues in election campaign manifestoes (Mokeretane). Although Emang Basadi focused on legal and political reform, I argue that the visibility of its leaders also

challenged patriarchal constructions of leadership, which continue to place men at the center of public spaces, positioning men as natural leaders while relegating women to private spaces. It is my view that to be able to address gender parity, we need to accept women as belonging in the public space and facilitate their voices being heard in such spaces.

I posit performance as a way of inserting women's voices into the public narrative, advocating for them as belonging in the public space. This dissertation reflects on my exploration of how to use performance to foster women's leadership. Such a consideration is also an exploration of women's experiences of/with leadership. I am interested in the internal barriers that women face: what are the conversations that women are having with themselves and with each other? What are the implications of these conversations for how women make sense of and navigate their lived experiences? How can those of us interested in women's advancement magnify these conversations to discuss why women do not appear to be vying for leadership positions? How do we move/work through these questions to achieve gender equity? These conversations are necessary for not only getting women into leadership positions but heard in decision making spaces. I contend, then, that performance addresses women's representation to facilitate their fuller incorporation into the public space.

I take representation as a multi-layered term; to represent, as in stand for or speak for someone, to represent as in to show images of someone, and to re-present as in to show again and to show differently. The lack of women representatives in parliament and other structures of leadership is affected by the images of women we present. It is for this reason that I am attempting to make a connection between women's leadership and performance. I say attempting because the projects I have undertaken during this research process are only a beginning, a strategy for moving forward together as women in the theatre in Botswana and for creating a

space to unpack how what we do in our work can affect what happens in the socio-political realm.

I am informed by multiple complementary frameworks (Macharia 128), namely gender studies, particularly Black, African, and intersectional feminisms; post-colonial and decolonial studies; studies on women's leadership, women and leadership, and women in leadership; and performance studies.

Conceptual Framework:

Women and/in Leadership, Women's Movements:

One of the earliest studies on women's leadership is Rosalind Miles' *Women and Power* (1985). Miles states that women's ascension to power has been derailed by external barriers such as a lack of access to education, as well as fears of "the loss of womanhood" resulting from the negative portrayals of women in power (7). She also cites an "assumption that only the exceptional woman ever makes it to the top" as another damaging myth (*ibid*). Miles further notes that despite the increase of women running for office, most women seem to be taking up leadership in other spaces—mostly business—where they can make a more positive impact (25).

Several authors have also advanced different terms to describe the contraction of rights following advances made by women's and feminist movements. In the 1980s, Susan Faludi described the resistance to women's rights during the Reagan administration as a "backlash" which she described as "an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-worn victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women" (xviii). Rejecting this idea, Kathleen Jamieson Hall proposed the idea of double binds instead, arguing that "to perceive gains for women as inevitably thwarted by crippling backlashes is to take on ourselves the role of the permanently shackled," (8). Jamieson Hall describes double binds as "a rhetorical construct that

posits two and only two alternatives, one or both penalizing the person being offered them" (14). She sees double binds as a way to describe the barriers that women continue to face while acknowledging advances in women's rights. I see double binds and backlash as complementary. On the one hand, Jamieson Hall rejects the victimhood often imposed on women; in so doing, she resists a portrayal of femininity that is premised on dependency and lack of agency. On the other hand, the concept of a backlash helps name deliberate attempts to impede advances made by women and other equity seeking groups. Backlash reminds us to be critically aware of the systemic nature of oppression and the ways it reinvents itself.

For her part, Jocelyn M. Boryczka talks about women as "suspect citizens" and proposes moving the notions of virtue and vice to the center to "spotlight how morality frames women's paradoxical relationship to political power" (2). Virtues focus on ideal femininity or "traditional womanhood" and include piety, chastity, and modesty; vices include promiscuity and infidelity. Boryczka argues that virtues facilitate the "mobilization of backlash politics against women's progress toward equality and freedom" (2). The notions of virtue and vice demonstrate the complementarity of double binds and backlashes. Jamieson Hall names five double binds:

1. Brain/womb – women can exercise their wombs or their brains, but not both.
2. Silence/shame – women who speak out are immodest and will be shamed, while women who are silent will be ignored or dismissed.
3. Sameness/difference – women are subordinate whether they claim to be different from men or the same.
4. Competence/femininity – women who are considered feminine will be judged incompetent, and women who are competent unfeminine.

5. Age/invisibility – as men age, they gain wisdom and power; as women age they wrinkle and become superfluous. (16)

She adds that "in a latter-day bind, women who succeed in politics and public life will be scrutinized under a different lens from that applied to successful men, and for longer periods of time" (*ibid).* Jamieson Hall goes on to link double binds with specific constructs, namely:

1. the no-choice-choice – brain/womb
2. the self-fulfilling prophecy – silence/shame
3. the no-win situation – sameness/difference
4. the unrealizable expectation – femininity/competence
5. double standard – age/invisibility. (17)

I see double binds as couched in female virtues and vices, which are used to mobilize backlash. Speaking to the situation in Botswana, Judith van Allen proposes "gender cultures" to refer to what she describes as a "zone of friction between rights discourses and lived realities," (Van Allen, "What Are Women's Rights Good For?" 99). I believe the notion of a zone of friction captures the push-pull dynamic between double-binds, virtues/vices, and backlash. This zone of friction arises because "African women are creating their own and new meanings as they attempt to challenge and change inequalities of gender regimes" (Van Allen, "What Are Women's Rights Good For?" 99). Van Allen uses Women and Law in Southern Africa (WLSA) as an example of how gender cultures operate. Recognizing the zone of friction, WLSA made changes in their campaign for gender equity to move from a "legal centralist approach" that focused on "individual women's statutory rights" to "a pluralist concept of law that includes customary law" to account for, and even use, culture and tradition to advocate for women's rights (Van Allen, "What Are Women's Rights Good For?" 104–05). WLSA's change in

approach was precipitated by a realization that they were trying to apply "rights originally created for white men of property in the North to the lives of African women today," rights that "in the context of colonial distortions [came to] reflect the interests of the male elite" while failing to account for the erosion of women's precolonial and economic rights (Van Allen, "What Are Women's Rights Good For?" 105). The shifts WLSA made in their strategy demonstrate the need to both attend to structural inequities and advocate for law and policy change to bring about social transformation. WLSA's "synthesis of customary and general law" (Van Allen, "What Are Women's Rights Good For?" 105) reflects the views of African gender scholars theorizing about the status of women in Africa. Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, in particular, has called for a consideration of the impact of colonization on women's status and rights (256), suggesting that the consideration of women's rights in postcolonial societies must interrogate the nation state itself.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Franz Fanon warned against letting the elite classes take leadership of the post-colonial state as this would lead to "bourgeois nationalism," and not redress the inequalities wrought by colonization (Lazarus 199). That is, independence would not result in (real) decolonization. In 1975, Peter Ekeh confirmed Fanon's prophecy, noting that the African bourgeoise only aspired to prove that they are the same as, not better than, their European counterparts. Instead, post-colonial African states have maintained European forms of education, administration, and technology (102). Ekeh adds that a key part of the colonial process was discrediting African institutions and knowledge systems (97). Awam Amkpa elaborates on this as follows, "Colonialism and European languages were not simply imposed on people, but also reorganized social relations, reinvented ethnicities, and sparked off varying cultural practices that identified and disidentified with its hegemonies" (119). In addition to

arguing for an end to colonialism on the basis that African elites were the same as their European counterparts, liberation struggles failed to account for the erosion of women's rights and social status due to colonialism. This is reflected in the fact that, "the end of the liberation and nationalist struggles in the 1970s was characterized by the popular injunction for women to retreat from the public sphere, take on the role of caregiver and 'rebuild communities'" (Akin-Aina 78). Sinmi Akin-Aina notes that women readily answered the call, only to find that their concerns were not addressed in national agendas (78, 81). The removal of women from the public space and the separation of the roles traditionally ascribed to them from political action suggests that a consideration of women's leadership and women in leadership needs to go beyond the present moment to account for the way that modern day politics are constructed to exclude women from leadership roles.

Mbugua wa-Mũngai adds that the removal of women (and youth) from the public space has perpetuated a "conception of public space … as one exclusively for male occupation" and "leadership as a male institution" (wa Mũngai 86). He notes how state-sanctioned images of Dedan Kimati, a Kenyan "liberation war icon," tend to age him and argues that this delegitimizes youth leadership while vesting state power in the idea of eldership (79). Similarly, he notes how prominent female Kenyan leaders have not been iconified because they "are perceived as challenging male stranglehold on state power…" (84). Wa-Mũngai's point about women leaders provides an example of how the African post-colony has been reproduced as a patriarchal state by perpetuating a (elderly) male-centered narrative. Despite women's activism in liberation movements, their contributions in shaping the post-colonial state have not been as readily accepted. I contend that this is a key contributing factor in our failures to achieve gender parity in leadership and is one of the reasons I use performance to address issues around gender equity.

The systemic exclusion of women from the public space is defined by Johan Gultang as structural violence (Mukherjee et al. 593). I contend that the post-colonial state enacts violence on women's bodies, literally and figuratively, creating internal barriers that work in concert with external barriers to silence women and conceal their experiences. These barriers are reinforced by media representations, as wa-Mũngai suggests when he states, "when [male] eldership becomes one of the dominant narratives of the state, as is the case in Kenya, a concomitant demand is made of citizens to aspire to a particular, patriarchal identity" (76). Further, the removal of women from the public space renders women's issues as private issues, further concealing their experiences. As such, initiatives focusing on women's leadership need to go beyond quotas to address and mitigate the culture of silencing and erasure that mediates women's lived experiences. Performance provides an opportunity to challenge constructions of leadership that privilege masculinity and to re-present women's issues as public issues.

Aili Mali Tripp and her colleagues state that, "[t]here needs to be a conjuncture of developments, including the rise of autonomous women's movements, the end of societal upheaval, the targeting of new resources to advance women's rights, and the presence of international influences and pressures for change" (22). While Tripp et al. refer specifically to post-conflict societies, recent events such as the #MeToo movement, #TheTotalShutdown, #IShallNotForget and the Women's March of 2016 demonstrate that continuous action is needed at different levels of governance and in various spheres of society to ensure that women's rights remain part of the political agenda and continue to be respected through policies and laws that address the intersections of oppression that women face.

The work that Emang Basadi did to raise awareness about how the law discriminated against women in Botswana, such as conducting education campaigns to encourage more women to run

for political office, exemplifies the different levels of advocacy required to promote gender equity. I consider the Emang Basadi education campaigns to have worked at two levels—telling women's stories and promoting the visibility of women as leaders. As such, Emang Basadi can be said to have used storytelling as activism (Polletta 430) and visibility politics to speak *for* women *as* women, something that I believe is sorely lacking currently. Both voice and physical presence are necessary to challenge patriarchal constructions of nationhood which continue to place men at the center of public spaces and position them as natural leaders while relegating women and their voices to private spaces. Despite Emang Basadi's success, Bauer notes that by 2010 the movement seemed to have gone quiet (24). The decrease in the number of women running for and being elected to parliament, and more so the lack of continuous policy review to address governance issues that negatively impact women and other marginalized identities, reflect the lack of a unified voice amongst women in recent years. The case of Emang Basadi demonstrates the need for autonomous women's movements, as per Tripp et al.'s assertion, and exemplifies how inserting women's narratives into public spaces can foster women's leadership. I argue for the use of performance to foster women's leadership as it invokes both storytelling and visibility.

Performance Studies:

The American director, Anne Bogart, suggests that we write ourselves into existence through the stories that we tell about ourselves (9), adding that the stories we tell in and through performance can create societies that offer new ways for people to "live together with increased humanity, empathy and humor" (7). Bogart's assertion echoes the sentiments of practitioners of applied theatre/theatre for development/popular theatre/theatre for social justice who argue for the use of theatre and performance as a tool for social change (Tshane; Selman and Battye;

Butterwick and Selman, "Community-Based Art Making"). Various terms have been advanced to name theatre practices with pedagogical and/or social justice aims. I am drawn to Nicola Shaughnessy's term, "applying performance," (xv) to describe the range of contemporary performance practices that "have a social intention and function, and [are] increasingly challenging the dualisms between aesthetic and non-aesthetic (or what might be considered as pure vs. applied theatre…)" (xvi). While my work has a social justice focus, I am not aiming to make community or popular theatre in so far as that is taken as a discrete genre of theatre separate from mainstream/commercial/art theatre. I am instead applying performance to the (sociopolitical) question of women's leadership and using it as a strategy for inserting women's voices into the public narrative; both by telling women's stories and by increasing women's visibility. I also contend that in the current moment visibility and voice alone, particularly without a consciously feminist outlook, are not enough. Inserting women's voices into the public narrative must inculcate a sense of women's agency, at both the individual and the communal levels. I believe that challenging the masculinization of leadership and/in the public space needs to contend with the intersecting oppressions that have led to the erasure of women's histories, traditions, and sovereignty by devaluing and privatizing the spaces women inhabit.

Shaughnessy asserts that, "since the 1960s experimental performance and feminism have engaged in productive dialogue, developing new vocabularies to articulate hidden histories and gendered experiences as the personal became political and public" (47). This is certainly a motivating factor in my attempt to use performance to foster women's leadership. I employ the performance studies' concepts of restored behaviour (Schechner), ghosting (Carlson) and effigy (Roach) to argue that one way performance fosters women's leadership is by reclaiming women's histories. In the early years of performance studies, Richard Schechner introduced the

notion of restored behaviour, which he understood as strips of living behavior which can be rearranged or reconstructed in a process of creating (rehearsal) a new process (performance), as a main characteristic of performance (Schechner, "Restoration of Behavior" 69). The work of reclaiming women's histories is to challenge the perception of women's activism and leadership as a 'new'—and for post-colonial societies, a Western—concept. My interest in restored behaviour is the opportunity it provides "to become *what they once were* – or even, and most often, to become what they never were but wish to have been or wish to become" (Schechner, "Restoration of Behavior" 71, emphasis mine).

Fred Newman and Lois Holzman of the East Side Institute extend this notion of becoming in their construction of Social Therapeutics, a methodology for human development that talks about being at once who you are and who you are becoming. In addition to philosophizing, key notions in Social Therapeutics are performance and human development, and more so, performance as a process of human development. Holzman and Newman extend this notion of performance to argue that you become who you are or want to be by performing who you are not (being and becoming) (Holzman 18–19). Finally, social therapeutics is premised on the belief that people grow in social units, but also that they grow by doing what they do not yet know how to do (Holzman and Mendez xii). The process of being in space together is considered an opportunity to internalize and use others' examples to break out of socially prescribed roles. I conceive of theatre and performance making teams as an example of the social units that Newman and Holzman refer to. I propose using the theatre to create a women's space by working with all-women teams. I believe working intentionally in this manner creates a platform for women to engage with each other about the issues that affect them, including, but not limited to, gender equity.

In her study of African gender relations, Catherine Acholonu notes that men and women had separate spaces (6) and asserts that colonization devalued African women's spaces by co-opting them as private spaces (77). Meanwhile male spaces were co-opted as public spaces. Examples of this in Botswana are the "*kgotla*"[2] and the "*lelwapa*."[3] The *kgotla* has been co-opted into governance structures as a space for public meetings to pass information and discuss community issues. It is often noted that this has always been the function of the *kgotla*, and that it used to exclude women and youth (Mogobe, *Theatre in Botswana* 5–6; Leslie 2). While this may be true, it is problematic in the way it conflates physical absence with lack of voice. This rendering of the *kgotla* does not account for the fact that the family homestead operated as the smallest unit of the community (Mogobe, *Theatre in Botswana* 5). Thus, while women did not physically attend the main *kgotla*, they had a voice in community issues because these were often discussed in the home and the ward before being brought up at the main *kgotla*. The *kgotla* as both a social and political space is reflected in the fact that in gatherings such as weddings and funerals men are often called to the *kgotla*, while women are called to the *lelwapa*. This reflects Acholonu's assertion that men and women had their own spaces, in which they discussed matters affecting them. Discussions around women's participation in public discourse rarely account for spaces such as the *lelwapa*, and the erosion of women's spaces, thus perpetuating the masculinization of leadership and the erasure of women's voices. Reclaiming women's histories begins with reclaiming, or creating new, women's spaces, and asserting them as spaces of critical dialogue around public issues. Working with women-only teams is a tactic to create critical

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[2] Leslie notes that the "Kgotla was an assembly, usually gathered in the Chief's courtyard, where people could debate and take part in making decisions for their community" (1). The Kgotla is a structure usually constructed of logs standing in a semi-circle, like a half-kraal, although recently the government seems to be moving towards brick-and-mortar structures.

[3] Lelwapa has two meanings, the first being home and the second denoting a courtyard structure in front of the house.

women's spaces. Sharing their stories through female-centered performances, performers can enact who they are becoming or want to become and rehearse taking up voice in the public space.

One of the many elaborations of restored behaviour is Carlson's notion of ghosting. Carlson describes different levels of ghosting—in a text, in a body or bodies, in a production or even in a space—arguing that theatre and performance are replete with repetition, haunted as it were (Carlson 9–10). He states that "…all plays in general might be called *Ghosts*, since, as Herbert Blau has provocatively observed, one of the universals of performance, both East and West, is its ghostliness, its sense of return, the uncanny but inescapable impression imposed upon its spectators that "*we are seeing what we saw before*" (Carlson 1, emphasis in original). But Carlson also states that, "if a work requires reception techniques outside those provided by an audience's memory, then it falls outside their horizon of expectations" (Carlson 6). In other words, an audience needs to have some understanding of what they are seeing, an understanding based on prior experience. This may be so, but from a gender equity standpoint it poses a challenge for expanding representation. If we take leadership as a performance, and the familiar is men as leaders then we become stuck in a cycle of repetition that continues to undermine women's efforts to ascend to positions of leadership. That said, Carlson's assertion suggests that quotas have not been successful because they undermine the possibility of becoming familiar with seeing women perform leadership in public spaces. This is exacerbated by inconsistency in women's movements as well as by the exceptional woman myth. The idea of ghosting suggests that we reject women as leaders because of the perpetuation of masculinity as the marker of leadership. For me ghosting, and more so haunting, speaks to the zone of friction of rights discourses and lived realities described by van Allen. In theory, we accept that we need parity in

decision-making structures but, we are yet to work through the underbelly of why we are not moving towards equity. This is highlighted in the "Mme O kae?" report, through the issues of socialization and women having to fulfil multiple roles.

The idea of ghosting suggests that society requires us to perform ourselves as we are perceived. An example of this is how Emang Basadi appointed a married woman with children as their president (Leslie 51) to avoid being dismissed as just a group of unattractive, single, or divorced, frustrated women (Molokomme 850). While this strategy was effective, women still find themselves navigating respectability politics. A recent example of this is the #MenAreTrash campaign and the responding #NotAllMen. By privileging women's voices, I use performance to interrogate the issue of perception, as Erika Fischer-Lichte notes, "performative acts offer the possibility for individuals to embody themselves, even if this means deviating from dominant norms and provoking social sanctions" (28). Fischer-Lichte characterizes this as part of the transformative potential of performance. Rendering performance creation as a women's space allows for a collective interrogation of existing representations of women and the female body, thus shaping critical discourse about themselves. Performing women's stories allows us to put images that re-present women back into the public archive.

Carlson's ghosting echoes Joseph Roach's idea of effigy. Roach notes the distinction between effigy as a noun and as a verb. As a noun it can mean a "sculpted or pictured likeness," and "suggest(s) a crudely fabricated image of a person, commonly one that is destroyed within his or her stead" (26). As a verb though, effigy also "means to evoke an absence, to body something forth, especially something from a distant past" (*ibid*). Roach notes that bodies in performance also act as forms of effigy, adding that, "performed effigies—those fabricated from human bodies and the associations they evoke—provide communities with a method of

perpetuating themselves through specially nominated mediums or surrogates." Making women's bodies visible in and through performance thus provides an opportunity for women to "perpetuate themselves" in the public space. I consider effigy to be a form of imaging, defined by Peter Snow as "a dual process of imagining and enacting" (81), both of which are embodied processes. Snow adds that, "to call something 'performative' is to refer to a facility to bring about a new state of affairs," (83). For Snow this facility is brought about by imaging. My starting point for using performance to foster women's leadership is that performance creates space to (re)imagine and (re)enact —re-image —women's (perceived) roles in new ways.

While creating women's spaces allows us to interrogate existing representations of women, performance allows us to create and insert new representations of women into the public space thus shaping discourse around womanhood and nationhood. Taken together, the concepts of restored behaviour, ghosting and effigy support the notion of performing women's narratives as a process of memorializing, working on a continuum from performance to performativity. Here, I am playing with the idea of "conjuring" and use the phrase "bodying forth" or "body forth" (Roach 26) to refer to bringing women and their bodies forth to be seen and heard within the context of leadership. I am locating a study of women's leadership within the context of performance studies because leadership is inherently performative. However, to borrow from Snow, leadership is predominantly imaged (bodied forth) as masculine, occurring in certain spaces and performed by certain people. Privileging women's stories in performance uses women's bodies as effigies to re-image dominant notions of leadership that exclude femininity, making women's bodies, and voices, familiar in public space. As performativity, woman-centered performances create spaces for women and move towards seeing how and where

women are leading. This is one way in which I conceive of performing women's narratives as fostering women's leadership.

Bodying forth also enacts reclaiming women's knowledge which tends to be characterized as being embodied. Diana Taylor distinguishes between the (written) archive and the repertoire (embodied knowledge and oral cultures), noting how the importance granted to writing came at the expense of embodied ways of creating knowledge. She asks, "whose memories, traditions, and claims to history disappear if performance practices lack the staying power to transmit vital knowledge?" (D. Taylor 5). Based on Pabalelo Mmila's assertion that "colonial and gender politics combine to banish storytelling and its performers (women) to 'the periphery of real knowledge production'" (238, citing Obioma Nnaemeka), I argue that it is women's traditions and claims to history that disappear. Mmila links the demise of oral storytelling to the subjugation of women in the Botswana context. Tshane reminds us that prior to the colonial era, Batswana — like other African societies — had their own education systems but these were replaced by formal schooling in the 19th century, which was assimilatory and privileged Western norms and knowledge, thus alienating Batswana from their culture (95). As such, reclaiming women's knowledge and histories is also a reclamation of cultural traditions that can serve communities. I want to heed Tshane's warning against an understanding of popular theatre —the term she adopts to define applied theatre—that is rooted in European pedagogy. Such an understanding further undermines storytelling (women's knowledge) (*ibid*). I apply performance to reclaim knowledge and knowledge forms that have been erased from/by the archive.

Reclaiming culture is necessitated by a masculinization of power that has positioned men in the African post-colony as knowledge and culture keepers, resulting in a weaponization of

culture to control and silence women (*Focus Group 1*). An example of this weaponization of culture is shown in the attack of a young woman at the Gaborone bus rank. The perpetrators claimed that she was dressed inappropriately, which is "not our culture." I have observed that claims to culture, as portrayed in the media, are often made when it comes to defining womanhood, and sometimes minority groups, yet are never made when it comes to male behaviour. In the example of the bus rank incident, if indeed the perpetrators were upholding culture why did one of them not call the young woman aside to advise her as would be expected of an elder? Male weaponization of culture victimizes women and creates a dichotomy between genders so that any claims to equity are framed as taking power from the dominant group. I argue that understanding and articulating the weaponization of culture against women requires an understanding of how the colonial encounter has shaped the understanding and use of culture in the post-colonial nation state. As such, I have adopted a decolonial feminist lens to navigate the intersections of gendered oppression, racialization, colonial domination, and alienation from culture, and to develop an understanding of Batswana women's lived experiences outside the paradigms of Western knowledge. I call this turning away from masculinity and Eurocentrism.

However, even as I seek a reclamation of culture, I acknowledge that culture is dynamic and the culture I am referring to was transformed during the process of colonization and does not exist in a fixed form that I can return to. Although I use decolonial feminism to reach outside Western epistemology, this is not to deny the colonial encounter but to acknowledge how we are marked by it. This research is also a 'sifting' (James citing Mahmoud Mamdani) through epistemologies, ideologies of being and socio-political histories to understand the status of women and move towards female sovereignty, especially in the African post-colony. I use the term post-colony to refer to former colonies in the intellectual sense (Appiah 348), which

acknowledges that while these countries have gained independence, they retain political and economic ties to their colonial masters. Because of these ties, I consider the African post-colony to be outward facing, which is why I am focused on internal barriers and turning away. It is also why I adopt a decolonial feminist lens in my work.

Post- vs. de-colonial:

At the beginning of my research process, I debated whether my theoretical framework was post-colonial or decolonial. I eventually settled on the decolonial after becoming disillusioned with the notion of independence and Botswana as an African success story. This happened in 2018 after I saw a news report about a diplomatic trip, during which our president, Dr. Eric Mokgweetsi Masisi, visited the Polish Chamber of Commerce to seek Foreign Direct Investment. I was appalled by this. In my view, this positioned Botswana as a beggar. Surely after 50 plus years of independence Batswana—whom the government has so far spent billions educating to advance the country—should be in a position to develop our own country? The president's trip, for me, operated within a rhetoric that positions Africans as perpetual victims, always in need of assistance from others. What I was witnessing, and feeling, reflects the "two ghosts…traveling the world in the sixties and early seventies: …the debate, in Latin America, on whether political, economic, and epistemic dependency would allow underdeveloped countries to develop; [and]…the debate around whether decolonization, in Asia and Africa, would create the conditions for development" (Mignolo, "The Way We Were" 11). Mignolo states that the answer to the second debate is that underdeveloped countries have not been allowed to develop because "development needed underdevelopment for its very enactment" (*ibid)*. Further, decolonization as an end to colonialism, what is referred to as formal decolonization (Ania Loomba 28), has

been characterized as emancipatory rather than liberatory. Walter Mignolo, citing Enrique Dussel, distinguishes between emancipation and liberation as follows:

> While 'emancipation' was the concept used to argue for the freedom of a new social class, the bourgeoisie, … and was recovered in the twentieth century in Marxist discourse to argue for the 'emancipation of the working class' or still more recently, for the emancipating forces of the multitude, 'liberation' provides a larger frame that includes the racialized class that the European bourgeoisie (directly or indirectly) colonized beyond Europe … and, thus, subsumes 'emancipation.' (Mignolo, "Delinking" 455)

Building on the work of Peruvian sociologist, Anibal Quijano, Mignolo locates emancipation within the colonial matrix of power (coloniality). He defines coloniality as, "a complex conceptual structure that guided actions in the domain of economy (exploitation of labor and appropriation of land/natural resources), authority (government, military forces), gender/sexuality and knowledge/subjectivity" (Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience" 177). While colonialism might be over, the rhetoric of modernity that characterises post-colonial states such as Botswana as needing to be developed perpetuates the power structures enacted by colonialism for the continued benefit of colonial powers. Mignolo argues that achieving liberation requires a "de-colonial epistemic shift"[4] which is a project of de-linking that "brings to the foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding, and consequently, other economy, other politics, other ethics," ("Delinking" 452–53). De-linking entails "detach[ing] from [a structure of knowledge rooted in Christian Theology, secular sciences and philosophy] to engage in the epistemic reconstitution of ways of thinking, languages, ways of life and being in

[4] In "Delinking: the rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality" (2007), Mignolo writes decolonial and decoloniality as "de-colonial" and "de-coloniality" but reverts to the unhyphenated versions in other writings. I use decolonial and decoloniality in keeping with the current convention.

the world that the rhetoric of modernity disavowed…" (Mignolo, Walter D., paras.7–8). Mignolo contrasts decolonial critique and de-linking with post-colonial critique, which he considers to be more focused on transformation within the academy ("Delinking" 452), and thus, like the post-colony, operates at the level of emancipation instead of moving towards liberation.

While Mignolo's conception of decoloniality purports to move beyond the post-colonial, Gurminder Bhambra argues for the consideration of decolonial and post-colonial critique as "connected sociologies" to bring together the various trajectories of the two fields (115). This is especially useful for considering the hybrid nature of the post-colony. An example of connecting sociologies is the use of the term "epicolonial" proffered by Shose Kessi, Zoe Marks and Elelwani Ramugondo. They use the term to refer to "phenomena for which the cause may or may not be directly traced to legacies or histories of overt or observed colonial encounters, but in which power relations and outcomes are recognizably colonial" (271). This definition is useful for speaking about the situation in Botswana, as we have a complex relationship with colonialism. Because Botswana was a protectorate governed by British authorities through indirect rule, we do not consider ourselves to have been colonized. We tell the story of inviting the British in (Washington)—that Chiefs from three of the major Tswana-speaking tribes travelled to London to ask for protection against the apartheid regime in neighbouring South Africa. Yet, according to Barry Morton and Jeff Ramsey, Britain declared their control of Bechuanaland during the Berlin Conference, prior to the three chiefs' visit to see Queen Victoria (217). While the narrative of the three chiefs' visit helped to protect Botswana from incorporation into apartheid South Africa (demonstrating the power of narrative) it also means that as a nation we do not always acknowledge the impact of colonialism on the country and our

culture(s), and how we perpetuate colonial structures in the treatment of non-Tswana speaking groups.

The Bechuanaland protectorate was an administrative colony, which Ania Loomba describes as a "shallow penetration" which functions largely by remote control (24). Administrative colonialism "incorporated rather than disturbed native hierarchies" (Ania Loomba 23). However, native hierarchies had already shifted due to early missionary settlements and the introduction of Christianity (Denbow and Thebe 121). Judith van Allen notes that the protectorate later served as a labour reserve for South African Mines after diamonds and gold were discovered in 1867 and 1886, respectively ("Bad Future Things" 143). Migrant labour to the South African mines reorganized social structures significantly and weakened kinship bonds. Although Botswana's protectorate status made it an administrative colony, Wazha Morapedi argues that areas like Ghanzi, Tati district and the Tuli Block formed settler enclaves, whose development was skewed along racial lines to the disadvantage of Africans in those areas (548–49). He adds that the economic imbalances resulting from settler empowerment are still apparent to this day (Morapedi 549). Processes such as the underdevelopment of native farmers, overcrowding in native reserves adjacent to white settlement enclaves, hut tax imposed by the colonial administration all contributed to the need for cash incomes, radically shifting the way of life. While the post-independence Botswana government has focused on development, and has been successful in this regard, some of these developments have not addressed the power imbalances wrought by the arrival of missionaries and policies from the protectorate era. The concept of epicoloniality helps to speak to the diverse power relations at play and invites a conversation about the impact of colonization on Botswana.

Whilst I employ a decolonial lens in my work, I use it as a connected sociology in which I acknowledge the hybrid nature of the post-colony while working towards a de-linking from Eurocentric and imperialist worldviews and epistemologies. Decolonial options allow us to interrogate notions of freedom and independence to advance women's rights and gender equity. Feminism(s):

Marìa Lugones coined the term "decolonial feminism" in response to what she defines as the "coloniality of gender" ("Toward a Decolonial Feminism" 744). She describes the coloniality of gender as "racialized, capitalist gender oppression," and locates gender within the colonial matrix of power conceived of by Anibal Quijano and the coloniality of being advanced by Nelson Maldonado Torres (Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism" 745). Lugones draws on Oyèrónkè Oyewùmí and Paula Gunn Allen to assert that colonization was a gendered process, and that gender stratification as we practice it today is a colonial construct. This includes the assumption of male superiority in African contexts (Acholonu 79). Lugones states "the decolonial feminist's task begins by her seeing the colonial difference, emphatically resisting her epistemological habit of erasing it. Seeing it, she sees the world anew, and then she requires herself to drop her enchantment with "woman," the universal, and begins to learn about other resisters at the colonial difference" ("Toward a Decolonial Feminism" 753). Decolonial feminism emphasizes "the logic of difference and multiplicity and of coalition at the point of difference" ("Toward a Decolonial Feminism" 755). I see decolonial feminism as theorizing from the intersections of nationality/ethnicity, gender, race, class, and culture/tradition to understand how gender and race, especially, intermesh to facilitate the silencing of racialized women, especially those living in the Global South.

While Marìa Lugones coined the term "decolonial feminism" to articulate how coloniality shapes gender, she also acknowledges that her conceptualization develops from the theorizations of Women of Colour feminists and feminists from the Global South ("The Coloniality of Gender" 1). Although I adopt decolonial feminism as my theoretical lens, I consider it to be rooted in Black, African and post-colonial feminist thought. Patricia Hill Collins notes the roots of Black feminist thought in Black women's activism, challenging racism in feminist theory on the one hand, male superiority in Black liberation movements on the other, as well as the economic exclusion of Black women (11–12). An analytical approach that considers different identity factors—race, gender, class, nationality etc.—has become known as intersectionality following Kimberlee Crenshaw's coining of the term. A focus on race and gender was defined by my experience in South Africa but in Botswana it proved difficult for me to articulate the relevance of such this focus as race is not considered an issue of concern, class is not readily interrogated, and gender analysis does not permeate everyday lived experience. I contend that this is part of the reason why attempts to increase women's participation have not been as successful as expected. I adopt a decolonial feminist lens in my research to interrogate how race, class, and gender operate in post-independence Botswana.

I also adopt a decolonial feminist lens to interrogate how imperialism shapes gender and racialization in Africa. Black feminisms resist the universalising rhetoric of white feminists and challenges their elision of race and class. However, African gender scholars also critique Black feminisms' potential exclusion of "Black, African, Africa-based women," and its inability to grasp the realities of the African context (Atanga 305). Obioma Nnaemeka, Pinkie Mekgwe, Sinmi Akin Aina, Lillian Lem Atanga, Rama Salla Dieng and Simidele Odekun all provide helpful summaries of the major debates in African feminine discourse (Kolawole 11) up to 2020.

In her article, “Mapping African Feminisms” Obioma Nnaemeka reflects on both African and Black feminine scholarship, including Zulu Sofola’s meditations on dewomanization and the masculinization of power, Clenora Hudson-Weems’s Africana womanism and Angela Miles’s transformative feminism (33–37). The use of the plural “feminisms” stems from the recognition that while feminism is named by the west; it exists in many contexts and in many ways as it responds to the various forms of oppression in those contexts (Kemp and Squires 4; Mohanty 2; Nnaemeka 37). Hudson-Weems uses Africana to refer to Africans on the continent as well as people of African descent in the diaspora and argues for Africana womanism as a framework rooted in Africana women’s experiences to prioritize race, gender, and class (450). Weems distinguishes Africana womanism from the womanism coined by Alice Walker, which Walker described as an aspect of Black feminism (Hudson-Weems 138–39; Kolawole 24–25). Weems considers Africana womanism to be rooted in African culture and to be family-centred, whereas she sees feminisms as female-centered and focused only on female empowerment instead of race empowerment (Hudson-Weems 139). Nnaemeka sees Africana womanism as forging links between African and African diaspora feminisms but adds that these must be argued for on their own terms rather than in the context of white middle class feminism. A transformative feminism “champions the creation of global linkages across racial, ethnic, and national boundaries” (Nnaemeka 37). This echoes Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s argument “for an antiracist feminist framework, anchored in decolonization and committed to an anticapitalist critique” (3). Mohanty’s argument demonstrates how racialized women, especially those from previously colonized societies, have been grappling with gender, imperialism, racism, and class.

In her review of African feminism, Lillian Lem Atanga highlights how African gender scholars have been grappling with the tension between culture and modernity. She states,

> Some African women describe themselves as having been influenced by western feminism yet remaining conscious of 'positive' African values. Such women (who may call themselves 'African feminists') are largely aware both of the perceived 'radicalism' of 'Western' feminism *and* the need to advance the causes of women, whose issues, as part of African realities, are not captured by western feminism (Mikell 1997; see also Ellece 2007). Indeed, *most* educated women (feminist or otherwise) face the dilemma of challenging conservative patriarchal practices while being 'African women,' i.e. without being accused of having been 'colonized' or influenced by western feminism (an accusation which does not give these women credit for thinking critically, reflexively and independently). (304)

What Atanga describes echoes what Deniz Kandiyoti calls "patriarchal bargains" to describe the ways that "women strategize within a set of concrete constraints" to respond to gender arrangements within their own societies (275). For her part, Obioma Nnaemeka proposes nego-feminism, arguing that the practice of feminism in Africa involves negotiation and compromise, knowing when to "detonate patriarchal landmines" and when to go around them (cited in Akin-Aina 71). The need to negotiate between cultural understanding and outside influences is especially acute in Botswana where many people were educated in the West and other parts of Africa due to an education policy that was geared towards developing a skilled labour force as quickly as possible. This education policy was responsible for me undertaking my undergraduate studies in South Africa, and for me doing my current research in Canada. Other scholars, such as Mary E. Modupe Kolawole, prefer womanism, as they believe it supports an African worldview that is family- and community-centered (Dosekun 54).

While many terms have been proffered to describe feminine discourse in Africa, Atanga notes two strands in the development of African feminisms and womanisms: "popular" African feminism(s) and "intellectual" African feminism(s). Those perceived as intellectual African feminists are criticized for the easy adoption of Western ideas, whereas popular African feminism is seen as privileging culture and family values, while still advocating for the improvement of women's socioeconomic and political status (Atanga 305–06). Dosekun concludes that "African feminisms are constructs, contestations and thus *cases to be made*" (60, emphasis in original). I continue to grapple with what to call myself. Despite the tensions within African scholarship about the word "feminism" I use it in keeping with Emang Basadi's founding ethos: to politicize women's issues, in Botswana specifically, and Africa generally. I also use it on the basis that it is "an ideological praxis that gives us a series of multiple strategies (of reading, of analysis [of doing, of being])" (Abena Busia in Kolawole 8). In addition to the "bread and butter issues" addressed by African feminine discourse (Dosekun 60, citing Mikell), I am particularly interested in challenging dewomanization and the masculinization of power through the weaponization of culture. To do so requires an understanding of cultural practices on their own terms. Decolonial thought alerts us to the fact that we look at cultural practices through a colonial lens, and de-linking is a process of trying to remove that lens and of resisting internalized oppression and domination to reclaim female sovereignty. I use the term decolonial feminism in so far as I see it as being rooted in Black, African and post-colonial gender scholarship, while resisting the polarization of the different streams of thought within African feminine discourse.

Literature and Practice Review:

Theatre and Performance for Social Change:

My approach to theatre and performance is influenced by Sarah Matchett and what I refer to as the South African tradition. In her early writings about her work with The Mothertongue Project (Mothertongue), Matchett talks about developing a process of theatre-making that resists the separation between community/popular theatre and mainstream/art theatre (Matchett 3). I have also been influenced by the work of Magnet Theatre, especially their use of physical theatre and African contemporary dance[5] in collective creation. Artistic director, Mark Fleishman uses this work to make a case for performance as research. While Magnet Theatre and Mothertongue do work in the community, their mainstream work also addresses social justice issues and current affairs. The two companies exemplify what I understand as applying performance because they work on a continuum between community/popular theatre and mainstream/art theatre.

I borrow the term "art theatre" from Thulaganyo Mogobe. Writing on theatre in Botswana, Mogobe makes a distinction between community/popular theatre, dance theatre and art theatre ("Status of Theatre in Botswana" 43). He notes that there is a strong tradition of community theatre following the work of *Laedza Batanani* and Reetsanang Association of Community Theatre Groups (Reetsanang) from the late 1970s to the 1990s. *Laedza Batanani* is a community theatre project that ran in Bukalanga, the North-east region of Botswana. The aim of the project was to encourage community participation in development programs, to promote self-reliance and cooperative action and raise literacy levels (Byram and Kidd 84; Mogobe, "Status of Theatre in Botswana" 45). Later, a similar project, *Bosele Tshwaraganang*, was established in Kgatleng in the Southern region of Botswana (Youngman; Tshane 75). Reetsanang on the other hand was

[5] I use the term "African contemporary dance" to refer to a genre of dance that fuses African forms of dance with modern dance.

established in the 1980s as a student group before being registered as an association in the 1990s. The association established groups across the country and was instrumental in the development of theatre in Botswana (Magwaza).

Mogobe decries the lack of continuity in art theatre, noting that there have been a number of companies throughout the years, but most have come and gone (Towards Sustainability Interview). My own research is influenced by my time as part of The Company@Maitisong (The Company). It was founded in 2002 by students at Maru-A-Pula School and operated as such until around 2012 when Gao Lemmenyane took over as director of Maitisong Theatre which is owned and operated by Maru-A-Pula School in Gaborone. Maitisong is treated as a regional, if not national, theatre because of the prominent role it has played in the Botswana theatre scene, including running the Maitisong Festival. The question of "where are the women" started with women in the theatre when The Company found itself struggling to attract female actors to their auditions for their production, *Born Around Here.* This perceived lack of women belies the fact that Reetsanang was actually started by women, and at some point sent one of their employees to pursue training in South Africa to focus on women in the theatre (Dipatane). I address this issue in more detail in Chapter 3. Although I have sought to use performance to foster women's leadership, I do not claim to do community or popular theatre. I have focused instead on increasing female representation in theatre-making through art theatre to find voice as a female theatre-maker myself and by working with other women to center women's stories and experiences.

Women and/in Theatre in Botswana:

My focus on women's stories and experiences has been influenced by Pabalelo Tshane. In her own dissertation, Tshane studies the role and participation of women in theatre to locate

and analyze women's presence in the creation of knowledge through theatre (Tshane 15). Tshane's study focuses on popular theatre which she argues does not meet its democratizing function because it is co-opted by the state to perform a top-down function of message dissemination. In contrast with the domesticating and victim-blaming "on-stage performances", Tshane proffers "marginal off-stage spaces" as potential sites for counter discourse (Tshane 14). Further, she contrasts popular theatre with oral storytelling, proposing storytelling as an alternative site in which women speak, showing how they tactically engage in issues of importance to them and demonstrate their cultural competency (Tshane 15). Tshane's focus on storytelling has influenced me to consider women's traditions and a reclamation of culture in my work. Her assertion that women in Botswana are aware of their predicaments and use alternate sites to demonstrate this awareness and how they imagine change highlights the need for interdisciplinary approaches in addressing gender equity. My interest in using performance to foster women's leadership and create women's spaces attempts to bring the counter-discourse of offstage performances on stage to give women both physical presence and voice in public discourse. I discuss this further in Chapter 3.

Women and Representation in Botswana:

Sibonile Ellece and Connie Rapoo have been influential in helping me contextualize my study. In her article, "Placenta of the Nation," Ellece analyzes marriage songs, specifically what she refers to as the *Rutu* chant, to understand the representation of women in marriage. She calls for a consideration of how cultural traditions have been coopted to oppress women. Ellece observes a discourse of compulsory motherhood in marriage songs such as the *Rutu* chant, which she warns "positions women firmly in the domestic sphere as child bearers and nurturers" (89). In addition, Ellece asserts that compulsory motherhood takes on "common sense legitimacy"

because it is perpetuated through songs performed by women, implying that women have "accepted their status" (90). This supposed acceptance of their status is one of the reasons I have chosen to focus on the internal barriers women face and on creating space for women to critically reflect on their experiences.

For her part, Rapoo studies the representation of women in myths and media. In her article, "Constructions of traditional womanhood in Botswana myths and popular culture," she theorizes the portrayal of women in the Botswana cultural imaginary by examining the role of performance in constructions of womanhood in Botswana ("Constructions of Womanhood" 6–7). Rapoo analyses representations of women in cultural myths, songs, and the media to demonstrate how "indigenous forms of knowledge transfer" and collective memory can become conjoined with colonial forms of archiving to inform gender representation. In her analysis, she uses narrative inquiry on the basis that "narratives thus reflect on social phenomena and actual experience" ("Constructions of Womanhood" 6). Rapoo uses depictions of Queen Mmantatisi and media representations of female political leaders such as the late Winnie Mandela from South Africa and Katherine Letshabo from Botswana. She also analyses marriage songs, and other artworks to demonstrate a complex system of gender representation that reveals, "the anxiety over transgressive behaviours and subjectivities that offend Tswana patriarchal sensibilities" (Rapoo, "Constructions of Womanhood" 22). Although most of the items Rapoo analyses perpetuate the subjugation of women, she also identifies others which are more subversive. Rapoo asserts that these subversive mediums, especially those performed by women, can serve as strategic sites to conjure female networks, creative agency, and power (*ibid*). Rapoo's study has encouraged me to continue to look at gender and representation, and to center women's voices in my work to challenge negative representations of women.

Ellece and Rapoo recall Rosaleen Nhlekisana's study of proverbs. Nhlekisana analyses the role of proverbs in the formation of national narratives. She argues that proverbs have contributed to Botswana's success as a stable democracy by promoting peace, humility, cooperation, freedom of speech and interdependence (Nhlekisana 150). Nhlekisana also points out that proverbs, as part of the oral tradition, carry a people's philosophy of life and serve as guidelines for how to behave (151). I discuss the issue of proverbs and the role they can play in promoting gender equity in Chapter 4.

Towards a decolonial feminist performance praxis:

Based on my theoretical conceptions and the research on gender representation in Botswana, I have resolved to work towards a decolonial feminist performance praxis to answer my instigating question: "Where are the women?" A decolonial feminist performance praxis is both a performative strategy for being in the world and a process of performance-making. As performativity it is characterized by the prologue, "Zooming In" and "Zooming Out". Zooming in/out is an attempt to locate my lived experience in a broader context of events taking place nationally and internationally, and to highlight the simultaneity of life. Zooming in/out is also, quite simply, a way to articulate ideas that inform the research but cannot always be expressed in academic voice.

While I have always been interested in the notion of performative writing, here I am particularly influenced by the notion of "philosophizing" coined by Fred Newman. Raphael Mendez defines philosophizing as "being self-conscious of the ordinary day-to-day activity of making mundane decisions in our lives," that is, asking big questions about little things (Holzman and Mendez 9). As such, a decolonial feminist performance praxis is about the simultaneity of being and becoming, an interrogation of how I am being and becoming, and how

I can be and become with others. I believe that any questions about why "women" do not assume positions of leadership must begin with why *I,* as a woman, do not assume positions of leadership. I use the term "we" rather than "they" to locate myself within the groups I identify with, namely women, Black women, Batswana women as well as Batswana, Africans, and people racialized as Black. I name these groups to point to the socio-political histories that I have been interrogating to come to a fuller understanding of issues surrounding women's leadership in Botswana. Locating myself within these groups is to locate myself at and to work through the intersection of the diverse power relations that mediate the lived experiences of people racialized as Black, nationalized as African, and gendered as women all the while undertaking this analysis from my own perspective to resist speaking *for* or *at* them and instead speak *with* them. It is not to conflate different identity locations but to recognize that my own positionality is informed by the intersection of these identity locations. I also name these groups to acknowledge the intersections I am yet to work through: class, ability, and sexual minority experiences. I have not engaged with folks who occupy these identity locations enough to adequately bring their voices into the research.

As performance, a decolonial feminist performance praxis centers women's voices and experiences to learn, promote, and assert women's traditions. I propose a decolonial feminist performance praxis to continue the work of reclamation, self-representation, self-expression, self-assertion, and historicizing started by racialized feminists, particularly post-colonial, African, Black, Indigenous, and Women of Colour. A decolonial feminist performance praxis begins the process of understanding feminisms in Africa in their own terms, as Nnaemeka and Hudson-Weems assert, to not only challenge but turn away from Eurocentrism and male superiority. Working with women-only teams resists the call to male spaces and asserts the value

of female spaces, thus reclaiming female sovereignty. I use the term sovereignty here to refer to bodily autonomy, claims to knowledge, as well as financial and economic independence. Reclaiming female sovereignty is a process of asserting women's spaces as sites of knowledge creation. This is how I perceive performance as fostering women's leadership.

A decolonial feminist performance praxis performs epistemic disobedience by challenging much of what we hold true about African culture(s), womanhood, Blackness and nationhood, especially deficit-based representations of said groups. I use the term deficit-based as defined by John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight of the Asset-based Community Development Institute to refer to community development approaches that focus on needs, deficiencies, and problems (2). Kretzmann and McKnight argue that deficit-based approaches develop from the perpetuation of negative images of a community that have come to be seen as the truth about that community (*ibid*). Deficit-based approaches also result in internalized oppression and dependency on outsiders to solve community problems. I am especially interested in using a decolonial feminist performance praxis to challenge dominant narratives about African women and to address internalized oppression. Teeomm K. Williams describes internalized oppression, also known as internalized subordination, as "(a) an effect or by-product of living within an oppressive context and/or (b) a condition necessary for the maintenance and perpetuation of oppression" (8). He also notes that internalized oppression afflicts people from both subordinated groups and dominant groups (internalized domination). Internalized oppression can be seen to operate in some of the challenges Emang Basadi identifies as being barriers to women's participation in political leadership, namely socialization and expectations of women's subservience. A decolonial feminist performance praxis not only challenges post-colonial patriarchal constructions and the silencing of women, but also accounts for the impact of

colonialism in contemporary constructions of womanhood and nationhood, thus building a decolonial feminist consciousness. I believe that a decolonial feminist consciousness is crucial for performing the de-linking needed to achieve liberation as it asks us to be aware of how we are marked by the colonial encounter, and to work through those marks intentionally to collectively resist colonial gender oppression.

Structure of the Dissertation:

I have conducted this research using performance-as-research, also referred to as practice-as-research in the arts (arts PaR[6]). The dissertation is structured following Robyn Nelson's recommendations for an arts PaR submission, which he says includes:

- a product (exhibition, film, blog, score, performance) with a durable record (DVD, CD, video);
- documentation of process (sketchbook, photographs, DVD, objects of material culture); and
- 'complementary writing' which includes locating practice in a lineage of influences and a conceptual framework for the research. ("From Practitioner to Practitioner-Researcher" 26)

Over the course of this research process, I produced five performances. Chapters 3-5 reflect on three of these performances which I include as the "products" of my research. The remaining projects, along with posters, trailers of the productions, and some contextual material where it is available, are included as part of the documentation of process. All of the materials are available for viewing in this folder.

[6] Note the use of the small "a" in abbreviating practice-as-research, distinguishing it from participatory action research (PAR). I write performance-as-research in full and use it interchangeably with arts PaR for ease of reference.

This document is the complementary writing and is structured as a "suite of essays" or an ensemble dissertation, which "might involve a theme and its variations or a set of distinct essays, probing different topics and using different methods or theoretical frameworks" (S. Smith 23). The suite of essays closely resembles the long-form dissertation but is "a more discursive formation that can take a variety of material forms: scholarly print, public print, digital, blog, and so on" (S. Smith 24). Shayla Atkins argues that this model is particularly well suited to the analysis of dramatic literature as it "privileges the work of the author and text over a research agenda that might be limited by a singular focus" (4). I believe this is the case with performance analysis, and more so research creation. While my research has been guided by an overarching idea, I have followed an impulse rather than a clear line of inquiry, with each project branching out from the one that precedes it. Organizing this written component as a suite of essays has allowed me to reflect on each project and the themes it addressed.

Outline of Chapters:

In this chapter I have introduced the theoretical underpinnings that inform my dissertation research and how I arrived at the notion of a decolonial feminist performance praxis. I also provide a brief literature and practice review. In Chapter 2 I outline my methodology, which I define as performance-as-research to capture the multi-modal nature of this work. My research process includes performance-creation, interviews, focus groups and post-performance discussions. I also describe the creative processes I used to develop the productions, especially the first two performances, *Nkadzi* (2017) and *The Thread that Binds* (2018, 2021), which focused on collaborating with other women to explore the question, "Where are the women?" The productions developed out of lengthy conversations with the cast and crew as well as improvisations by the performers. Interviews and focus groups were designed to reach a broader

cross-section of women to try to understand the lived experiences of women in Botswana, especially women theatre-makers. For this write-up, I undertake a thematic analysis of the productions I created as well as the interviews I conducted.

Chapter 3 reflects on the production, *Nkadzi* (2017), which was my first attempt at a woman-only production process. I discuss the impetus behind working with a women-only cast and crew, namely, to use co-production to pool resources to create paid opportunities for women actors. I also explore the parallels, if any, between the development of the women's movement and women's participation in theatre. Based on interviews with other female theatre practitioners I try to provide a context for contemporary women's theatre, to make an argument for female-led performance practices as a strategy for moving into leadership. I use *Nkadzi* as an example of how female-led productions can provide a context for offstage performances that move in parallel to women's movements to foster women's leadership on and off the stage.

The fourth chapter focuses on *The Thread that Binds* (*Threads,* 2018) and discusses the creative process I employed, as well as the findings from the performance and the interviews around it. The creation of *Threads* sought to reclaim women's traditions by incorporating traditional dance, *Poko* (Tswana praise poetry) and orature. This incorporation of Botswana traditional performance forms stems from African contemporary dance which blends African and European dance traditions. By so doing, African contemporary dance can be said to be syncretic (Balme 1). In this, it echoes other protest traditions and begins, if not exemplifies, the project of epistemic disobedience (Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience"). *Threads* builds on the idea of physical theatre not only to engage the body but, through traditional dance, to engage it differently. I argue that the incorporation of traditional performance forms in contemporary

theatre provides a space to build women's resilience, and thus the capacity to resist the impact of structural violence.

Chapter 5 focuses on *The Space Between* (*Space*), a performance I created in 2021. *Space* builds on the work I did in *Threads* to further reflect on my practice. Unlike *Threads* and *Nkadzi, Space* was a solo performance. Creating *Space* as a solo performance allowed me to undertake an embodied interrogation of the themes we explored in *Threads* and *Nkadzi* as I had asked my co-creators to do. It also allowed me to interrogate my own positionality. Through the creation of *Space*, I have begun to work towards a SeTswana aesthetic which focuses on the continued incorporation of Botswana traditional dance forms into African contemporary dance as a gesture towards cultural specificity. A SeTswana aesthetic, as I hope to use it in my practice, also interrogates SeTswana womanhood. I believe cultural specificity is a strategy for building ethical relations by not projecting myself onto others' cultures (Nchunga, *Research Interview*). This is important for coalition building across difference.

The concluding chapter summarizes the findings from each of the chapters and discusses how I aim to move forward. A SeTswana aesthetic demonstrates the key aspects of a decolonial feminist performance praxis, namely cultural specificity in locating oneself, reclaiming women's histories and traditions, and reclaiming culture to center other ways of being, knowing and sensing (Vázquez).

Chapter 2: Methodology

My research focuses on Botswana to remain relevant to my community(ies): the University of Botswana, women, Black women, African women, Batswana, theatre-makers, women theatre-makers and performing artists in Botswana. That said, I have been living in Canada while conducting this research. During this time, communities across that country have been grappling with reconciliation and decolonization as Indigenous peoples demand accountability and recognition of Canada's violent colonial legacy. My location in Canada at this time has raised questions about what it looks like to foster women's leadership. These questions include: What is feminism? What is it to be post-colonial? What is it to be African? What is it to be Black? What is it to be an African native living on Indigenous peoples' lands? Living in Canada in the post-TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) moment has provided an opportunity to step back from Botswana and to look at it and my situation there from outside, causing me to reflect on what it means to be independent. My time in Canada has also caused me to reflect on the linkages between neo-colonialism and settler colonialism. It is seeing these linkages that has led me to seek a decolonial feminist performance praxis, which I conceive of as a methodology of being in the world based on an ethics of liberation.

Kessi et al have been instructive in helping me articulate a decolonial feminist performance praxis. In their article, "Decolonizing African Studies", they note:

> Decolonizing entails a political and normative ethic and practice of resistance and *intentional undoing*—unlearning and dismantling unjust practices, assumptions, and institutions—as well as persistent positive action to create and build alternative spaces,

networks, and ways of knowing that transcend our epicolonial inheritance. (271, my emphasis).

Kessi et al. define four dimensions of decolonial work: structural, epistemic, personal, and relational, and reiterate that decolonial work requires coordinated action (272). While all four aspects are intertwined and overlap, I situate this research in the personal to better understand my cultural and political history. I consider a deeper understanding of my cultural and sociopolitical history an important starting point for challenging unequal power relations between men and women in post-independence Botswana. Focusing on the personal is a way of locating my own positionality in relation to the issues I am examining, in keeping with the recommendations of feminist, decolonial and Indigenous research methods to state one's positionality in research.

What is my positionality? I am a Black-identifying woman from Botswana. I grew up in a small mining town called Orapa where my mother used to work as a nurse. I was sent by my mother's employer to Maru-a-Pula School in Gaborone. I was then sponsored by the Government of Botswana to attend the University of Cape Town (UCT), where I obtained my BA, as part of the country's ongoing education and skills development programme. I sponsored myself to return to UCT for a BA Honours in Drama. It was in Cape Town that I was labeled a feminist. I was called a feminist because I questioned how I saw gender relations being practiced, but I was not just a feminist, I was labeled an angry Black feminist. For a time, I embraced the Black feminist part, but I have since become uncomfortable with the construction, and subsequent dismissal, of feminist action as a Western concept as well as the assumption that African cultures and traditions necessarily oppress women. In my experience, these assumptions have served to divorce young African women from their cultures by fighting gender injustice

based on neo-liberal claims to individual rights, which keeps us tied to the Global North in ways that perpetuate the salvation narrative of colonialism, imperialism, and the developmental politics that have since been called neo-colonialism. Further, both these assumptions take for granted male superiority. To challenge the assumption of male superiority effectively requires the questioning of cultural, social, and political institutions, and the narratives we perpetuate about ourselves as Batswana and as women.

The personal dimension of decolonizing also emphasizes the need for self-reflexivity. I use "we" and "our" to implicate myself in the problems I am identifying, and to go beyond theorizing to work through the application of academic concepts and ideas in everyday life. I characterize my work as performance-as-research to bridge the divide between theory and practice that so often makes it difficult to articulate research in the arts (Nelson, "Introduction" 5). While my use of the term is based on Mark Fleishman's definition, I take as my starting point Richard Schechner's definition of research in performance studies that:

> First, behavior is the "object of study" of performance studies. Although performance studies scholars use the "archive" extensively—what's in books, photographs, the archeological record, historical remains etc.—their dedicated focus is on the "repertory", namely, what people do in the activity of their doing it. Second, artistic practice is a big part of the performance studies project… *The relationship between studying performance and doing performance is integral.* Third, fieldwork as "participant observation" is a much-prized method adapted from anthropology and put to new uses… Fourth, it follows that performance studies is actively involved in social practices and advocacies. (*Performance Studies* 2, my emphasis)

I continue to draw on this definition to understand performance as a field of study, a methodology and an analytical tool. While Schechner breaks down the components of research in performance studies, Nelson's model for practice as research in the arts (arts PaR) establishes how these components come together. Nelson describes arts PaR as:

> …involv[ing] a research project in which practice is a key method of inquiry and where, in respect of the arts, a practice (creative writing, dance, musical score/performance, theatre/performance, visual exhibition, film or other cultural practice) is submitted as substantial evidence of a research inquiry. ("Introduction" 9)

Whilst both scholars emphasize artistic creation, critical reflection and the interdisciplinary nature of such work, Schechner's definition leans more towards what Nelson considers practice-*based* research (my emphasis) which is "research which draws from, or is about, practice but which is articulated in traditional word-based forms (books, articles)" (Nelson, "Introduction" 10). According to Nelson's models, my research constitutes practice-*based* rather than practice-*as*-research ("From Practitioner to Practitioner-Researcher" 26–34) as I have not focused solely on performance creation. In addition to creating a series of productions and documenting them for submission, I have also conducted interviews and focus groups, and engage in the critical discussion of several literatures as part of my research process. Although this written component of the dissertation goes beyond a critical reflection on my artistic output, I lean towards performance-as-research because for me it operates on a continuum between Schechner's and Nelson's definitions. This continuum is captured by Fleishman's definition of performance-as-research as "research that is carried through or by means of performance, using methodologies and specific methods familiar to performance practitioners, and where the output is at least in

part, if not entirely, presented through performance"(28). Fleishman's definition is helpful in locating performance-based artistic practice at the heart of the research.

That said, Nelson's definition has been helpful in sifting through the different terms that overlap in their use of artistic processes or sensibilities within research. These include, but are not limited to, play building as qualitative research (Norris), theatre as method (Butterwick and Selman), narrative inquiry (Clandinin; Webster & Mertova), performative inquiry (Pelias), performance autoethnography (Spry), poetic inquiry (see Vincent), and lyric inquiry (Nielson), amongst others. In addressing the issue of relevance and understanding what I mean by using performance to foster women's leadership, it has been necessary to sift through these methods to arrive at defining my research method as performance-as-research.

These methods have also influenced my approach to using performance-as-research in the way they center relationality and their "respect for ordinary lived experience" (Clandinin 18). My performances are devised in collaboration with the performers to center their voices and experiences. Here, I draw on narrative inquiry, echoing Marie-Heleen Coetzee, who asserts that, "narratives and the way in which we story them are powerful means of creating, enforcing or changing personal and social realities," (95). Coetzee contends that storying is a performative act and argues for performative inquiry as a tool for engaging with performance practice to explore "the interplay between performance and performativity" (98), an interplay which is at the core of a decolonial feminist performance praxis. I connect Coetzee's claim to Ronald Pelias who describes performative inquiry as using the body as a site of knowledge, and a methodological tool in embodied practice. In the section, "Representative forms of Performative Inquiry," Pelias elaborates that performative inquiry manifests in three ways: literature in performance—the staging of literature such as plays and poems; performance ethnography—staging research

findings from ethnographic activities, and autobiographical performance—staging the details of someone's life, either the performer's or someone else's (paras.16–20). My approach follows the third manifestation as my productions focus on mine and my co-creators' life experiences. This understanding of performative inquiry also echoes Joe Norris's notion of play building, or collective creation, as qualitative research as well as Butterwick and Selman's theatre as methodology where "theatre creation itself was the mode of exploration, self-reflection, analysis, and documentation," ("Deep Listening" 12). I see these methodologies as articulating the writing and performing of the self, doing so collectively, and situating knowledge as co-created. This is a defining feature of using performance to foster women's leadership. I use performance-as-research to initiate conversation with other women, to interrogate our experiences as women collectively, and to body ourselves forth by sharing these experiences in the public space.

By using performance to foster women's leadership I also consider performance-as-research to be a form of action research, which Jean McNiff describes as "an enquiry by the self into the self, with others acting as co-researchers and critical learning partners," (28). Judi Marshall goes on to distinguish between first-, second- and third-person action research. She defines first person action research as

> involve[ing] a person cultivating an approach of inquiry to all they think, feel, and do, including being curious about their perspectives, assumptions and behaviour (Marshall and Reason, 2007). Their intent would be to develop their awareness, practice, choices and effectiveness in context, through developing their abilities to bring inquiry into the heart of ongoing action. (8)

I believe this speaks to the personal dimension of decolonial work and the performativity of a decolonial feminist performance praxis, and it is why I deem a deeper understanding of the socio-political context a necessary starting point for addressing challenges facing women.

Marshall also notes the similarities between first person action research and autoethnography, especially "the commitment to see the political in the personal" (8), although she does not see them as being interchangeable. She also adds that first person action research provides a foundation for inquiring with others. It also provides space for researchers to experiment with the translation processes between life and research and how they are interwoven and inform each other, and "to explore the connections and potential incongruences between our theorising and how we act" (xv–xvi). Using performance-as-research, especially the act of performance creation, addresses this process of translation between life and research. Marshall also notes critiques of first-person inquiry as potentially being self-indulgent or narcissistic (xix), concerns that have also been raised in relation to autoethnography (Ellis et al., sec.5). While I have kept these concerns in mind, I also note Saidiya Harman's insistence on the necessity of autobiographical examples to connect to historical and social processes (in Sharpe 8). Thus, living life as inquiry is not only a cousin of autoethnography but contains autoethnographic elements. I consider first person action-research to not only involve critical reflection on oneself and one's environment, but also as coming alongside the reader and/or audience and inviting them to reflect on their own situation.

I consider performance-as-research to be a multidisciplinary research method that is rooted in first person inquiry and accounts for subjectivity, situatedness and positionality (Kessi et al. 274). to create a living theory—a decolonial feminist performance praxis. It is also an

inductive methodology that privileges working through, in my case, historical erasure, structural and epistemic violence as well as internalized oppression.

Research Process:

Performance Creation:

Part of developing a decolonial feminist performance praxis involved creating a performance each year to refine my creative process. Three of the performances, *Being* (2016), *Nkadzi (2017)* and *The Thread that Binds* (*Threads,* 2018), were co-created with, and performed by other people while two, *In the Shadow of Blessings* (*Blessings*, 2017) and *The Space Between* (*Space*, 2021), were created and performed by me.

Being, Nkadzi, and *Threads* all built on each other as I used the question, "where are the women" as a starting point for exploring the notion of women's leadership in Botswana from different perspectives. For *Being* we talked about womanhood and the challenges of being a woman in Botswana. One of the key themes that arose from this was fragmentation as a result of multiple, sometimes contradictory, expectations of women in Botswana society, particularly young women, who are supposed to lead and yet are not socially sanctioned to do so: "You're not allowed to have your cake and eat it too because it's 'wrong', but you're expected to, but you can't" (Baatshwana). Tumisang Baatshwana talks about being part of a generation (late twenties to early thirties at the time) that is in between as this is a generation that experienced both our grandparents' way of life (traditional) and the transition into the technological age. I propose that this in-betweenness has created a sense of neurosis in this generation. To explore this neurosis further and expand the conversation, I engaged a larger cast for *Nkadzi*. We focused on the theme of "Gender and Mental Health," with the performer-creators sharing experiences of abuse, sexual assault, and loss.

In addition to exploring the issue of women's leadership collectively, another aim of *Nkadzi* was to build collaborative relationships with other women theatre practitioners. Influenced by Matchett, I conceive of collaboration as a feminist mode of creation. Research in business leadership has also found that women tend to work more collaboratively with their teams and use non-hierarchical approaches. Irene Wolfstone has argued for the integration of matricultures into our lived practices. *Nkadzi* and *Threads* privileged women-only teams to create space for the kind of deep-listening (Butterwick and Selman, "Deep Listening") that I believe is needed in the contemporary moment to achieve gender-equity and drive for lasting change.

Building on the previous two performances, *Threads* examined how personal experiences impacted women's responses to external barriers by exploring the themes of post-coloniality, decoloniality, Blackness, Africanness, womanhood, and tradition/culture. The performance also incorporated Botswana traditional performance forms, namely traditional dance, poetry, and storytelling. The use of traditional performance forms developed from discussions around culture in *Being* and my interest in decoloniality. Influenced by Tshane's research on storytelling and women's roles in popular theatre, I became interested in tracing the genealogy of women's traditions. Incorporating traditional elements was a way to use performance to explore our cultural knowledge and to consider what can be reclaimed to advance women's rights and gender equity.

My first solo performance, *Blessings,* began as an autoethnographic inquiry for a class project. I chose to develop it into a full-length performance in keeping with my desire to refine my creative process and presented it as part of a double bill with *Nkadzi* based on our theme of "Gender and Mental Health." I note *Blessings* because it laid the foundation for the last

production in the series, *Space*, through which I advance the concept of a SeTswana aesthetic. *Space* builds on the use of traditional performance modes from *Threads*, as well as the autoethnographic aspect of *Blessings,* to further explore the sense of neurosis and in-betweenness raised in *Being*. While the incorporation of Setswana performance genres in *Threads* focuses on tracing a genealogy of women's traditions, *Space* focuses on identity. Working towards a SeTswana aesthetic in *Space* continues the process of learning about the worldviews that organize Batswana's cultural understandings and attempts to challenge them on their own terms. The continued use of Botswana performance modes also gestures towards Indigenous research methodologies, which I believe are an important aspect of decolonial praxis. However, I do not yet characterize my methodology as Indigenous research because I do not fully carry that knowledge within me.

Interviews and Focus Groups:

In addition to creating performances, I conducted numerous interviews with performance practitioners and hosted focus groups between 2018 and 2020. I began by interviewing participants in South Africa and Zimbabwe in addition to Botswana to locate my work within a Southern African context. I conducted three interviews and focus groups in Botswana, five interviews in South Africa and eight interviews in Zimbabwe. After an initial review of these interviews, I decided to focus on Botswana and conducted additional interviews with female theatre practitioners between 2019 and 2020, including follow-up interviews with the casts and crew of *Threads* and *Nkadzi.* My selection of interviewees followed a "snowballing" effect (Yingling and McClain) as interviewees helped me identify more women theatre-practitioners in Botswana.

The first three focus groups I hosted in 2018 involved general members of the public to gauge perceptions of women's leadership, the women's movement in Botswana, and their thoughts on post-coloniality and decoloniality. Based on feedback from a participant in the first focus group, I also hosted focus groups in corporate spaces, resulting in another focus group in November of 2019. In March 2020, I hosted two focus groups with all the women I had interviewed and/or worked with in Botswana for this research process. These focus groups were motivated by the desire to build collaborative teams that led to the creation of *Nkadzi*, as well as the assertion that focus groups allow participants to share ideas and can thus lead to responses that they may not have thought of in an individual interview (Halliday and Brown 6).

I use thematic analysis to correlate the interviews, focus groups and post-performance discussions, and to connect them to the performances. I began my analysis by transcribing the Botswana interviews, the first three Zimbabwe interviews and the first three South Africa interviews. A strong theme in the interviews was the need to recognize the work that women are doing in their own spaces, exposing my own bias and the ways that I have internalized the idea that women in Botswana are not active in theatre. As a result, I decided to focus on the women that I had seen produce theatre and performance works, and thus on women performance makers in Botswana. This shift in perspective was also facilitated by the 2019 Maitisong Festival in Gaborone which privileged women-centered work in its program, allowing me to identify additional interviewees. Shifting my perspective also led me to work on historicizing women's roles in the development of theatre in Botswana as part of tracing a genealogy of women's traditions. The interviews that I conducted in relation to this aspect identified several women who were involved in the theatre companies of the 1990s and early 2000s.

Except for *Space*, which was presented online, each performance included a post-performance discussion. I also held a debrief with the cast and crew of each production, during which we discussed the themes of the play and our experiences of the process. To give performers a chance to say things they may not feel comfortable sharing in a group, I also held individual interviews with each performer. Understanding our experiences of the process was part of building long-term relationships to be able to collaborate in the medium- to long-term which I consider an important aspect of coming alongside research participants and collaborators.

Nkadzi was co-produced with other women to challenge the idea that women cannot work together and do not support each other. We instead found ourselves embroiled in conflict. To better understand the source of this conflict I conducted individual interviews with the cast and crew in 2019. Another strategy for building relationships was remounting *Threads* in 2021. Originally, we were supposed to remount both *Threads* and *Nkadzi* but were not able to do so due to Covid restrictions and a shortage of funds. We did, however, meet to review the performance and the script of *Nkadzi*, which allowed us to discuss some of the issues that arose during the initial production. During these discussions of the script, the cast emphasized the issue of emotional trauma as a potential barrier to women's participation. To dig deeper into the question of women's ability to work together, I asked performers to complete a pre- and post-performance survey and held another debrief after the 2021 performance of *Threads* to better understand the challenges of women-only teams. I chose to use written questionnaires as I thought this would allow the team to provide candid reflections on their experiences (available here). A recurring theme in our debriefing session was that women are not open with each other, which leads to tension in the rehearsal process.

Although performance-as-research helps to bridge the divide between theory and practice, Nelson notes that it can involve more labour because of its multi-modal, and I would add emergent, nature ("From Practitioner to Practitioner-Researcher" 9). But, as Kessi et al. note, epicoloniality is multi-sited and multi-dimensional (272) and thus requires multi-modal approaches if this new decolonial turn is to be successful. To be able to articulate a decolonial feminist performance praxis, I have had to begin with a process of sifting through ways of doing research and creating performance that can privilege the voices and lived experiences of identity groups that exist at the intersections of race, gender, class, and colonial imperialism. The methods I have highlighted privilege research that is rooted in and challenges my ways of being in the world. I posit a decolonial feminist performance praxis as a way of being and doing in the world that privileges relationality and the co-creation of knowledge in and through democratic dialogue.

Creative Process:

Within my performance creation, I use physical theatre as a method for devising performances. Devising work through a physical theatre approach is reliant on the performer-creators sharing their own stories (Disele 66). Stemming from both dance and theatre, physical theatre is a multi-modal genre that, in my view, creates space for different ways of knowing that are rooted in both cognitive knowledge and bodily experience. In this process, I locate myself as a facilitator/director and my cast as "performer-creators", using the performer's body as a resource (Disele 66). This is in keeping with Mignolo's assertion that decolonizing knowledge and decolonial knowledge-making are rooted in the body- (and geo-) politics of knowledge ("Epistemic Disobedience" 20). Jennie Reznek echoes this sentiment when she states that physical theatre's emphasis on the body as living, moving, and differentiated resists violence by

making the body a site of reclamation and creative power (5–6). Through her theatre company, Magnet Theatre, Reznek teaches physical theatre to youth from disadvantaged backgrounds in South Africa. She uses this work as an example to support her argument and position performance as a necessary strategy for responding to structural and epistemic violence by centering experience as knowing (Ermine, "Aboriginal Epistemology") and by reaching beyond the written archive to recover lost knowledge—bodying forth.

My use of the performer's body as a resource draws on the narrative inquiry concept of "come(ing) alongside" the performer-creators. In performance, coming alongside participants takes two forms: the sharing of stories during the creative process, and the building of a working relationship beyond the performance. The sharing of stories in the creative process involved taking a conversational walk with each of the performer-creators at the start of rehearsals. The conversational walk was an opportunity to talk openly with each performer, to get to know them, to elaborate on my own ideas and to reflect together on the idea of women's leadership. In *Nkadzi* and *Threads*, which involved bigger casts, each performer would come to rehearsal an hour before the official start time so that we could walk and talk before the rest of the team arrived. We would walk together around the University of Botswana campus, where the performances took place, and then find a place to sit and talk. At the end of the conversation, I would walk back ahead of the performer-creator to allow them to walk back alone in a silent walk. The silent walk was to give the performer-creator time and space to reflect on the aspects of our conversation that resonated strongly for them and to note the themes they wanted to explore further.

Back in the rehearsal room, the performer-creator would have an opportunity to journal before joining the rest of the cast for warm-up. During the rehearsal, we would have group

discussions about the themes we were exploring. I would then assign the cast tasks individually and in groups to generate material. Individually, performer-creators would improvise around the themes from our conversational walks; as a group, they would improvise around themes arising from our group discussions. For *Space*, because it was a solo performance, I took a conversational walk with my production manager who then gave me writing prompts.

Coming alongside the performer-creators forms part of the "living, re-telling and reliving" of personal stories (Clandinin 34). Re-telling participants' stories is a "process of coming alongside participants and then inquiring into the lived and told stories" *(ibid*). In my performance creation, re-telling participants' stories takes a slightly different form than in traditional narrative inquiry. While we inquire into the lived and told stories together, the participants retell their own stories by performing them. In this sense, performance is both a process of retelling and reliving stories.

After the week of conversational walks, discussions, and devising, I assigned the performer-creators a task to create a short performance of the story they wanted to tell. These performances are based on the drama therapy technique known as self-revelatory (self-rev) performance, which allows performers to transform deeply "personal material into theatrical creations" (Emunah 224). I found this technique useful because it gave the performers agency in choosing what and how much they wanted to share. At the heart of this task was encouraging the performer-creators to write themselves, and an understanding of writing the self as allowing performer-creators (women) to "become active agents participating in critique, creation and analysis of their worlds to discover ways to expand equity for themselves and others" (Davis 118). In keeping with action research principles, these individual tasks paved the way for collective exploration of the themes when building the performance.

The second week of rehearsals began with the performer-creators sharing their performances. Following the presentation of the self-revs, I put the performer-creators in pairs, and asked them to respond to each other's presentations, moving from writing the self, to collective/collaborative writing. Lorraine York notes that collective creation in theatre has been theorized "as a way out of existing structures for groups who feel themselves culturally disenfranchised" (162). York's statement echoes Vèvè A. Clark, who is more explicit in locating collective creation in theatre as a feminist mode of creation (260), while also noting that making women's experiences public follows a tradition of women gathering in socially sanctioned spaces, such as the well or the spigot, to "express the unspoken in their private lives" (251). I locate my work within this history of feminist collective creation and African women's representation, working with female-only teams to use theatre to create a women's space through which to critically examine and make public women's lived experiences. It is from this perspective that I argue for a need for greater representation of women on stage as a means for improving political recognition, if not representation.

Following the sharing of the self-revelatory performances, and the creation of responses between the performer-creators, I asked them to share their writing with me up to that point. I used the writing to create a draft script for the following weeks of rehearsal. Once we had a draft script we began more formal rehearsals, focusing on learning lines and choreography, emoting and characterization, and building up to the final performance. While we continued our discussions, the focus at this stage was on the show and less on the themes. *Being* and *Nkadzi* were one-off performances while *Threads* ran for three days and was remounted again in 2021. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the show was recorded and presented online as a Facebook event.

Conclusion:

I define my research method as performance-as-research, creating performances and conducting interviews, focus groups and post-performance discussions to facilitate dialogue about the status of women in Botswana. Performance-as-research is a multi-modal approach which is necessary for understanding the impact of intersecting oppressions on women's lived experiences. Central to my creative process is the use of devised creation to center my collaborators' voices and physical theatre to center the body. I use conversational walks in my ensemble work to get to know my collaborators better and discuss the themes of the production with them. The following chapters detail aspects of the creative process specific to each performance and discuss the themes that arose from them, starting with *Nkadzi*.

Chapter 3: Women, Leadership and Theatre in Botswana: Women's Collective Creation as Coalition Building in *Nkadzi*

In 2017, I co-produced *Nkadzi* with two of my fellow female artists in theatre and dance. *Nkadzi* continued a trajectory I started with *Being* (2016), to develop a model for creating work that I could sustain—financially, physically, and emotionally—over the medium to long term to facilitate consistent participation by women in theatre production in Botswana. This decision followed a 2016 forum discussion hosted by The Company@Maitisong (The Company) entitled "Can I take part?" The discussion stemmed from a concern that women were not participating in theatre creation. Although Mpho Rabotsima states that women have remained active in theatre as actresses (Rabotsima), by 2016 The Company was struggling to attract a satisfactory number of women to their auditions. This is despite The Company's efforts to create productions through which actors could have access to consistent, paying jobs.

Rabotsima, Mogobe and Lemmenyane all note that financial challenges present a barrier to women's continued involvement in theatre creation. Mogobe points out that the lack of funding and infrastructure development in Botswana—both in terms of organizational structure and physical buildings—have made it difficult to produce theatre, resulting in few opportunities for gainful employment. He cites this lack of opportunities as a major reason for the paucity of women participating in theatre as most promising theatre makers leave to seek employment in more stable and rewarding industries (Mogobe, *Research Interview*), although some remain involved on a part-time or voluntary basis. I have noticed, however, that participation on a voluntary or part-time basis still leads to the erasure of women in theatre and performance as their contribution is not fully recognized, diminishing women's visibility.

Participation on a part-time and/or voluntary basis also speaks to an issue raised by the, "Mme O kae?" report, that of the multiple roles played by women (Emang Basadi 7). While the "Mme O kae?" report focuses on women's participation in political leadership, some of the barriers it discusses also pertain to theatre and performance. In addition to multiple roles, these barriers include a lack of resources, lack of confidence due to socio-cultural factors, and socialization (Emang Basadi 5–7). Multiple roles in theatre and performance are through women writing, directing, producing, and sometimes acting in their own plays. This is a challenge because it can lead to burnout. I propose that burnout is another reason for the lack of women in theatre, especially in leadership roles. The absence of women in theatre is compounded by a dearth of mentorship for young theatre-makers, which overlaps with lack of resources. A lack of mentoring is particularly challenging as it makes it difficult for women to transition into production roles. My interest in co-producing *Nkadzi* was to see how to use collaboration to mitigate burnout and create space for younger theatre-makers to get involved in production roles by working with a woman-only team.

During the "Can I take part?" forum I was left feeling that women were not actually given space to speak about what challenges they faced. Instead, the conversation became dominated by men, even though the forum was facilitated by a woman. This highlighted, for me, the issue of voice and the lack of women's voices in defining the issues and challenges that affect them, and how to address these issues: another problem identified in the "Mme O kae?" report (Emang Basadi 7). Drawing on Acholonu's observation that in pre-colonial African societies women and men used to gather in separate spaces, I chose to work with an all-woman team to create a women's space where women could critically examine their lived experiences and speak about the challenges they face as women. I was especially interested in creating a

space where we can experiment and grow as artists. Following the "Can I take part?" Forum, I hypothesized that perhaps the issue was not necessarily that women were not showing up for auditions, but that the women who did audition were overlooked most likely because of lack of experience. How can you develop your craft with no time and space to practice? I resolved to fill the gap by creating work that engages emerging artists. In this way, I hoped to facilitate women's participation in theatre creation thereby inserting women's voices into the public space.

Despite my pre-existing relationship and seemingly shared ideals with my co-producers, the process was fraught with tension, recalling Pabalelo Tshane's notion of on- and offstage performances. Tshane defines onstage performances as "public theatrical performances by various theatre groups meant for an audience" and offstage performances as "the less-structured verbal and embodied gestures that occur in private one-to-one conversations, funerals, weddings, storytelling performances, workshop discussions as well as casual pre-performance conversations and actions" (13). The concept of on- and offstage performances emerges from Tshane's critique of popular theatre performances in Botswana, especially with regards to how such performances address women's participation. Tshane argues that popular theatre is still controlled by men, and functions as a theatre of domestication because it is funded by the state. As such, it perpetuates state narratives that simplify community issues, including issues that affect women (4–30). She posits offstage performances as sites for counter-discourse and calls for linking on- and offstage performances to guard against the "usurpation of marginalized voices" (Tshane 29). Creating women centered performances is how I link my onstage performances to my offstage performances, especially with regards to women's participation and gender equity. It is why I have moved towards a decolonial feminist performance praxis as a strategy for being and doing.

This chapter reflects on the production of *Nkadzi*. I believe that performance can foster women's leadership by challenging socio-cultural norms that limit women's agency, creating space for women to discuss issues that affect them and challenge prevailing narratives about women's roles and place. But I also contend that for this work to translate into real-life, women must be critically aware and reflective of how and where we take up space. In exploring how to use performance to foster women's leadership I find it necessary to focus on what women are doing, to think and work through the issues of socialization and confidence. How do women see themselves, their experiences, and their responses to the world around them? How do I see myself? This highlights the action-oriented aspect of my work which focuses on interrogating my own leadership practice in the context of performance creation and theatre education to consider how my onstage performances influence and/or are influenced by my offstage performances.

Nkadzi

Creative Process:

We created *Nkadzi* over a period of four weeks, performing in the fifth week. Setting a time limit was to develop best practices for ourselves to be able to sustain our work. We wanted to contain the rehearsal process to increase the value of the performers' pay. The show was performed as part of a double bill with my autoethnographic performance, *In the Shadow of Blessings* (*Blessings*). Following the performances, we held a talkback to gauge audience members' views on the themes portrayed in the performances.

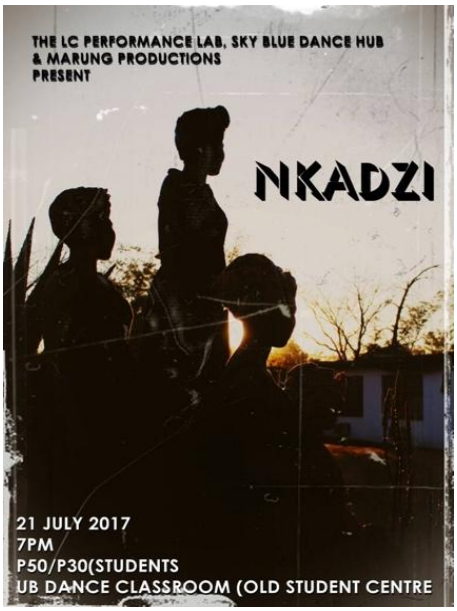

Fig. 1. Chris Mangiroza. Nkadzi Poster. 2017

I took up the role of director, with one co-producer being the choreographer (the choreographer) and the other the assistant director (the AD). Both co-producers were meant to help with dramaturgy. We started with the broad theme of gender and mental health, which we narrowed down through conversational walks, group discussions and improvisation. I led the early stages of rehearsals, setting the performers tasks to generate content for the performance and compiling the final script. The AD led the later rehearsals focusing on character development and finalizing the performance. The final performance integrated movement and poetry, following the concept of lyric inquiry (Neilsen). I resisted dialogue to heighten affective response and minimize being didactic, which is always a risk in theatre with social justice aims. I believe using "nonrationalist writing" (Neilsen, para.10) can "expand perspectives on human experience" (Vincent 51). In describing the performance, I use the character names and refer to the performers using their initials to maintain some confidentiality because the performance was derived from personal experiences, some of which are sensitive.

Performance:

Black out. The performers start speaking in unison, almost chanting, under their breath:

Dear Lord Jesus,

Mwari, Ndzimo, Modimo

Bua le bana ba gago

Nkadzi, nkazazana

Thedzani ipapa

Vhakazi, ko indaba ku nyarara so

Mosadi ke thari ya sechaba

Mosadi o tshwara thipa ka fa bogaleng.

They repeat this prayer/chant, getting louder with each repetition. The lights come up to reveal four performers in a diagonal line, each sitting on a stool. The audience is seated in a horseshoe/semi-circle shape around the performers. Two performers face one side, while the other two face the other. They are wearing long, black dresses with wide straps along with headwraps made of African wax fabric. The headwraps are of different colours and are tied according to each performer's preference to denote their own unique style. Throughout the performance the cast move the stools to create different spatial configurations and images.

Prayer

Once the lights are up, they repeat the chant one more time before launching into their own individual prayers. The other three speak softly as "Bubuya" (CB) says her prayer out loud. Each performer says their prayer, all ending with "Love. Lerato. Kuda." "Goitse" (LK) is the last to say her prayer. Beat. They all start speaking in unison again, each reciting her own prayer.

They stand up, pick up their stools and move around the space, ending the scene by placing the stools in a straight line. Beat.

Love…?

One performer, Goitse, stands against the wall at the back of the stage area, and hums a melancholic tune. Another performer, "Obakeng" (TS), stands at the front of the performance area, on the opposite side from Goitse, performing a movement sequence. Bubuya and "Nelly" (NL) stand on either side of one stool in the middle of the playing area, facing each other. They mirror each other. Bubuya speaks in Kalanga while Nelly echoes her in English. The poem questions the power dynamics in male-female relationships, ending by telling the listener, presumably a man, that, "You crushed my spirit, you crushed my heart." They freeze with their arms crossed over their chests. Goitse and Obakeng pull the stools on the ends out of the line and sit. They each recite a monologue, punctuating their words with movement. Obakeng asks if she is not worth loving, while Goitse questions why love is so difficult, stating that she is always in the wrong even when she did nothing wrong. Obakeng is angered by this, asking the listener, "why crush my spirit, my dreams and needs?" When they finish Nelly and Bubuya become animated again, performing a movement sequence that mimics slapping each other. They speak in unison, shouting into the "mirror", while Goitse and Obakeng respond with movement:

You must

Crush my heart

Crush my spirit

Crush my strength

Crush my soul

Crush my flesh

Crush my womb

Crush my mind, too big for you

Silence me

My thoughts

My values

Principles

My ways

My opinions

My dreams, wants and needs

Crush me for you so you can feel free

Subject me to torments

Nightmares and wet dreams

Wet dreams

Not of pleasurable memories and sexual fantasies,

But

Wet dreams of tears flowing day and night and even in my sleep

You choke my voice

You choke my truth

You choke my progression

Success and

Greatness.

ALL: Love. Lerato. Kuda.

(Beat).

Beaten

Bubuya moves to the front of the stage area, remaining center. To her left, Nelly and Obakeng stand side by side, facing the opposite side of the stage. They perform a duet as Bubuya narrates a story about her father beating her for getting drunk at school. Goitse moves away from the back wall and walks forward as though trying to sneak into the house. She is "caught" by her father. As Bubuya narrates, Goitse re-enacts her own altercations with her father, punctuating Bubuya's monologue. Her actions become increasingly frantic as the beatings become worse, ending with her crying until she passes out.

ALL: "Love. Lerato. Kuda.

Robbed

They repeat the opening chant/prayer again as they transition to the next scene. Nelly and Goitse stand facing each other on either side of one stool towards the front while Bubuya and Obakeng do the same towards the back. Nelly and Goitse take turns speaking as Bubuya and Obakeng perform a duet. Their movements are weighty as they lean their heads on each other's shoulders and bend over from the waist, as though pulling each other down. Nelly talks about questioning her self-worth and contemplating suicide. The rest of the cast speak in unison, mimicking the voices in her head:

You're nothing

You're worthless

What are you trying to say? You sound stupid.

Quiet! You look like a fool!

Quit it! You don't have the confidence

That's too big a dream for you…!

Goitse talks about her 21st birthday. As Nelly concludes her story, she swaps places with Bubuya. Goitse continues the story of the 21st birthday. All her friends were out of town. A male acquaintance insisted she come to his house. Her "no" was not accepted. Bubuya and Obakeng conclude the scene:

Death at my birth

No joy

No confidence

A burdened heart

His scent, his face, forever a part of you

His clothes, now this one his face you can't recall.

Love. Lerato. Kuda.

Blocked

Nelly speaks, asking the rest of the cast why they are blocking her. They do not respond. She tries to speak to Goitse who stands across from her and does not get a response. She goes to Bubuya and Obakeng and tries to speak to them too. They also do not hear her. She concludes that they cannot see her because they *are* her.

Transition.

Release

Bubuya, Obakeng and Nelly pull their stools to make a square as Goitse speaks. She is waking up and does not recognize the people around her. They position the stools in a square to create a room as Nelly stands in the center. Flashback to Nelly's suicide attempt. She explains that she wanted to end her life because of the death of her father. As she "takes" the pills, the

others speak. Bubuya explains that she needed release, Goitse asks us to let her sleep, and Obakeng recites the prayer for Nelly's "corpse." As they speak, they shift to form a line. They move forward in single file and form a diagonal line facing the front:

This is for us

This is us

This you have to hear

My past torments me

My dad so violent

My mum helpless

My dreams are dying

My dad is killing us

I surrender

My dreams are dying

I am dying

My own blood is killing me

I surrender

But why should I surrender

Let's not surrender.

They start singing and go to exit, taking the chairs with them.

The lights fade.

The End.

Themes in the Performance:

Nkadzi took as its starting point the issue of mental health. The theme of gender and mental health grew out of my curiosity about post-natal depression, which I explored through *Blessings*. Staging *Nkadzi* alongside *Blessings* allowed me to move between an individual exploration and a collective exploration to consider the internal barriers that women face, their responses to those barriers and how that impacts their capacity for leadership. In our conversational walks, I asked very broad questions to allow the cast to reflect on the topic. I started the discussions by asking the performer-creators what they understood about gender, what they understood about mental health, and what they thought the two had to do with women's leadership. I also asked them about their own personal experiences coming into leadership. The pieces that we used in the performance reflected trauma from experiences of physical and sexual violence as well as loss. It also highlighted responses such as alcohol abuse and suicidal ideation to cope with these stressors.

The theme of domestic and sexual violence was portrayed through the offerings of three of the performers and was expressed in "Beaten" and "21". The sense of self-destruction portrayed in "21" echoes Seloilwe and Thupayagale who note that experiences of abuse can lead to depression (40). Suicidal ideation was expressed in "Release" through the character of Nelly. The performer who made this offer was talking about the loss of her father. I contend that the theme of suicide in "Release" also reflects a recurrent theme in our rehearsal discussions. The performers often noted a sense of being killed, or at least of being under attack. I believe this is a reflection on the ways that physical, sexual, and structural violence intermesh and act to silence and erase women. This is further expressed towards the end of "Love…?" when the performers accuse the listener of crushing their spirit.

"Love…?" also expresses the theme of gender relations which was prevalent in our discussions when creating the show. The performers in that scene state:

Bubuya: Ndo cha kuti mo ndi gwadzisa

Nelly: Would you accept me as I am

Bubuya: Ndo cha kuti mo ndi loba

Nelly: Will you hurt me

Bubuya: Kuti mo ndi bla

Nelly: Will you abuse me

Bubuya: Kuti mo ndi bulaya

Nelly: Will you lash me tongue and cheek

Bubuya: Mo ndi khona

Nelly: Can you handle me

Bubuya: Imwi mo ndi khona wale

Nelly: All of me

Bubuya: A ku no mu pengesa

Nelly: Without intimidation

Bubuya: Kuti buchilo changu ku no enda sebuanana

Nelly: Degradation of me

Bubuya: Mo shaka ndi chinyidza

Nelly: Suppression required of me

Bubuya: Kuti ba sze ba ti u nlume

Nelly: For you to feel like a man

Bubuya: Kuti u khone ku milika se nlume

Nelly: For you to not feel less than a man

Bubuya: Kuti mu lebe mu ti ndiwe nlume ipapa

Nelly: For you to be comfortable in your own skin

Bubuya: Ma ndi gwadzisa moyo

Nelly: For you to not look weak

The statements in "Love…?" reflect the performers' concerns about women being socialized to act subservient to men. One performer noted that this has negatively impacted her career because she is seen as being "big headed" when she asserts herself (Lentebanye). In our discussions, the performers noted how the expectation to be subservient resulted in a lack of support for their endeavours, leading to burnout because they felt they were always fighting. One performer noted that for her this has resulted in a lack of confidence because "ga re sepe hela" (we are nothing), and a feeling that there is no use in trying to do anything. The concerns that the performers raise explain the seeming despondency among women when it comes to participating in social structures, echoing the findings in the "Mme O Kae?" report. This performer also highlights the danger of viewing communities through a deficit-based lens—the focus on what women are *not* doing fails to recognize what women *are* doing, and thus devalues their efforts, even to themselves.

While creating the performance did not immediately resolve the barriers that women face with regards to participation, it did break the silence around internal barriers that affect women's capacity to vie for opportunities where they do exist. This is exemplified by the performer who created and played the character of Goitse, LK. During a follow-up interview LK noted that she had never had an opportunity to reflect on her experiences in such depth and that doing so allowed her to break out of an abusive relationship and to start standing up for herself more

(Koosaletse). Another performer noted that participating in the production gave her courage to discuss issues that affect women openly, and to continue doing work in this area (Lentebanye). By creating space for women to interrogate the internal barriers they have faced while participating in theatre, *Nkadzi* allowed the performers to release their trauma by expressing it physically and vocally, thus moving through the violence they have experienced (Reznek). In this, I contend that performance serves a similar function to bloodletting rituals in African cultures (Rapoo, "Conjuring Africa" 123–24), which were used to heal individuals and communities. Rapoo notes that the portrayal of bloodletting in performance is used to express agency by liberating oneself from "previous debilitating psychological marking" ("Conjuring Africa" 123).

Although the process of *Nkadzi* was generative for LK, not all of the cast members felt the same way. During the review of the performance with the cast and crew in 2021, CB, the performer who created and portrayed the character of Bubuya, noted how traumatic it was. CB's comment points to the potential that retelling stories of trauma has to recreate the trauma, especially in performance as the performer has to (re)become the character. Julie Salverson writes about this, warning against "an aesthetic of injury" in which the performer's story becomes a spectacle and the audience become offstage voyeurs (paras.5–11). Salverson calls for "performances which testify [to] explore form and content in ways which move beyond … binaries … to invite and retell the complex mix of fears and desires, abilities and injuries, that comprise subjecthood" (para.23). This was the intention behind hosting a talk back—to allow audience members to "remain present, seeing and being seen, hearing and being heard" (Salverson, para.14). That said, I recognize that the performance needs to go further to become a safe space to interrogate the performers' concerns, especially if I am to go forward with this kind

of work. With this in mind, we made sure to have counsellors present during the early stages of rehearsal for the next production, *The Thread that Binds*, to provide emotional support for the performers.

Although there is still much work to be done, *Nkadzi* demonstrates how creating space for women to share and interrogate their experiences can challenge the violence that patriarchal culture enacts on women's bodies, inculcate a sense of women's agency at both an individual level and a communal level, and allow for self-reclamation.

Issues in the Creation Process:

While I consider the performance aspect of the show successful—we had a full house, and audience members identified with the challenges that the performance portrayed—I consider the process of coalition building less successful. Conflicts that arose during rehearsals resulted in us not restaging the show the following year, although that had been our intention.

In creating female-only teams I am interested in both the onstage performances—the work that we create together—and offstage performances—our ability to build relationships during the creative process and to maintain them beyond the production. I believe that this kind of collaborative work is how women can continue to create theatre, inserting women's voices and narratives into the public domain. I deem the potential of using performance to foster women's leadership to lie in the ability of onstage performances to influence offstage performances. This is reflected in Butterwick and Selman's notion of theatre as method, in which they worked with other women to address conflicts that arise in feminist movements due to differences in class, cultural and racial locations (Butterwick and Selman, "Deep Listening"; Butterwick and Selman, "Community-Based Art Making"). However, our focus on creating the onstage performance left little time to reflect on the offstage performance, or even to make sense

of it, leading to a rift in the relationship between some of us, specifically the AD and I. This conflict also led me to question how I am living up to feminist ideals in terms of relating to other women.

I believe the major source of conflict between the AD and me was a difference in directing styles. Whereas I position myself as a facilitator, it seemed to me that the AD took a more hierarchical approach. Because the AD led later rehearsals the performers were already used to the facilitative, co-creator approach and did not adjust well to the hierarchical approach. Part of the reason for this was that the performers were not able to distance themselves from their stories and could not approach the "characters" as they would for a more conventional script. This was difficult for me to communicate with the AD as she was already feeling like an outsider and that the space was not safe for her, and I was trying to balance making her feel safe and part of the team with making the performers feel safe. The divide between the AD and the rest of the team was exacerbated by the fact that the performers were not comfortable talking to the AD about how they were feeling. Although we had a debrief after the production, we did not fully address the conflict and critically reflect on how we could build relationships with each other, which was one of the aims of co-producing and co-creating the show.

Thinking about how our onstage performances reflect or influence our offstage performances, I interviewed the cast and crew members individually about their experiences during the creative process of *Nkadzi* to try to better understand the tension. The AD pointed out that we did not communicate well. Further, restricting the timeline for creating the performance did not allow us to dedicate time to developing a relationship as co-producers, a shared understanding of feminist values and how these should manifest in the theatre-making process. One of the performers added that the conversational walks at the beginning of the process

allowed me to build relationships with the cast and suggested that the AD should have been a part of those walks (Lentebanye). I would add that we were greatly disadvantaged by a lack of examples of women-led teams and mentors in creating work that centers women's stories, experiences, and voices, and so had to learn by doing.

Theatre and Women's Leadership:

The issues reflected in the creation of *Nkadzi* and the challenges we faced echo some of the issues identified as being a barrier to women's leadership. In the "Mme O kae?" study, Emang Basadi identified a lack of confidence due to socio-cultural factors, limited funding for women to participate in political leadership, sexist rhetoric in campaign strategies, multiple roles of women/competing priorities and limited time, and a lack of opportunities to network across party lines as some of the barriers to women's participation (4–8). This suggests that the issue is not so much the barriers women face, but the lack of space to collectively reflect on these issues and develop strategies to overcome them. The lack of space compounds structural barriers such as a constitution that is ambivalent towards gender (Bauer 26; Emang Basadi 4; Van Allen, "Bad Future Things" 142) and the first-past-the-post electoral system (Genderlinks, "Women Demand New Deal," paras.8–10; Emang Basadi 8). These barriers require continuous advocacy, which in turn requires a unified voice. The themes *Nkadzi* raises suggest that more work needs to be done to capacitate women to participate in shaping national narratives in different sectors. By using performance and addressing the issue of women's leadership in and through theatre, I have focused on what I deem to be internal barriers as well as on creating a women's space where we can critically interrogate barriers to women's participation and develop strategies to overcome and dismantle them.

I assembled a women-only team for *Nkadzi* because I believe that the potential of using performance to foster women's leadership lies in the ability of onstage performances to influence offstage performances. Specifically, performance provides the opportunity to emphasize both visibility and voice, going beyond increasing the numbers of women in leadership to include women's issues in the political agenda. Tshane, in reference to state-funded popular theatre initiatives, states,

> Without denying the importance of the final product, in my view the public on-stage performance is a limited and oftentimes hegemonic narrative. It is a narrative that is to a large extent influenced by the power relations between the theatre group, the state (funder), and the community. For this reason, I propose a (renewed) focus on what I call performances of the "off-stage" (verbal and embodied gestures that occur in rehearsals, casual one-on-one discussions, and observations that I made outside the theatrical on-stage performances) as a space where discourses of the subordinate are partially located. There is power enunciated in both the "on-stage" and "off-stage" performances. Hence, I proffer that it is meaningful for popular theatre interventionists to consider both the off-stage and the on-stage space discourses, whether they are in concert with or contradict one another. (Tshane 50).

Tshane's study aims to locate women in popular theatre, and she argues that despite popular theatre interventionists' claims of community participation this is not fully the case because target communities are not involved in the play-making process. She adds, "funding, or lack thereof, plays a fundamental role in the limited involvement of communities in the theatrical representations of 'their' issues" (5). Creating *Nkadzi* as an ensemble production and self-funding were a way to involve my target community—women in Botswana—in shaping

theatrical representations of their issues. However, *Nkadzi* also reveals a need to capacitate communities to speak up when space is created for them so as not to replicate existing patterns of power. This is reflected in our inability to openly discuss the conflict in our debriefs at the end of the production.

Tshane also notes the dominance of men in the development and performance of popular theatre interventions. This mirrors the political sphere, where despite the involvement of women, men dominate in leadership positions. The need for women to speak for themselves was reflected in 2020 through the establishment of a Parliamentary Caucus on Women to address the high levels of gender-based violence in Botswana. While the caucus is much needed and long overdue, it is telling and worrisome that the motion for it was raised by a male member of parliament even though the minister responsible for gender was a woman. When the caucus was eventually set up it comprised five men and one woman, who was appointed because the caucus falls under her ministry (Makati). The fact that the prevalence of gender-based violence came back into the public consciousness through the voice of a man, and that the inquiry is being led by men, demonstrates how men still control the narrative. While male allyship is necessary, women must lead the charge in addressing issues that affect them.

Conclusion:

My interest in telling women's stories as a strategy for fostering women's leadership stems from a desire to challenge dominant narratives and discourses about womanhood in Botswana. In this chapter I reflected on the creation of *Nkadzi*. By working with a woman-only team and co-producing the show, I explored collective creation as coalition-building. Working with a woman-only team did indeed create a women's space and an opportunity to reflect critically on issues that affect us. However, more work needs to be done for our onstage

performances to influence our offstage performances. This is necessary to achieve both visibility and voice for women, a connection I consider key to fostering women's leadership. *Nkadzi* also showed parallels between women's participation in theatre and women's participation in politics. The process provided important lessons for coalition-building through collective creation which I carried into the next production.

Chapter 4: Reclaiming women's histories and cultures: the use of traditional performance modes in *The Thread that Binds.*

"To kumbila wanano, to kumbila mbakiso, to kumbila ne batana kwe bakadzi (we ask for peace, harmony and unity amongst women)," (Disele et al.).

These are the closing lines of the 2018 production, *The Thread That Binds* (hereafter *Threads*). The lead dancer says the lines just before the cast perform "Wosana," a popular dance of the Kalanga, an ethnic group from North-Eastern Botswana. Our starting point for *Threads* were the themes of postcoloniality, decoloniality, Blackness, Africanness, womanhood and tradition/culture. The performance incorporated Botswana-based performance genres, namely traditional[7] dance, poetry, and storytelling. The use of Botswana-based traditional performance

Fig. 2. Disele et al. The Thread that Binds. 2018. University of Botswana

[7] Traditional dance is the umbrella term used to refer to the cultural dances of the different ethnic groups in Botswana.

forms built on a sense of fragmented identity and in-betweenness identified in an earlier production, *Being* (2016). My aim was to consider what has been lost in the quest for modern development and what can be reclaimed to allow us to (re)empower women and advance gender equity. The incorporation of traditional performance forms stemmed from my belief that it is women's traditions and claims to history that disappear when performance practices are rendered as lacking the staying power to transmit vital knowledge (D. Taylor 5). This belief follows Pabalelo Mmila's observation in relation to oral storytelling, which she asserts as predominantly a women's practice in Botswana (238; Tshane 68). I believe storytelling is one example of how women's traditions become erased. Whereas other traditional performance forms have persisted as part of theatre and performance in post-colonial Botswana, storytelling has not fared as well, demonstrating how women's work tends not to be valued because it is relegated to the private space and women's accomplishments are not always documented. Pabalelo Tshane insists on highlighting traditional storytelling as a site of women's cultural and knowledge production to redress this lack of documentation and to proffer an alternative to the "biased and tainted accounts of women as passive victims that voicelessly succumb to their oppression" (263). Tshane and Mmila's assertions about storytelling have encouraged me to look at women's traditions in my own work.

Further, I have noted that when women's accomplishments are documented, their successes are often presented as exceptions rather than norms. This recalls Jamieson Hall's argument, in relation to women in higher education, that, "the stolen legacy of our foremothers denied generation after generation that testified to the possibility of female learning… As each generation succeeded its legacy was lost to the next" (11). The myth of exceptionalism is most notable in Botswana's politics today and is often accompanied by the de-feminization of the

women who do overcome barriers to assume political office (Rapoo, "Constructions of Womanhood" 9). This is reflected in the representations of women such as Margaret Nasha and Dorcas Makgatho who are noted for their loudness, which is considered a masculine quality or at the very least unbecoming for a woman. I note my own internalization of this narrative which is reflected in my response to Moduduetso Lecoge's "A Woman of Many Firsts," a biographical play based on her grandmother, Gaositwe Chiepe. During a preview of the play, I asked Lecoge what challenges Mma Chiepe had faced in her journey to political leadership, and she insisted that Mma Chiepe was adamant that she did not face the kinds of barriers we have come to expect (Lecoge). This suggests that the subjugation women experience (and the superiority men claim) in post-colonial Botswana is not necessarily a result of our cultural practices, as is often suggested in feminist texts. Mma Chiepe's story is one of the reasons I have moved towards decolonization and a reclamation of culture. I argue for decolonization as un-learning my culture from a European/colonial perspective, and re-learning it from its own perspective to understand the wisdom behind the practices.

This position may seem like an attempt to return to a "before," and more so, risks romanticizing cultural practices. However, I consider it an important turning away from Eurocentrism and masculinity to both historicize women as well as to understand the ways in which cultural processes have intermeshed with Christianity and European modernity to the detriment of women in former colonies. Turning away from Eurocentrism is also about not looking at cultural practices and women through a deficit-based lens as focusing only on the deficiencies of a community inadvertently perpetuates the same power systems we decry (Kretzmann and McKnight 1–4). Kretzmann and McKnight propose an asset-based approach which focuses on identifying the capacities, skills and assets in a community (5, 9–10). For this

research, an asset-based approach has meant resisting the assumption that "there are no women" in the theatre or that women are not participating in theatre production and instead asking *who* are the women that are participating and what are they doing? This shift in perspective challenges the prevailing narrative, which places a focus on leadership in the public domain and fails to acknowledge where and how women are leading. A deficit-based approach to women's leadership, I contend, asks women to work harder to make themselves seen and heard with little to no support. Further, the focus on business and politics in Botswana perpetuates a narrative of men as cultural leaders to the detriment of women, a phenomenon that is reflected through the "brain drain" of women from theatre.

The portrayal of female leaders as exceptions renders women's leadership invisible, erasing its history. This erasure is what makes it necessary for women to story themselves and insert those stories into the public archive. For me, it has also made it necessary to learn traditional forms of theatre and performance, which are currently excluded from the drama and theatre curriculum at the university level and treated as extra-curricular activities at the secondary school level. This separation reflects Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vázquez's claim that "modern aestheTics have played a key role in configuring a canon, a normativity that enabled the disdain [and] the rejection of other forms of aesthetic practices" (4). They proffer the term "aestheSis" instead, which they define as,

> an option that delivers a radical critique to modern, postmodern and altermodern aestheTics and, simultaneously, contributes to making visible decolonial subjectivities at the confluence of popular practices of re-existence, artistic installations, theatrical and musical performances, in literature and poetry, in sculptures and the visual arts. (*ibid*).

In addition, Carolyn Korsmeyer reminds us that the development of aesthetics is also a gendered project, especially in its separation of art from utility. Lesego Nchunga echoes this sentiment with her observation (in response to a comment about construction) that women's language describes the utility of their doing and so tends to focus on practicality (Nchunga, *Research Interview*). Perhaps this is why it seems as though "women are happy to do spade work" as Gaolape Basuhi puts it (Basuhi, *Research Interview*). My own focus on practicality informed my time at The Company@Maitisong, as I was committed to building up the industry and so neglected financial reward. While I do not think this is in itself a bad thing, the challenge is that whereas women are focused on doing the work that they believe needs to be done, they find themselves providing their labour in exploitative circumstances, and where there is financial gain, their labour is devalued to the extent that they are not compensated fairly for their efforts. This has not only created a brain drain of women in the theatre but also divestment through the loss of resource persons who take their fundraising and advocacy to other industries.

That said, there remains a level of mistrust of each other amongst women that makes coalition building difficult. This is reflected in interviews with women, where interviewees brought up the issue of the "pull her down syndrome" (PHD). Based on these observations, it is no wonder that women have become excluded from theatre-making in various ways, and that traditional stories and storytelling have disappeared from the mainstream. As such, learning traditional forms for the purpose of theatre-making has becomes a strategy for de-linking from imperial (and patriarchal) knowledge-making (Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience" 178). My observations made it important for me to not only learn traditional performance forms, but to identify and learn from knowledge keepers. To that end, in 2016 I started working with Gaolape Basuhi (popularly known as Aus' G), the coordinator of Mogwana Traditional Dance Group. We

met weekly for about a month while I was working on *Being*. At the time, we were not able to incorporate what we learnt into the performance because we were still finding the form and the lessons were short-lived. When we created *Threads,* I invited Aus' G to develop a one-week workshop to teach the cast and me traditional dance. She also gave us a short workshop on storytelling, during which she performed a few stories for us. In addition, we took a workshop with Benjamin Janie, a lecturer in African Languages and Literature at the University of Botswana, and a poet. Incorporating traditional performance forms in *Threads* was an attempt to use performance to not only reclaim culture, but to reclaim *women's* cultures, thereby resisting a deficit-based approach to women's empowerment that positions women from the Global South as perpetual victims, especially of their cultural traditions.

The incorporation of traditional performance forms is inspired by African contemporary dance and Afrofusion, which blend African and European dance traditions. African contemporary dance has roots in Senegal and South Africa. In Senegal, African dance was developed by dancer, choreographer and teacher, Germaine Acogny who was interested in synthesizing African traditional dances to develop "a new African Dance idiom," (Acogny 23). In South Africa, Afrofusion is credited to Sylvia Glasser and her company, Moving into Dance Mophatong (MIDM), who began blending modern dance with African dance and music (Glasser 5–7). MIDM is also one of several dance companies that worked across racial lines despite the apartheid regime's efforts to segregate races (Sichel 9). In this, it echoes other protest traditions which have used "theatrical syncretism" (Balme 1) to create modes of performance that challenge dominant forms. I believe this continues the project of epistemic disobedience (Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience").

The Thread that Binds:

Creative Process

We created *Threads* over a seven-week period with the first week being dedicated to workshops in traditional performance forms, namely traditional dance, poetry, and storytelling. The second week was dedicated to conversational walks with each of the performers and group discussions about the themes of the performance. From the previous production, *Nkadzi*, we learnt that performers tend to share sensitive information about their personal experiences and so we engaged counsellors to join our discussions during the week of conversational walks and devising to help create a safe space. The workshops in traditional performance forms were based on Yen Yen Joyceln Woo's premise that arts-based-researchers must make an effort to acquire skills in the artistic mediums they use (327). That said, although the workshops were meant to build competency in traditional art-forms, they were also aimed at reclaiming these forms of performance since the performers were all trained in the Western tradition of theatre making. This relearning was an attempt to rethink not only ourselves, but Setswana cultural traditions and how we understand them. Put another way, it was an opportunity to learn other languages of expression for storying ourselves. I contend that this reclamation of culture rejects the victimhood imposed on post-colonial female subjectivity.

During the traditional dance workshops Aus' G taught us three dances that are associated with women: *Kapi*, *Wosana* (also referred to as *Hosana,* depending on the dialect), and *Khoba*. According to Aus' G, *Kapi* is a San dance game usually played by women that celebrates the melon that the San used as a source of water during dry seasons (Basuhi, *Traditional Dance Workshop*). In it, performers dance in pairs; with one person in front, holding and playing with the melon, and her partner behind her. They dance together until the performer in front throws

the melon to the one behind. *Khoba* references an injured bird, imitating the way it hops and *Wosana* is based on the rain dance of the Kalanga. The name is derived from the dancers who used to perform the ritual. In *Wosana,* the dancers wear black skirts to represent rain clouds and white tops to represent rain showers (Basuhi, *Traditional Dance Workshop*). Our costumes resembled the *Wosana* attire with the exception that the skirts were lined with bright coloured fabrics. The performers also adorned themselves with wooden beads and wore leg shakers used for traditional dance.

We ended up incorporating these traditional dance styles into the performance. We also incorporated elements of orature, *Poko* (Tswana praise poetry), and contemporary poetry and dance. Orature came in the form of one of the performers' offerings in the devising stages, "*Mosetsana*" (Setswana for girl), which talks about a girl who grew up in colonial Botswana. It highlights the lack of agency afforded young girls, and women, as well as the changes brought about by independence; both the good and the bad. "*Mosetsana"* was structured using the tone and elements of a traditional story, starting with the opening, "*Gatwe e rile*" (the Setswana equivalent of "Once upon a time"). The characters are named after this story and are numbered in order of each performer's appearance in the script. Some of the poetry grew out of the workshop with Mr. Janie, where we discussed the elements of praise poetry and were tasked with developing our own poems to put what we learned into practice. During our presentations, one of the groups created short praise poems for each other. Inspired by this, and another poem in which one of the performers praised Kgosi Mosadi Seboko, chief of the Balete ethnic group, I asked each of the performers to write a poem praising themselves. I then assigned the poem each performer had written to their *Kapi* partner to recite as part of their duet.

The original performance of *Threads* (2018) took place outdoors, with the first three scenes taking place in a passageway (Fig. 3). Whilst performing outside stemmed from a desire to occupy space in the University of Botswana as a public space, the choice of starting in the passageway addressed some logistical issues. The first was to provide the performers with backstage options for the opening scene, and the second was to make it easier for the audience to find us, as people who do not know the University of Botswana campus well tend to get lost. Starting in the passage also allowed people to enter discreetly if they were late. We performed *Threads* again in 2021 and presented it online. This chapter focuses on the 2018 performance.

Performance:

We (the audience) enter a passage, where we are invited to sit. Once everybody is seated, we hear a voice calling out, "*Khoba wee, khoba*!" Other voices respond, "*Hee Khoba*," coming from different directions. The performers enter the playing space one by one. They wear white vests and black skirts and are adorned with beaded necklaces.

Fig. 3. Disele et al. The Thread that Binds opening scene. 2018. University of Botswana

They continue their call and response, dancing playfully with each other. Mosetsana 1 (MK) leads them into a semi-circle, facing us. The lead singer, Mosetsana 3 (TS), brings the call and response to an end. They laugh amongst themselves. Mosetsana 4 (NG) calls for another

song. They start another version of the same song, taking turns to dance in the middle of the circle. Each performer does a variation of the footwork, which follows a seven-count. Mosetsana 3 dances last and closes the song. Storyteller (MT) moves towards the center, regarding the audience intently. The others sit down in the semi-circle formation, watching her. Once they are settled, Storyteller begins, "*Gatwe e rile."* The group responds, "*Tlhaba wee!*" (roughly "tell us the story"). Storyteller repeats, "*Gatwe e rile*," this time to us. Catching on, some of us respond, "*Tlhaba wee!*" Storyteller continues, telling the story of Mosetsana, who was married young to a much older man, and how hard she worked taking care of her in-laws—cooking and cleaning—while her husband was away, presumably working at the mines. Storyteller also tells us about Botswana's independence, and how it brought opportunities for Mosetsana, such as the opportunity to go to school and to get formal employment. She also warns us that the country's independence did not mark the end of Mosetsana's struggles.

End scene.

Storyteller moves aside as the other performers stand up, Mosetsana 1 and Mosetsana 4 exit the playing space. Mosetsana 3 stands in the center while Mosetsana 2 (LK) stands to the side watching the scene, deep in thought. Storyteller approaches Mosetsana 3 and walks around her intimidatingly: "Who owns you Lolo?" she asks, angrily. "Who loves you? *I* own you. *I* love you. *Ek het jou lief (*I love you*)*. *Praat di dae* (say it) Lolo… SAY IT!" Mosetsana 2 jumps, as though jolted out of her reverie. She looks back at the scene and we understand that this is her memory. As she starts telling us about this relationship, Mosetsana 3 and Storyteller exit. She tells us that the relationship was like a train, going on and on. She imitates the train until she is too tired to go on. "*Kwanele*!" (Enough!), she exclaims; concluding that she has to be her own woman. She exits.

We hear singing in the background, a funeral song. Storyteller comes back to tell us that we can go "inside" to pay our last respects to "the deceased".[8] She ushers us out of the

Fig. 4. Disele et al. The Thread that Binds Mosetsana 1 addressing the audience. 2018. University of Botswana.

passageway into a second playing space, a courtyard (Fig. 4). We enter the courtyard to find Mosetsana 3 standing in the playing area, watching as the rest of the cast carry Mosetsana 1 in and lay her down in the center. They circle around her and "exit" to take up positions at the back of the playing space, where they continue to "mourn". We follow them, also "paying our last respects" before taking our seats. Mosetsana 3 continues to observe the scene until we are all seated. She asks the funeral attendees why they are crying. Her question prompts a flashback to an office scene. The colleagues gossip about Mosetsana 3, accusing her of sleeping her way to the top. Mosetsana 3 tells them that they did not see her potential when she was alive, that their snide comments and backstabbing are what killed her. She lies down on the ground, swapping

[8] In Botswana funeral proceedings begin with a viewing of the deceased. The casket is usually kept in the house for this, and people go inside to pay their last respects. Once the funeral starts, the casket is closed and taken outside.

places with Mosetsana 1. Mosetsana 1 asks women what it is that we really want, noting that we do not seem to enact woman empowerment even though we say that is what we want.

As Mosetsana 1 concludes her monologue, Mosetsana 3 rises from the ground and starts a song, *Mma Mati*. In the song, the singer asks another woman for help with her child so that she can finish her chores on the farm. The rest of the cast perform a contemporary dance piece, transitioning to Mosetsana 2's second poem. Here she tells us that we need to appreciate her, the woman, more, to recognize her strengths rather than just focusing on her weaknesses. She ends by picking up a drum, signalling another group dance piece. The cast interpret the dance as depicting women carrying different burdens and struggling with them. Despite the weight of their burdens, they refuse to succumb to the struggle and instead keep trying to pick themselves up until they find a way through. As they find their way through, they pick up momentum, until eventually they triumph.

Mosetsana 2 uses the drum to signal another scene change. She leads Mosetsana 1 and Storyteller to a ramp at the back of the playing space (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5. Disele et al. The Thread that Binds Mosetsana 3 and Mosetsana 4 duet. 2018. University of Botswana.

The three recite a poem while Mosetsana 3 and 4 perform a duet. At the end of the duet, Mosetsana 2 uses the drum to signal another scene change as they transition to *Kapi.* The

performers dance in pairs, playing with a ball to signify the melon. Mosetsana 2 and 4 start these duets, with Mosetsana 2 praising Mosetsana 4. Mosetsana 4 exits, and Mosetsana 1 enters to play with Mosetsana 2. They continue like this, with the performer who enters praising the person they find in the center, until Mosetsana 4 returns to close the song. Storyteller enters the semi-circle to "end" the story, reminding us that even though a lot has changed there is still more to be done. Mosetsana 3 comes forward into the semi-circle, kneels and says, "To kumbila wanano, to kumbila mbakiso, to kumbila ne batana kwe bakadzi" (Fig. 2) before starting *Wosana,* the rain dance. End of show.

Themes in the Performance:

The structure of *Threads* followed a trajectory of development, from girlhood to womanhood. We placed *Khoba* at the beginning of the show as it is a playful dance and is often performed by younger dancers. The performers entering with *Khoba*, all coming from different directions, echoed children coming from their homes to go and play. The call and response also engaged the audience, pulling them into the performance. We placed "*Mosetsana*" after *Khoba* to resist romanticizing culture, to complicate the binary between culture and modernity, and to encourage a critical look at how each one shapes our conceptions of womanhood. Aesthetically, placing the two pieces at the beginning of the performance created a structure that could facilitate meaning making.

Interspersing *Kapi* with praise poetry created a celebratory tone and showcased the need for women to celebrate themselves and each other. In addition, *Kapi* and *Wosana,* reference water. I tend to gravitate towards water in my performances, usually to symbolise cleansing or healing. Batswana, nationally speaking, have a strong affinity to water as the country is two-thirds desert and semi-arid. However, that the two dances are usually performed by women also

signals the symbolic connections sometimes made between water and femininity. Daniel Rothbart argues that water is given a feminine identity in different cultures due to its ability to give and sustain life (2). He notes, "water speaks to birth through our emergence from the womb but also contains the seed of death" (Rothbart 2). It is this giving of life I wish to signal by referencing water in my performances, seeking a renewal or rebirth, in *Threads*, of women's status as full citizens within the societies they are a part of—a recognition of their humanity as it were. The incorporation of two traditional dances that reference water was to suggest women's power and ability, their adaptability and resilience, as well as the need to heal past hurts in order to harness that power. Closing with *Wosana* signified hope for the future with regards to women's advancement. This celebratory closing was also a conscious choice to center joy and pleasure as strategies of self-affirmation and for resisting violence (Halliday and Brown 7–9).

A major theme that arose in *Threads* was lateral violence. Performers reflected on the ways that women pull each other down, commonly referred to as "pull her down" (PHD) syndrome, citing this as a major impediment to not only women's leadership, but women's advancement in general. For me, this was an important turning inward to reflect on internal barriers and the ways in which we, as women, hold ourselves back. This was emphasized by the funeral scene. In Mosetsana 1's poem she says,

> "We sing woman empowerment like preschool children sing their ABCs.
> We say we want to be strong women who raise strong women
> but when the choir is silent, it's every woman for herself.
> …
> What I really see is a ladder
> as we step on each other

to get what we want

while we forget the song."

During Mosetsana 3 and Mosetsana 4's duet, Mosetsana 1 refers to the problem of holding ourselves back as a curse, and concludes that, "That curse was cursed by women, and it is only women who can uncurse the curse they cursed."

The cast and crew also discussed the issue of PHD at length during our post-performance debrief. They noted, with concern, that it seems as though women do not want to see other women progress. In addition, the group noted that there seems to be a lack of confidence amongst women, with one participant suggesting that perhaps women prefer to stay in situations they are familiar with (*"Threads" Performers Debrief 1*). The participant's remark echoes the "*Mme O Kae*?" report compiled by Emang Basadi, which found that one of the barriers to women running for office in Botswana is a lack of confidence. The cast and crew also observed that there seems to be tokenism when it comes to women in leadership, which can compound the lack of confidence (*"Threads" Performers Debrief 1*). Doing what is familiar may explain why there are more women in middle management in the corporate sector and in council positions in the political sphere. Seeing other women succeed in these roles may encourage other women to pursue them whereas tokenism perpetuates the exceptional woman myth and can discourage women from trying out for new opportunities.

Emang Basadi also notes competing interests as a barrier to women's participation in politics, echoing one of the findings in Rosalind Miles' *Women and Power*. Miles suggests that some women prefer not to participate in politics because they do not see it as a worthwhile venture in terms of making a difference in their societies (25). At the same time, the performers also criticized what they perceived as a tendency by women who have achieved a certain status

to close doors to other women or isolate themselves, arguing that that exacerbates tokenism because once that woman faces challenges, she has nowhere to turn because she will have pushed away her support base (*"Threads" Performers Debrief 1*). Performers generally noted that PHD syndrome works in both directions, arguing that women need to pick each other up but they also need to pick themselves up.

An unexpected benefit from the creative process was the opportunity for intergenerational dialogue. Our traditional dance mentor, Aus' G, is an example of how, as Jamieson Hall notes, one generation's legacy is lost to the next in the arts. Because the most celebrated artists in Botswana tend to be men, women who have remained active in the industry tend to be overlooked. In 2019, one interview participant noted that when she submitted her play for the 2019 Maitisong Festival she was told that no woman had directed a show at the festival before her (Pule), yet Mbali Kgosidintsi's play, *Tseleng*, was the headlining act for the 2014 Maitisong Festival, while Moduduetso Lecoge produced and performed her play, *A woman of many firsts,* at the 2016 and 2017 festivals, and Kgomotso Ratsie had directed *The Signature* at the 2017 festival. In addition, Tumisang Baatshwana had presented shows at the 2014, 2015, and 2016 festivals. I contend that the prominence of men in the industry functions as gatekeeping to erase women's histories. In keeping with the action-oriented nature of my research, I made a conscious effort to develop a relationship with Aus' G after an interview in 2015. During the interview, it came to light that she also has a deep knowledge of Botswana's theatre history. This knowledge is often overlooked because she is recognized mostly for her work in traditional dance. The traditional dance workshops thus created an opportunity to engage with Aus' G as an "elder" in the arts, in a context where most of our mentors are or have been men. Her ongoing involvement in theatre and performance also challenges the dominant narrative that women often

leave theatre to pursue more lucrative career paths. It is my hope that building women-centered teams breaks the cycle of rediscovering the wheel, at least for those pursuing a feminist agenda in and through their work.

Learning traditional dance from Aus' G also inadvertently enacted the call to "find those *ba e leng gore* they know culture, they really really understand the true definition of tradition and culture and *re se tsise kwano* (bring it here)," (*"Threads" Performers Debrief 1*). In her response the participant also noted that we promote proverbs that speak against women's power and leadership and argued that a deeper understanding of our culture can encourage a use of language that promotes gender equity. These views recall Ellece and Nhlekisana. Nhlekisana asserts that proverbs have been used to shape public discourse (150), while Ellece reminds us that cultural traditions/practices have been coopted by some at the expense of women (82), what a participant in the focus groups has referred to as the weaponization of culture. As such, the proverbs that are prevalent in our narratives of women are those that deny them power. In her declaration that we must call forth proverbs that empower and/or respect women, she asserts the potential of proverbs to reshape narratives of womanhood. Admittedly, Aus' G is one person, speaking from her own positionality, but during the traditional dance workshops her teachings challenged our views on culture and how it positions women. While some of us still held on to the view that culture disempowers women, we agreed that we do not know our culture well, with one performer suggesting that a deeper understanding of culture can contribute to a better sense of self (*"Threads" Performers Debrief 1*).

Post-performance Discussions and Focus Groups:

We presented four performances of *Threads,* including a preview a week prior to the performance*,* and held a discussion with the audience after each one. Although I had drafted some questions, I mostly allowed the discussion to flow freely. The audience was fairly diverse, with the first night being dominated by older women. The second night was more mixed in terms of gender but appeared younger. The third night was also mixed, both in terms of gender and age. Generally, the performance was well-received.

During the creation of *Threads* in 2018 I also held three focus groups. The first one of these was attended by two people, while the remaining two were each attended by one person, and thus functioned more like interviews. Fortunately, the second focus group coincided with the last performance and the participant was able to attend and contribute to the post-performance discussion. In response to feedback from a participant in the first focus group, I held another focus group in November 2019. The participant had suggested that the time (Saturday mornings) of the focus groups may not have been conducive for most people because of household responsibilities and it may be better to arrange focus groups for a time when people are just getting off work. The focus group in 2019 consisted of five women working in the corporate sector.

Core Themes:

Weaponization of culture

In the first focus group, the first participant (FG1 P1) argued that culture is weaponized against women, asking why we talk about, for example, male dominated spaces but never talk about female dominated spaces (*Focus Group 1*). The weaponization of culture reflects Jamieson Hall's notion of double binds. It also echoes Akin-Aina, who cites Mikell to propose that, "(f)our

factors were instrumental in instituting a new form of gender bias that pervaded the African colonized states: Christianity, Western education, the adoption of Western marriage systems and alternative legal systems" (76). Where African traditions were maintained, they were distorted to help colonial regimes maintain power (Ekeh; Amkpa; Appiah). Jamieson Hall asserts that double binds are enmeshed in theology, biology, and law. Appiah, Amkpa, Ekeh and Akin-Aina demonstrate how double binds have become enmeshed in culture to further oppress women in post-colonial societies. FG1 P1 echoes the performer who says that we need to find knowledge keepers and emphasize proverbs that speak to women's agency and power. FG1 P1 also argues that "We can't expect to preserve Setswana culture in English… We keep trying to tell our story in a language that is not equipped to tell our story" (*Focus Group 1*). FG1 P1 was speaking both in response to the weaponization of culture and in response to her co-participant's assertion that we (Batswana) do not aspire to our own cultural norms.

Not aspiring to ourselves:

> "We—*gone mo,* on our own continent—we're not doing enough to aspire to our own selves. And I don't know if it's because of our behaviour, our conduct, our history or what the story is. But we don't have that same level of pride. … I don't see us celebrating enough of ourselves, enough of who we are, our history and where we come from. And even our language." - Participant 2 (*Focus Group 1*)
>
> "So, a decolonial approach for me is about saying not only are we relocating where power is thought to stem from, but we are giving presence to that which had been removed." – Participant 1 (*Focus Group 1*)

The second participant in the first focus group (FG1 P2) brought up the point that as Africans we do not aspire to ourselves and that this is evidenced in how we no longer respect our traditions

and traditional institutions. I contend that the devaluation of "femme power" (FG1 P 1) teaches women not to aspire to ourselves and I posit PHD syndrome as a symptom of not aspiring to ourselves as women.

The post-performance discussions reiterated the notion of PHD syndrome, with one audience member using nursing as an example of how women put each other down. The audience member noted that although nursing is a female dominated profession, men are still more likely to be elected to leadership positions, such as union executive committees, than women. This echoes Mokeretane's observation that despite women's involvement in political organizing they are less likely to run or be nominated for office (Mokeretane). Creating a women's space in and through theatre and reclaiming women's histories and cultures is an attempt to address this aspect of gender equity.

Identity crisis:

"You must have your cake and eat too, but you can't…" (Baatshwana)

Echoing FG1 P2, a participant in the third post-performance discussion noted that as a nation Batswana seem to have an identity crisis because on the one hand, we talk about maintaining our traditions but, on the other hand, we seem to be copying Western cultures. This echoes the sense of neurosis identified in *Being*. This contradiction is demonstrated by the lack of cohesion in the women's movement and recalls Jamieson Hall's proposal that, "What can be construed as a backlash often was a serious disagreement among women's advocates about means and ends" (19). The demise of Emang Basadi in the early to mid-2000s lends credence to Jamieson Hall's argument as women have been unable to speak in a unified voice to a similar degree since that time. One prominent example is the Botswana Caucus of Women in Politics

(BCWP), which disintegrated due to tensions caused by the perceived dominance of members from the ruling party (Bauer 29). To me, the lack of progress with regards to gender parity in government, and the increasing disparity in other areas, engenders stillness. If, as Reznek proposes, stillness is a form of death, I propose that there is a form of social death playing out on women's bodies. While I do not mean to suggest that all female theatre practitioners should address gender issues all the time, I do argue that performing women's narratives performs against the stillness brought on by the identity crisis proposed in the post-performance discussions.

Gender relations:

"…the listener chose not to hear" (Singer 68)

Although the performance was generally well received, there are some criticisms that have stayed with me:

1. In the preview, a colleague asked why there were no men in the performance, stating that the performance would have benefitted from a male perspective. This colleague began his statement by declaring that he is not a feminist and that in Setswana culture women were afforded a lot of respect.
2. On opening night another colleague noted that the performance was great as a piece of research but was too on-the-nose as an artistic endeavour and needed to be more subtle to gain the sympathy of men.
3. At the last performance another colleague called the production "basic," saying that, for example, he did not see me, the choreographer, or his sister (women he knows personally), reflected in the performance.

I was struck by these critiques because they were made by men, although I acknowledge that the last commentator identifies as gay. I did not respond to any of the comments at the time as I wanted to give space to other audience members to respond, however I am concerned by the way these comments work to recenter male voices. The comment about not being a feminist reflects a failure to acknowledge that "we now live in a globalized community where those 'good traditions' have been appropriated by some to their advantage and to the disadvantage of women" (Ellece 82). This makes men complicit in upholding the structures that oppress women whether or not they assert male superiority. It also recalls Kessi et al assertions that decolonial work requires intentional undoing (271). Developing a deeper understanding of cultural traditions draws on the work of WLSA to not only talk about women's rights but to talk about men's obligations, that is to ask for greater accountability in addressing gender inequity.

Greater accountability from men is needed to challenge the victim blaming that has become part of the discourse of gender equity. On the surface, the comment about subtlety seems to be about artistic merit, but it also echoes the responses of the #NotAllMen movement which, in my view, sought to silence women by using respectability politics as a basis for dismissing the #MenAreTrash campaign. The #NotAllMen response's use of respectability politics echoes early post-colonial governments' failures to acknowledge gender bias and the silencing of women, performing a gatekeeping function that maintains a status quo that oppresses women. The comment about subtlety feeds into a discourse that places the onus on women to change themselves to avoid being victims of structural violence instead of asking for structural change so that the violence does not occur.

My colleagues' comments reflect not only a glass ceiling, but a glass wall—an invisible barrier between men and women, in which men do not think they are being oppressive, and even

consider themselves to be allies, but are in fact hindering the efforts women make through micro-aggressions such as tone policing. This reflects Jacqui Singer's assertion that, "the struggle to be heard has been constant but 'seemingly absent' because the receiver was not actively present, or possibly, the listener chose not to hear" (68). In a follow-up interview, one of the *Nkadzi* cast members noted receiving similar comments as the ones above, remarking that her work has been called biased because she privileges women's stories. It is thus difficult not to view my male colleagues' comments as an inability or an unwillingness to hear women's voices. I believe that gender activism must include men, but I still insist that activism for women's rights must center women's voices and start with women's perceptions and definitions of womanhood. In her article reflecting on women's voices in theatre, Singer demonstrates a growing poetics of women's voice in theatre, asserting that, "women playwrights reclaimed their past histories, celebrated their lives as women and explored their own subjectivity, whilst scrutinizing every aspect of their lives objectively" (81). In creating women-centred performances I have drawn on Singer's assertions to create a space where women can speak in their own voices. Further, in developing *Threads* and turning towards culture I wanted us to critically reflect on where the oppressions we face as women in Botswana come from. Additional research is needed in this area to better understand gender relations, especially in the theatre.

A Feminist Critique of Feminism:

In the preview, another colleague called *Threads* "a feminist critique of feminism". I believe my colleague was commenting on the seeming disconnect between intellectual feminism and feminist action on the ground. This disconnect is why I am interested in understanding women's lived experiences of feminism. In our debrief, the performers noted that perhaps the problem is that we do not understand feminism, with one performer arguing that it brings about

more discrimination, while another proposed that, "it assists those who understand it but those who don't understand it, um, it doesn't help them" (*"Threads" Performers Debrief 1*). This sentiment echoes Women of Colour (WOC) feminists' critiques of white, western feminism that have led to the popularization of intersectionality as a model of analysis. The performers' comments raise concerns about class disparity, which also formed part of the critique of Emang Basadi (Van Allen, "Bad Future Things"; Bauer), and can perhaps be seen as part of the backlash against women's rights. Understanding women's experiences is thus a strategy for moving out of abeyance by identifying and promoting issues of common interest.

The themes raised in the performance and in the various discussions demonstrate the need to understand the shifts that arose in African epistemologies due to colonialism. It is also necessary to challenge prevailing notions of feminism as a Western construct and "not our culture" in African societies like Botswana—a sentiment previously expressed by Van Allen ("Neo-Liberal Women's Rights" 38). The construction of feminist action as unAfrican forms part of the weaponization of culture identified by FG1 P1, where culture is used as a tool of control. This use of culture works as a double bind, specifically silence/shame (Jamieson Hall 16) where women are asked to exercise silence to prove their Africanness or be shamed as being not African enough. This encourages women to give up power in order to belong. A decolonial consciousness urges us to critique semblances of culture that equate womanhood with subservience and violence, and further, to know our cultures for ourselves. This knowing is not to romanticize culture but to understand how colonialism erased bases of power previously occupied by women and confound stereotypes that first, deny women agency by positing culture as a source of male power, and second, that perpetuate images of African men and cultures as barbaric. Such stereotypes are problematic as they are used to justify continued epistemic

violence in the name of development and progress. For previously patriarchal societies such as Botswana this critique is necessary to challenge the weaponization of culture against women.

Conclusion:

The creative process of *Threads* allowed for a collective reflection on the status of women in Botswana by incorporating traditional performance forms. This was especially so with the integration of traditional dance, as it allowed for intergenerational dialogue between women. I had hoped that this kind of dialogue would facilitate a rejection of the victimhood often imposed on women in post-colonial societies, however, post-performance discussions with audiences that watched the production still focused more on the issue of gender-based violence, and how to engage men on issues of women's leadership. This shows the amount of work still needing to be done to challenge public conceptions of womanhood, especially in Botswana.

The imposition of victimhood is particularly problematic as it denies women agency, leaving them dependent on others to stand up and speak for them. It also perpetuates the silencing of women's voices, which has led to the current status quo. While the creative process of *Threads* was a powerful personal experience, we still need to explore strategies for making the final product similarly effective for the audience. In addition, because the show was based on the performers' personal experiences and reflections, it did not feature all of the themes we discussed when we started. What the performance did achieve was the creation of a women's space in which women could reflect with each other on their status. This serves to decenter maleness, which I consider an important first step towards reclaiming women's histories and cultures and fostering women's leadership.

Threads introduced the use of Botswana traditional performance forms in my work. I continued this work in my next project, *The Space Between* (*Space*), to work towards what I call

a SeTswana aesthetic. Working towards a SeTswana aesthetic allowed me to continue my exploration of cultural traditions. I discuss *Space* in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Towards a SeTswana Aesthetic in *The Space Between*

"What does it mean to exist as a problem?" (Siphamandla Zondi, 2018)

Drawing on W.E.B. du Bois and Aimé Césaire, Professor Siphamandla Zondi argues that colonization and racialization made Black people, Africans, natives, Indigenous peoples into things by problematizing and calling into question our humanity (Zondi). He calls on us to become bigger problems by refusing to be docile in systems that "thingify" us and by re-becoming agents of new forms of epistemology as well as human and power relations (*ibid*). He also asks: How do we re-become? Professor Zondi's statements have stayed with me for a long time, leading me to ask: What, and who, is a problem? As a proponent of decolonization, I have come to conclude that I must interrogate how I exist as a problem, both in the sense of being thingified and in the sense of how I perpetuate the thingification of others through my own internalized oppressions. In doing so, I have come to pursue what I call a SeTswana aesthetic. I use the notation, SeTswana, to differentiate between Setswana – the language spoken, as well as the customs and traditions practiced, by people belonging to Tswana ethnocultural groups; Batswana (Singular: Motswana) – the national identity of people from Botswana; and Tswana – the term used to refer to the larger ethnocultural grouping of people who speak Setswana, who spread across Botswana, parts of Namibia and parts of South Africa (UNISA). It is a subtle, and even superficial difference, but a necessary distinction to make as it points to the nuances I perceive as being brought on by national borders.

I also separate Setswana as a national identity and Tswana as an ethnocultural identity because Setswana as a national identity includes people from different ethnocultural groups and,

I contend, is shaped and informed by the proximity and relationship of the Tswana with other ethnocultural groups who occupy the place now known as Botswana. Although borders are fluid, as evidenced by the many Batswana who have relatives in neighbouring countries, I contend that national borders add nuances that make cultures the same but different, especially because they have shaped and been shaped by colonial processes and the sociopolitical experiences that stem from them. For one thing, in Botswana the Tswana hold a dominant position and were at the forefront of the transition from protectorate status to independence. In South Africa, the Tswana were part of the Black majority that were oppressed under the apartheid regime. Setswana forms one of eleven official languages in South Africa, in contrast to being the national language in Botswana where English is the official language. Because Setswana is the national language and is taught in schools, I argue that in Botswana we take it for granted that we know our culture, an assumption I have come to problematize through my dissertation research because of how it has come to position women.

Asking how I exist as a problem and working towards a SeTswana aesthetic is about pursuing cultural specificity. I explored this through a solo performance titled *The Space Between* (*Space*), interrogating the intersections between settlerhood, Africanness and Indigeneity. I decided to examine my location as a Motswana and a woman living in Canada in the aftermath of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in Canada and during the decolonial turn, and how that affects my understanding of and responses to Indigeneity, Blackness, decolonization, and settler colonialism. I created *Space* in 2021 as a recorded performance for online presentation during NextFest Digital, a festival for emerging artists based in Edmonton, Canada. Unlike the productions that precede it, which focused on women's experiences and were based in Botswana, *Space* grew from my positionality as a Motswana

international student based in Canada, and my reflections on the relationship between post-colonial independence, Africanness, and Indigeneity. These reflections are what have led me to pursue a decolonial lens in understanding women's experiences in relation to coming into leadership. This chapter reflects on *Space* in moving towards a SeTswana aesthetic and cultural specificity. My reflections on existing as a problem and on my positionality as a racialized settler in Canada are informed by María Lugones's call for coalition building across difference and Willie Ermine's call for an ethical space of engagement.

Coalition Building Across Difference:

In her articulation of decolonial feminism, Marìa Lugones calls for coalition building across difference. She states that we need to "learn about each other as resisters to the coloniality of gender at the colonial difference, without necessarily being an insider to the worlds of meaning from which resistance to the coloniality arises" ("Toward a Decolonial Feminism" 753). Echoing the sentiment of knowing without necessarily being an insider is Lesego Nswahu Nchunga's warning against projecting yourself onto others' cultures (Nchunga, *Research Interview*). I see this projection onto others as operating through a romanticization of struggle that can lead to appeals to victimhood. At its most extreme, projecting oneself onto other cultures is reflected through the advent of racial pretendians—where people with no traceable connections claim Indigenous heritage or people of European descent pretend to be light-skinned African Americans or try to appear African by darkening their skin. The appeal to victimhood is also a symptom of a deficit-based approach to empowerment where strategies to address the challenges facing women, especially in Africa and the Global South, are based on a perceived lack of resources. Such strategies have been shown to perpetuate invisible barriers by only addressing explicit barriers. In my view, this approach has resulted in a discourse in which

people from marginalized identity groups constantly have to justify their humanity to have their rights respected and honoured. I contend that women must begin to recognize their own humanity by resisting appeals to victimhood, and de-romanticizing struggle. I argue that coalition building across difference and resisting the coloniality of gender begins with turning away from whiteness and (toxic) masculinity, which in turn begins by recognizing our own humanity *for ourselves*, not to prove it to other peoples.

An Ethical Space of Engagement:

I link Lugones and Nchunga's sentiments to Willie Ermine's concept of an ethical space of engagement, which he defines as a theoretical space created between two human communities poised to encounter each other. The space is created because "each entity [is] moulded from a distinct history, knowledge tradition, philosophy, and social and political reality" ("The Ethical Space of Engagement" 194). But it is not just the encounter that sets up the ethical space, but the intentions that "confront" each other in the encounter. Ermine emphasizes the need to tackle the "undercurrent"—"the subsurface interests and attitudes that continually influence communication and behaviors between individuals, organizations and nations" ("The Ethical Space of Engagement" 198). What I see Ermine calling for is honesty in cross-cultural dealings, especially from those that occupy a dominant position or carry privilege. I believe this honesty is fostered by an intersectional analysis of one's positionality and the practice of naming this positionality in our research as called for in feminist, decolonial and Indigenous research methods, to name a few. Such honesty stems from a deep knowledge of the self. But how can one know themselves if they are a product of epistemic violence? This is why I have focused on Kessi et al's pillar of self-decolonization for this research. Cultural specificity is a starting point

for building an ethical space of engagement to resist projecting myself onto others' cultures and experiences.

The Space Between:

The Space Between (Space) is one of five productions I created during my doctoral studies. It builds on the use of traditional performance forms in *Threads*. Incorporating Botswana-based performance modes in *Threads* was a performative process of cultural reclamation and an exploration of how to use our own traditions as a starting point for learning to sense differently. The idea of a SeTswana aesthetic focuses on the continued use of Botswana performance genres as a starting point for theatre-making, as well as the incorporation of Botswana traditional dance into African contemporary dance as a gesture towards cultural specificity[9]. A SeTswana aesthetic, as I envision it, interrogates Botswana national identity and womanhood. Given that part of my objective for using performance-as-research was to refine my creative process, a turn towards the aesthetic seemed natural. Further, Caroline Korsmeyer asserts that "art and aesthetic taste are powerful framers of self-image, social identity, and public values" (1). For a project that focused on how public narratives shape representation, this makes aesthetics an important consideration. Earlier projects focused on engaging with others on different themes related to gender equity and women's leadership. *Space* focused on working through how a decolonial feminist performance praxis looks and feels. As such, *Space* was a strategy for performing alongside my collaborators by interrogating my own positionality and voice "on [my] feet" (Selman and Battye 159). In this, *Space* also builds on the work I did in

[9] Although I refer to cultural specificity, at this point it is more national specificity because Botswana is named after the eight Tswana speaking groups, yet there are other, non-Tswana ethnic groups whose dances also inform what we call traditional dance. Because of the identification of the nation-state with Tswana speaking groups, the national language is Setswana; culture and tradition are taught from this perspective. It is in this sense that I refer to "my" culture.

Blessings, using autoethnography to interrogate my own experiences coming into leadership and the broader sociocultural context(s) that inform them (Ellis et al.).

My conception of a SeTswana aesthetic is informed by Paul Taylor's theorization on Black aesthetics, Carolyn Korsmeyer's writings on gender and aesthetics, as well as Matthew A. Izibili and Rowland Abiodun's explanations of African aesthetics.

Further Conceptual Considerations:

Black Aesthetics:

Paul Taylor defines Black aesthetics as, "the practice of using art, criticism, or analysis to explore the role that expressive objects and practices play in creating and maintaining Black life-worlds" (chaps.1, Sect. 4). He goes on to distinguish between first- and second-order versions of Black aesthetics. Taylor describes first-order Black aesthetics as a set of practices that emerged "as soon as Africans and others began to seek and create beauty and meaning from within the cauldron of racial formation," (*ibid*). Second-order Black aesthetics, on the other hand, have emerged over the last 100 or so years "when artists, critics, and other thinkers started to approach their expressive practices specifically from the standpoint of modern race-thinking" (*ibid*). Taylor uses the distinction between first- and second-order versions of Black aesthetics to differentiate between practices (first-order Black aesthetics) and (new) traditions (second-order Black aesthetics), stating that, "traditions have institutional conditions, including shared criteria for achievement or success, and canons of recognized achievement on which to build." The distinction between first- and second-order Black aesthetics is helpful for understanding or tracing a genealogy. The notion of Black aesthetics is also useful for understanding and articulating the role of "aesthetic self-fashioning" (P. C. Taylor, chaps.1, Sect. 1) as part of the process of resisting oppression. Taylor notes that racialization is a product of the project of modernity and tries to draw continuities between Africans on the continent and Africans in the

diaspora. Despite this, and his reference to Black British theorizing, Taylor's focus remains on descendants of enslaved Africans in the diaspora, especially Black Americans. As such, I also draw on Izibili's perspectives on African Aesthetics.

African Aesthetics:

Izibili says of African aesthetics that it "is created and arises as an answer to practical problems and therefore serves practical ends. Arts and aesthetics in this way become part and parcel of life" (213). Izibili decries the separation of art from utility and points out that in African art part of the beauty of the object stemmed from its functionality (211). In this he echoes Taylor's assertion that Black aesthetics could not afford to be "art for art's sake" (P. C. Taylor, chaps.1, Sect. 3). Izibili's observations also echo Mogobe's assertions that traditional theatre— initiation rites, storytelling, harvest festivals, trance healing dances etc.— served several functions, based on the social impact it would have on the people (*Theatre in Botswana* 59). While forms such as popular theatre focus on the utility of art, and try to capture the communal aspect of artmaking from traditional forms, these have come to be dismissed as lesser art. In his theorizing of African aesthetics, Izibili asserts the co-existence of art and politics, echoing recent scholarship that criticizes the separation of effect and affect in art that is oriented towards social justice, such as popular theatre (Thompson 2).

Feminist Aesthetics:

Scholars of feminist aesthetics also decry the "anti-aestheticism" associated with socially engaged artmaking as well as the depoliticization of aesthetics (Ziarek 5–8; Chanter 464–66). Caroline Korsmeyer and Ewa Ziarek also note that the separation of form and function in aesthetics is a gendered process. Korsmeyer goes on to say that this separation denigrated women's work, reducing it to the level of crafts (6, 14). Ziarek and Chanter highlight the

necessity of considering race in discussions about aesthetics (Ziarek 11–12; Chanter 464). Monique Roelofs deepens the analysis of the connections between gender, race, and aesthetics to call for critical race feminist aesthetics which she describes as

> a line of investigation, at once practical and theoretical, that not only recognizes the troubled workings of the aesthetic in the areas of race, gender, and attendant orbits of social functioning but also affirms the central role that aesthetic activities can and do play as elements of a simultaneously inventive and critical, collective engagement with modalities of race and gender… (369)

In formulating the concept of critical race feminist aesthetics, Roelofs reminds us of aesthetics' "racial heritage" (365). The notion of critical race feminist aesthetics draws on decolonial, post-colonial and critical race theory. While Roelofs acknowledges the intersections of race, gender, class and coloniality, she primarily focuses on race and gender and does not address the imperializing role of aesthetics.

Decolonial Aesthesis:

The work I did in *Threads* and *Space* begins to gesture towards a decolonial aesthesis as part of the process of developing a decolonial feminist performance praxis and using performance to foster women's leadership. Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vázquez define decolonial aesthesis as a "revaluation of what has been made invisible or devalued by the modern colonial order [and] a critical intervention within the world of the contemporary… in which the artist and the curator are struggling to challenge the hegemonic normativity of modern aestheTics" (5). Vázquez further points out that aesthesis operates at the level of epistemology to decolonize our ways of sensing. Using SeTswana traditional performance forms as a starting point in my work is very much about learning to sense differently.

A SeTswana Aesthetic:

Interrogating my positionality as a Motswana and a woman living in Canada began with a curiosity about what Botswana looks like in the global imaginary. Commenting on the experiences of African women immigrants in Western countries, Philomina Okeke-Ihejirika argues that the racialization of "continental Africans" as Black does not account for their particular experiences (Okeke-Ihejirika 2; Okeke-Ihejirika et al. 582; Mensah 108). The racial categories "Black" and the ethnicized category "African" flatten, homogenize, and render invisible diverse sociopolitical and economic experiences. I find that the discourse of racialization in Canada positions African, Caribbean, Black (ACB) peoples as victims in relation to their counterparts of European descent while at the same time subsuming them in the category of "settler." Although I agree with scholars who problematize the interpolation of ACB peoples as "settlers" (see Cordis; Adefarakan; Sefa Dei), I contend that part of building an ethical space of engagement with Indigenous peoples and tackling systemic racism is to acknowledge and confront how we are settled in Canada. As a Motswana, this is especially important given the tenuous relationship between the Botswana government and San peoples, the Indigenous peoples of the region around the Kalahari Desert. I am hesitant about claiming indigeneity in relation to whiteness as this does not interrogate my positionality prior to coming to Canada. Instead, I interrogate the intersection between post-colonial independence and Indigeneity. It is in this sense that I speak about existing as a problem—acknowledging that while I am racialized as Black, I do not carry the experience of growing up as a minority, and that my engagement with whiteness is rooted in the imperial relationship between Africa and the West, China, and India. I believe this understanding facilitates accountability to others in coalition building across difference.

To explore what Botswana looks like in the global imaginary, I started with African contemporary dance. The incorporation of Botswana performance genres stemmed from a desire to explore how these can inform choreography and storytelling. In this I am influenced by Andrew Kola's work with/in Mophato Dance Theatre (Mophato) and Tumisang Baatshwana's work with/in Sky Blue Dance Hub (Sky Blue). Kola established Mophato after training at Moving into Dance Mophatong, a contemporary dance company in South Africa that is credited with being pioneers of African contemporary dance and Afrofusion. In 2012, Mophato staged their first full length production, *Kgosikgolo*, featuring SeTswana traditional dance forms such as *Phatisi.* In 2014 the company performed *Wosana*, inspired by the rain dance of the Kalanga peoples who are based in the north-east region of Botswana. This work reflects Kola's assertion of the need to build on and celebrate our own traditions and forms because they are what make us unique. For her part, in 2014 Baatshwana engaged Thabang Molefe from Mogwana Traditional Dance Troupe to teach her performers elements of *Tsutsube*, one of the forms from the San's trance dances, which she then incorporated into the choreography of *Keneilwe – A Dance for the Given*, her first full-length production. I consider Kola and Baatshwana's work to be instances of bodying forth SeTswana through performance. Moving towards a SeTswana aesthetic is about critically engaging with and celebrating my culture as a decolonizing praxis.

I consider a SeTswana aesthetic to sit somewhere between contemporary and traditional art practices. *Space* draws on traditional practices and cultural understanding to think through what Botswana might look like in the global imaginary. Through the creative process I also explored how we come to culture and tried to work through how cultural traditions can empower and how they can oppress. These reflections are mostly conceptual and inform aesthetic decisions rather than being explicitly represented in the final performance.

Creative Process:

Because *Space* is a solo performance, I had to reimagine some of the strategies I used in previous productions, especially conversational walks. As I did not have cast members to rely on, I walked and talked with my production assistant, who then assigned me topics to explore further in writing. I continued traditional dance classes with Aus G during which she taught me a new dance, "Dichammana," a game that originates from the Balete, a Tswana speaking group who inhabit(ed) what is now known as the South-East district of Botswana. In the game, women (or the dancers) dance/play around a piece of slate rock referred to as *phatsana* (Basuhi, personal communication). The lyrics of the song decry an encounter with Afrikaaner settlers, colloquially referred to as *Maburu*, from the term *Boers*, who cheated the narrator by buying their cattle at unfair prices. In addition to Aus G and my production assistant, I worked with a musician and sound designer to create a soundtrack for the performance, a strategy I adapted from a collaborative project I participated in curated and produced by Brandon Wint. To develop the music for *Space* I would read the poems I had written and the musician, Cedric Ncube, responded by improvising on his guitar. I in turn improvised to the tracks Cedric composed to develop choreography. In total, I wrote seven poems for the show:

"Bodies of the wake"

"Lost Ones"

"Keikitse"

"This Body"

"Black"

"Be. Again"

"Beautiful ones."

We recorded two versions of "Dichammana," one slow and one fast, as well as the poems I had developed choreography for: "Lost Ones" and "This Body". I also had a photoshoot during which we recorded exterior shots of the movement to add to the film.

I worked with designer, Opelo Letshwiti, to create the costume for the performance. After lengthy conversations with her about representations of Batswana women, we settled on a brown *leteisi*. *Leteisi*, also referred to as *jeremane,* or *shoê-shoê* (*shwe-shwe*) in Sotho, refers to a tough cotton fabric that has been adopted as the traditional attire for Batswana. Denbow and Thebe cite a letter from early missionary settler, Mary Moffat, requesting "dark, blue prints, or Ginghams … in fact, any dark cottons, which will wash well" from her sewing circles back home to use to make clothing for Batswana women (121, 125). These fabrics originally came in blue and brown (Denbow and Thebe 125). We chose *leteisi* because it represents women's traditional dress in contemporary Botswana. Opelo decided to create a reversible wrap dress (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6. Chris Mangiroza. The Space Between Photoshoot, 2021. University of Botswana

She then engaged artist and printmaker, Tariro Matiwonesa Peo Ncube, to create artwork for and print the fabric for the reverse side of the dress. In creating the artwork for the second fabric we concluded that a SeTswana aesthetic comprises earth tones—browns, cream whites, burnt oranges etc.—because Batswana primarily used to fashion clothing from cowhide and animal skins. These earth tones are also reflected in the décor—mud huts, clay pots and baskets woven using different reeds and grasses.

Fig. 7. Tariro M.P. Ncube. The Space Between Poster. 2021

Tariro used this colour palette for the final image (Fig. 7), which she created by abstracting a photograph of me from a performance of *Blessings* (2017/18). Using the photograph came about because of a debate about what visually distinguishes Batswana women from other African and Black women. This is an essentialist question, and indeed to look at the final image, one still sees a "Black" woman, but it is an important question for recognizing that people racialized as Black are not homogenous, and that Africa is not a monolith. Making such a distinction is also an insistence that one speaks from their own positionality in creating an ethical space of engagement. While I was initially hesitant about the use of my image on the costume, it ended up informing some of the choreography in the show to signify self-reclamation. In the

spirit of aspiring to ourselves, it can be said to be a way of projecting myself (my cultural heritage) onto myself. This is certainly the motivation I channelled in the second half of the performance when I reverse the dress. The colour palette for the image was also the impetus for the choice of a brown *leteisi* pattern. The wrap dress Opelo created also resembles a *khiba*[10], an apron-like dress that women used to wear while working (Basuhi, personal communication). The final costume comprises the dress and a large headwrap. While Batswana women tend to cover their hair with a headscarf, especially in traditional gatherings such as funerals and weddings, large headwraps have become more popular as part of contemporary traditional dress due to influences from other cultures.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the show was recorded and presented as a film at NextFest Digital in June 2021.

The Performance:

The film opens with a title slide comprising the poster for the show. A song, "Dichammana," comes on as the poster is juxtaposed with an exterior shot of me on the right-hand side of the screen, facing the left as though I am looking at the poster. I wear the brown dress with Black shoes; half my hair is up in a bun. As I start dancing the poster dissolves. We cut to an interior shot of me on stage. In the interior shot I wear the dress along with a head wrap made of the same material as the dress, no shoes. The stage is bare. We remain on the interior shot as the song ends. At the end of the song, I come forward. I recite "Bodies of the Wake," moving between stage left and stage right to punctuate my words. As I finish reciting "Bodies of the Wake," a faster version of "Dichammana" plays. I start dancing to the song as in the opening

[10] The word *khiba* is also used to refer to a skirt made of *leteisi* or to the fabric itself. It is adopted from the name of the front apron that formed part of women's dress in pre-colonial times.

sequence but start to adapt it to contemporary dance as the song continues. Towards the end of the song I use my movements to go backwards, ending up crouched upstage center.

Music starts, a slow guitar overlaid with a voiceover of "Lost Ones." Onstage I dance to the music. The choreography features collapsing movements and reaching gestures, denoting loss as I lament the passing of my grandmother and my mother-in-law. I finish the sequence by moving to the front of the stage. As the music fades, I start reciting, "Keikitse," which takes the tone of a Setswana praise poem but continues the lamentation. I ask my grandmother to tell me a story—the story of our family, the story of the women in our family so that I can also tell these stories to my children—her great grandchildren—and future generations.

An electric guitar starts playing. I perform another piece of choreography. A voice-over is heard, "*Oa sia sia. O tshwara kwa, o lesa kwa*," (you are all over the place, you keep doing this and that). The speaker repeats the phrase over and over, like a chant, starting off slowly then building up in speed and intensity as the guitar builds up to a crescendo. On the stage, I respond to the sound with foot stomping movements that mimic running, also picking up speeding until the movements look frenzied, moving around the stage. As the voice over ends the guitar slows down. Another voice over starts reciting a poem, "This Body." I break from the frenzied movement, ending up at the front of the stage again. As the poem starts, I stomp my foot rhythmically in response to the words, the video cuts between shots of me dancing on stage and me dancing outside. At the end of the poem, another chant starts, "*Kea sia sia. Ke tshwara kwa, ke lesa kwa*" (I am all over the place, I keep doing this and that). I start a new rhythm of foot stomping to match the voice over, moving around the stage and exiting at the end. I recite the next poem, "Black" in silhouette. The lights behind me change from red, to yellow and come up full towards the end of the poem.

The guitar returns at the end of "Black" in a slower rhythm. I perform a hip-hop and krump inspired freestyle dance. During this section, I take off the dress and reverse it, ending the section with the printed fabric showing. I recite the last two poems, "Be. Again" and "Beautiful ones." During, "Beautiful Ones" we shift between an exterior shot, where I am standing in front of a hut, and the interior shot of me on stage. At the end of "Beautiful Ones" I repeat the choreography from the transition between "Keikitse" and "Oa Sia, Sia." Lights fade as I use the movement to exit.

Themes of the performance:

I wrote "Bodies of the Wake" in response to Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being.* The wake is defined as, "keeping watch with the dead, the path of a ship, a consequence of something, in the line of flight and/or sight, awakening, and consciousness" (17–18). Sharpe uses the metaphor to think through the Black lived experience in what she calls the afterlives of slavery. This conception of the wake, and of the contemporary moment as the afterlife of slavery, resonates strongly with me as I feel it best articulates the power structures that define the relationship of African, Caribbean, Black (ACB) folks to settler states, especially white settler states, and African states' relationship(s) to the Global North. For me, the notion of the afterlives of slavery is helpful for thinking and working through the internationalization of racism, especially anti-Black racism. The poem "Black" continues my meditations on race. It grew out of a prompt from my production assistant to write a poem about "life in the now." In it I state,

> Here are bodies
>
> Here are bodies painted the colours of the rainbow all the while being marked for death.

Here are bodies marked for dispossession placed in relation to other bodies, bodies that possess, that consume without hesitation.

Here are bodies consumed by rage all the while finding joy in uncommon spaces.

Here are bodies fighting back, all the while crafting resilience out of unbelonging.

Here are bodies refusing the mark of coloured-ness.

"Black" reflects on race as colour. I developed it by looking up dictionary definitions of the colours used to describe people of different races, namely black, red, yellow, brown, and white. The dictionary definitions portray how colour has been used to denigrate racialized peoples across the globe. By placing the definitions of colour next to each other, I begin to critique white possessiveness as it has grown out of the colonizing mission. Seeking cultural specificity in decolonial feminist undoing is about articulating how white possessiveness operates through class stratification, especially in the African post-colony. It is for this reason that I interrogate SeTswana identity through a decolonial lens and speak of an ethical space of engagement. I contend that while Batswana are marked by the internationalization of racism and the colonial encounter, we have an ethical imperative—especially those of us who also carry class privilege, however precarious—to acknowledge the privilege we carry in relation to other Africans. It is for this reason that I call for a turning away from whiteness. Turning in-ward at the communal and sociopolitical level is about turning towards other Africans and (re)building relations amongst ourselves to resist the dependency wrought on Africa.

While "Bodies of the Wake" and "Black" provide socio-political commentary, "Lost Ones" and "Keikitse" reflect on personal loss. I wrote "Lost Ones" in response to my grandmother and mother-in-law passing away within two weeks of each in October of 2019. "Keikitse" laments the loss of oral history that their passings represent, especially family history and cultural

knowledge. It also laments the loss of women's traditions, such as farming and building, that I had hoped to learn from them. Asking my grandmother to tell me a story reflects my desire to know myself differently from how I have been socialized to see Black, African female subjectivity. Denbow and Thebe point out that early missionaries reorganized gender roles in pre-colonial Tswana societies (121). Previously, it was women who used to build and men who used to sew clothing. Mourning the loss of cultural knowledge and women's traditions through "Lost Ones" and "Keikitse" decries the imposed victimhood of African women that does not acknowledge the ways they have been disempowered by colonial social norms, particularly being made to depend on men whereas they used to be able to provide for themselves by, for example, constructing the family dwellings and growing their own food. I also address this imposed victimhood in "Bodies of the Wake" when I state,

This body is a body living for the wake
It is a body marked by poverty
It is a struggling body
A body *for* struggle
A body *of* struggle.

This imposed victimhood is why I call for asset-based approaches in undertaking initiatives designed to foster women's leadership. It is also why I speak of interrogating the culture from its own perspective. A decolonial feminist performance praxis resists the assumption that SeTswana cultural practices oppress women, and instead looks for the spaces where women held power.

The voice-over of "Oa sia sia" was recorded using Aus G's voice as a response to "Keikitse." I used Aus G's voice to suggest a critique of the younger generation by an older

generation, while “Ke a sia sia” used my own voice as self-critique. “This Body” addresses these critiques when I say:

> This body
> Is a neurotic body
> asked to do more, be more
> and failing, flailing
> a body doing too much
> and not enough.

The notion of *“go sia sia*” refers to the busyness I have noticed within myself and my agemates which emanates from a desire for upward mobility, which in turn is premised on a politics of recognition. The busyness also echoes the many social responsibilities women carry, and the resulting burn-out. The foot stomping for “Ke a sia sia” borrows from a variation of a traditional dance called “*Chankaneng*.” The lyrics of the song talk about being imprisoned, which recalls Jamieson Hall’s double binds. This is expressed through the lines “a body doing too much and not enough.” The section is a meditation on the cultural neurosis identified in *Being* and in *Threads,* of being in-between worlds and being required to act without necessarily being given the authority to do so—the zone of friction described by van Allen.

I chose a hip-hop inspired freestyle after “Black” to smooth the transition between the first half and the second half of the show. The first half of the show focuses on loss, grief, and anger while the second half moves towards self-acceptance and finding joy. Freestyling, with its unchoreographed movements, echoes this sense of self-acceptance as it allows the dancer to celebrate and express themselves. I thought it was important to express some level of joy to resist falling into the same victim narrative I decry. Centering joy follows Mpoe Mogale’s assertion

that joy is an important strategy for building resilience (Mogale and Disele). This is reflected in "Beautiful Ones" which celebrates Black beauty and femininity.

In some ways "Be. Again" is a response to "Keikitse." While "Keikitse" calls on my grandmother to tell me a story, "Be. Again" reflects on childhood moments in which I, alongside my friends, troubled the establishment—sometimes even the African American or Black American establishment—through simple actions such as questioning song lyrics. At the same time, it is a self-critique of the ways in which I did not listen to my grandmother (or my mother and my aunt for that matter) when they did try to expose me to or teach me about our culture.

Conclusion:

Because *Space* grew out of a consideration of aesthetics in the sense of "high art", I consider it a gesture towards decolonial aesthesis. I contend that achieving a decolonial aesthesis is as much about the intention of the work as it is about the outcome. I created *Space* as a solo performance because *Threads* did not achieve the aesthetic I saught. When I created *Threads,* I was looking for a deeper understanding of traditional performance styles. I wanted the performers to have traditional dance in their bodies, but I was not anticipating that the traditional dances would be incorporated into the performance as is. I hoped that we would take our newly acquired knowledge of traditional dance and our existing knowledge of contemporary dance and bring the two together to create a new idiom that speaks to and reflects on the themes we were exploring in *Threads*. That did not happen most notably due to time constraints and the varied experience levels of the performers. Coming to *Space* I wanted to explore the process through my own body to try to develop my own understanding of how to bring traditional dance and contemporary dance together in a way that privileges Botswana-based forms.

In so doing I was pursuing aesthetic beauty, although *Space* contains elements of the aesthesis. This demonstrates why intentional undoing must begin with the self. The concept of decolonial aesthesis asks me to question my own ideas and understanding of beauty, and more so beauty in art. The idea of "high art" was one of the core debates at the end of *Threads* in the post-performance discussion where one audience member noted that he felt that the show was "basic" for a Gaborone, i.e. urban, audience. I interpreted this as meaning that the quality of our work doesn't "pass". On the other hand, another audience member appreciated the fact that it could appeal in other places because it took forms that are familiar in the community and used them to create theatre that discusses issues that affect a certain part of the community, as in popular theatre. I have come to understand that the notion of a higher art is a colonial concept, and it continues a practice in which art is separated from communities and their idioms and cultural practices. This is something that I am still reflecting on. In some ways, I think I achieved what I set out to do as a performance artist which was to continue a tradition of bringing Western art together with African art to speak to the post-independence period. In this regard, a SeTswana aesthetic uses the approaches of autoethnographic performance and Indigenous arts-based research methods to interrogate the Botswana context, especially cultural traditions, in and through performance. As such, a SeTswana aesthetic privileges Botswana-based traditional performance genres and uses them as a starting point for creating work. It also calls forth elements of SeTswana aesthetic fashioning to highlight the cultural context in which it is created.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This write-up has provided a reflection on the processes I undertook to explore the question "where are the women?" The question stemmed from a curiosity about why women are not ascending to leadership positions, focusing on Botswana. It also grew out of a desire to center women's voices and experiences in understanding the challenges around gender equity in leadership. As a woman working in the arts, specifically theatre and performance, I have become interested in how my work intersects with and speaks to work on women's empowerment to achieve gender equity. Drawing on multiple theoretical frameworks, namely decolonial, post-colonial, women and gender, and performance studies, I have developed a decolonial feminist performance praxis to use performance to foster women's leadership. This praxis is a way of being and doing in the world that focuses on speaking from my location as a person gendered female and racialized as Black, situated in and from Africa. Decolonial feminism is a term coined by Marìa Lugones to bring together analyses on race, gender, and colonialism by Third World, intersectional, and Women of Colour feminist scholars and analysis of the coloniality of power by decolonial scholars ("The Coloniality of Gender" 1).

I used performance-as-research to learn how to engage in decolonial being and doing through my artistic practice. Using performance-as-research has been a process of sifting through arts-based research methodologies to center the voices and experiences of my collaborators, while still interrogating my own experience. As such, my approach to performance-as-research draws on first-person, lyric, narrative, and performative inquiry. I see these methodologies as articulating writing and performing the self, doing so collectively and situating knowledge as co-created. This is a defining feature of using performance to foster women's leadership. A

decolonial feminist performance praxis begins with a process of decolonizing the self and employs an intersectional lens to understand the experiences of women, the barriers they face and how that impacts their capacity for pursuing leadership positions. This has forced me to challenge my own views and understandings of women's leadership. By paying attention to women and intentionally centering their voices, I wanted to challenge the prevailing narrative which takes a deficit-based approach—focusing only on needs, deficiencies, and problems (Kretzmann and McKnight 1). A deficit-based approach is problematic because it focuses on the lack of women in *sanctioned* leadership spaces, obscuring and devaluing the work that women are doing in other spaces. Continually putting women in a victim position this way denies them agency in challenging the barriers they face.

I also began incorporating traditional performance forms into my creative process as a strategy for reclaiming culture. Reclaiming culture is about interrogating cultural practices from their own perspective to challenge the weaponization of culture against women. I am particularly interested in challenging claims that feminist action is "unAfrican" and the use of culture to justify the oppression of women. I also believe that the reclamation of culture contests prevailing narratives around women and their capacity to lead and starts with women themselves when creating initiatives to foster their leadership in positions of authority. Incorporating traditional art forms into my creative process uses performance to engage with culture and deepen my knowledge of cultural practices. As such it gestures towards Indigenous arts-based research methods, an approach I intend to continue using in my research and artistic practice to deepen my knowledge and understanding of cultural practices. Deepening my cultural knowledge will help me identify traditional spaces in which women gathered and the role they played, if any, in

shaping perceptions of womanhood and facilitating women's voices within the societies they inhabited.

During this research, I produced five shows, which have led me to conceive of a SeTswana aesthetic in realizing my decolonial feminist performance praxis. I developed three of the performances by co-creating them with other women. In these productions I used conversational walks in the devising process to get to know my collaborators better and to get their views on the themes we explored through our productions. Expanding on the question of "where are the women" (*Being* 2016), we explored gender and mental health (*Nkadzi*, 2017), Africanness, post-coloniality, independence, Blackness, and tradition/culture (*The Thread that Binds,* 2018). I used devising to center my collaborators' experiences, voices, and reflections on these themes. *Being* raised the issue of a neurosis, stemming from being in-between generations and cultures. The collaborator in this piece suggested that women are expected to take up positions of leadership but are not fully supported or honestly sanctioned to do so.

Nkadzi, created and performed in 2017, extended this inquiry to a larger group of women by co-producing the show with two other colleagues and engaging a cast of four. Through *Nkadzi* I also started working with women-only teams to create a women's space. I conceived of this as a strategy for coalition building, which I deemed necessary for women in theatre to address the financial barriers that prohibit first, the growth of the theatre industry in Botswana and second, women's participation in theatre production. Conflicts between myself and one of the co-producers made the *Nkadzi* experiment partially successful in that we were able to work together to mitigate the financial barriers that independent theatre makers face, especially women. However, the process of coalition building stalled as we were not able to continue working together after the performance. Despite these conflicts, I maintain that women need

spaces in which to critically engage with each other about the barriers they face and their role in society, as well as to self-represent. The theatre, for me, presents such a space.

When reflecting on *Nkadzi* I drew parallels between women's participation in the theatre and women's participation in political leadership. Although my interest in working with women centers on understanding internal barriers, it is important to highlight the external barriers that continually limit women's participation in public spaces. Chief among the external barriers that negatively impact women is a political economy of lack—women carry the brunt of lack of funding in both politics and in theatre. Because women carry the social burden of caregiving, they often do not have the capacity to take on leadership roles in either field. This leads to another barrier: too many responsibilities, which leads to burn out and again, women leaving the field. Other barriers are sexism and societal conditioning that positions women as inferior to men. These factors were identified by Emang Basadi in a 2019 report titled, "Mme O Kae?" My interest in using performance to foster women's leadership is to challenge both the lack of women's physical presence *and* women's voice(s) as I contend that the issue of women in leadership is two-fold. First it is the presence of women in leadership positions (physical presence) and second it is the representation of women's issues at decision-making levels (women's voice). I contend that we need both and that they should not be treated as one and the same. The primary goal of using performance to foster women's leadership is to bolster women's capacity to speak for themselves as women, as well as to amplify women's voices where they are speaking and magnify their leadership in alternative spaces. I argue that initiatives based on quantity take a deficit-based approach by focusing only on where women are perceived to be absent, and thus fail to attend to the structural barriers that limit women's participation in sanctioned leadership spaces. I propose a decolonial feminist performance praxis in using

performance to foster women's leadership as a self-reflexive approach to ensure that my offstage performances are rooted in anti-oppressive processes and informed by my onstage performances.

When we came together to create *Threads,* I was curious about women's thoughts on independence, Africanness, Blackness and post-coloniality. These are intersecting issues noted by African feminine scholars (Kolawole), especially with regards to representation and how that affects women's participation. *Threads* is where I started incorporating traditional art forms into my work. Drawing on the development of African contemporary dance, I was interested in the use of Botswana traditional art forms as sites for engaging with culture and reclaiming women's traditions. I had become disgruntled by the way development rhetoric was based on catching up to the west and positioned African women as victims of their cultures. I perceive this as a form of displacement, hence the neurosis identified in *Being.* In focus groups and interviews conducted during that time, one participant articulated this as "not aspiring to ourselves" while another argued that we, Batswana, seem to be having an identity crisis. Using traditional art forms to engage with and develop a deeper understanding of Setswana culture is an ongoing inquiry, working towards a SeTswana aesthetic.

A SeTswana aesthetic is a method of speaking and creating from my own cultural specificity. It draws on the strategies of autoethnographic inquiry and Indigenous arts-based research methods to center Botswana traditional performance in my creative practice, develop a deeper understanding of cultural practices and how they have been changed by colonialism, Christianity, and independence. A SeTswana aesthetic also draws on Batswana's dress and décor. I see this as building an ethical space of engagement in relating across difference. My first attempt at realizing a SeTswana aesthetic was *The Space Between*, a solo performance I created in 2021. Creating and performing in the show was my way of coming alongside my co-creators

in interrogating the themes we had explored in *Nkadzi* and *Threads.* Developing a SeTswana aesthetic has been a process of learning by doing. This dissertation has been "a reflection from the middle" (Disele and Selman) as the process of developing a decolonial feminist performance praxis is an ongoing process of learning, unlearning, and relearning to center Botswana traditional art forms as decolonizing praxis.

Based on this work, I conclude that a decolonial feminist performance praxis must use Indigenous arts-based research methods to work towards and through a SeTswana aesthesis (Vázquez; Mignolo and Vázquez). Rolando Vázquez speaks of aestheSis instead of aestheTics, arguing that aesthetics is part of the colonial project of modernity, acting to control perception and representation (7). Decolonial aesthesis is the process of de-linking through the arts by "mobilizing non-Eurocentric cultural archives, embodied experiences and memories that have been under erasure" (Vázquez 8). One way to do this is to become more grounded in Botswana-based epistemologies as Vázquez argues that "the decolonial response…is about enabling a grounding in one's own historical positionality" (xviii). I believe using Botswana traditional art forms in my work begins to gesture towards a decolonial aesthesis, however I need to become more grounded in my own cultural knowledge to center the worldviews that inform these art forms in my research. At this time, I am interested in the worldviews and cultural practices of the different ethnic groups in Botswana.

Achieving a decolonial aesthesis also requires the intentional use of Indigenous arts-based research methods, to conceive of conversational walks as a strategy for visiting. Uncle Richard Van Camp talks about visiting as a way to get to know, in his case, your mentors, learning their stories and listening with your whole body so that when the time comes you can tell their story well (locs.2277–2283). Going forward, it will be important to find ways to

incorporate conversational walks as visiting to create more space for participants to visit with each other, instead of me being the only person who visits with other team members. In the creative processes of *Nkadzi* and *Threads*, I took a walk with each person, but they never got to walk with each other. The conversational walks were an opportunity to get to know each performer but while I got to know each performer's story and understand how they work; they did not get the same opportunity to get to know each other. I believe that visiting—conversational walks as visiting—creates a space of resilience for women, amongst women. That kind of visiting can help generate productive conflict as opposed to the kind of conflict we experienced during the creation process of *Nkadzi* by facilitating an ethical space of engagement. This is an important aspect of coalition building that needs closer attention to continue creating women's spaces in and through performance.

To my question, "Where are the women?" the women are there but the barriers we face, both internal and external, seem to be inhibiting our capacity to speak in a common voice. In my view, the feminist movement struggles to gain momentum because of its appeals to "victimhood", which perpetuates a dependency on paternalistic institutions to "let us in" at the expense of the "get it done" attitude that I have observed amongst women, especially those from marginalized communities. Several interviewees shared a similar sentiment, positing that the women's movement is fragmented. They decried women's seeming inability to articulate and unite around their strengths. The inability to bring feminist action in line with feminist theorizing and advocacy has created fissures that are yet to heal. Creating women's spaces in and through performance can help heal these fissures by allowing women to shape conversations around womanhood and women's leadership in Botswana, as well as calling attention to the spaces in which women are leading. This builds on previous strategies that drew on cultural practices that

honour women, placing power with women rather than with the hegemonic structures that oppress them.

Creating women's spaces also performs a turning away from male superiority and Eurocentrism to highlight women's traditions and promote women's agency. Working collaboratively in these spaces resists a core external barrier to women's participation: lack of financial resources. Pooling resources through collaborative work encourages women to support each other, overcoming the limitation of too many social responsibilities and the burn out that results from that. My focus is to attune myself to where women are and to what they are saying, and to use performance to amplify women's voices so that the listener who chose not to hear can no longer ignore us. That said, using performance to create women's spaces is also to assert women's agency and sovereignty, and thus reduce (refuse) dependency on systems that do not serve us. A decolonial feminist performance praxis is thus an asset-based process that addresses gender equity by working from the intersections of the women it deals with, centering cultural specificity to create an ethical space of engagement.

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Appendix:

1. Support Materials:
    a. Production Posters
    b. *Being* - video
    c. *In the Shadow of Blessings* - presentation and write-up
    d. Interview questions – interview questions, Nkadzi/Threads pre- and post-rehearsal surveys
    e. Practicum write-up
    f. Production Recordings and Highlight Videos
2. *Nkadzi* – full video
3. *The Thread that Binds* (2021) – video
    a. *The Thread that Binds (*2021) – event page
4. *The Space Between* – video