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The Baby Returned to its Mother

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The Baby Returned to its Mother

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Abstract

This essay analyses the performative photographic series *iSana libuyele kuninai* by South African artist Buhlebezwe Siwani. The artwork is read as a representation of an artistic exploration that brings Sangoma practices – traditional African healing practices – to the forefront of the urban landscape of a South African township in order to question the still open wounds of Western colonialism and Apartheid regimes.

Keywords: Sangoma, colonialism, apartheid, South Africa, performance, land

The Baby Returned to its Mother

A black woman standing in the middle of a paved street. Wearing a red and white dress, she is barefoot and holds a chicken with her left hand. It is not clear whether the chicken is dead or alive. The artist - the woman - is holding it by the feet; the chicken is upside down and one of its wings is almost open as if wanting to fly. She looks directly into the camera, defiant. Behind her is South Africa. The sky is cloudy, turbulent, filled with grey clouds, the mountains loom on the horizon. The street is bounded by an almost endless line of houses. Half-built houses, dilapidated houses, some covered by corrugated metal sheets, others with half-constructed walls built with rickety sticks. Light poles burdened with wires dangling perhaps a bit too low. There is no one on the street. Only a parked car. The artist stares defiantly at us. I again notice her bare feet. I notice the limbo between the chicken's life and death. "Every spirit lives in a liminal space, and I explore what it means to be a human being in-between world" (Lümen, 2021).

This is an image from the series of two photographs entitled "*iSana libuyele kunina*" (translated from Xhosa as "The Baby Returned to its Mother") by young South African artist Buhlebezwe Siwani. I repeat, the image depicts a barefoot woman standing in the middle of the street holding a half-dead chicken. A defiant black female body in what can be inferred

as a *township*¹ in a city of South Africa, potentially Cape Town. In this performative photographic series Siwani allures to the historical layers embedded in this particular urban landscape but also inscribed in her own body and her own gaze. “Spaces can [...] extend into bodies, just as bodies extend into space” (Ahmed, 2007, p.92). What does it mean then to hold a chicken amid a South African township in 2015? What of the colonial and apartheid structures are still present in the “free” post-apartheid South Africa and brought forth in this performative photograph? Artist and scholar Nomusa Makhubu refers to the ruins of apartheid and the processes of social ruination activated by colonial-racist-heteronormative-Christian structures; “The ‘rot’ and ‘decay’ may not be manifest on actual edifices, but it consumes certain bodies, ferments race and gender social relations, and decays the sense of belonging” (Makhubu, 2020, p.572).

Holding a chicken in the middle of a township street speaks to the colonial violence against native African spirituals beliefs, to the apartheid violence of land extraction and to the urban seclusion against the black indigenous population, to the oppressing desacralization of bodies and land. In a video interview published by *The Narrative*, Siwani explains that this piece, *iSana libuyele kunina*, was the pivotal moment of her body of work reflecting upon the interrelation between the violence perpetrated against bodies, land and belief systems. A continuous and fertile body of work that highlights, “How our religion was taken from us. Through religion our land was taken from us. Through land our dignity was taken from us” (The Narrative, 2021). And in which ways to heal; to heal this social, historical and land wounds.

Buhlebezwe Siwani is a traditional healer in the Southern African practice of Ubungoma, a Sangoma. She combines her artistic and sangoma practices to actively reflect and open spaces for social and historical healing. The second photograph of *iSana libuyele kunina*, portrays Siwani standing in front of a rickety Pentecostal church which reads: “Jesus is Lord. Uyesu Uyinkosi. Khayelitsha. Assembly of God”. The church, behind a white wooden fence is a warehouse type of structure painted in soft neon aqua colour; the gable roof is crowned by a dark red Christian cross “Jesus is Lord”: Uyesu Uyinkosi” is written in the same dark red colour. Siwani wears the same red and white dress like in the other photograph. This time she stands on a grassed area with plastic trash, with clear traces of people gathering in the area. A chicken is sitting on top of the artist’s head. In the Ubungoma tradition, chickens are placed on the head as a means to communicate with the ancestors, in order for its killing to be accepted as a ritual sacrifice, Siwani allures to the demonization and

¹ The terms *township* and *location* usually refer to an under-developed, racially segregated urban area, that between the XIX century and the apartheid regime were reserved for non-whites, namely Black Africans, Coloureds and Indians. Townships were usually built on the periphery of towns and cities and present high levels of gun violence and shortage of services such as running water, or scarcity of electricity.

missionary violence that indigenous African spiritualism and religions have been subjected to and reaffirms their power, their relevance in contemporary South African society. Siwani further explains that the chicken is a cross in its own way: “I decided to put it in my head as a sacrifice on its own, as it is an intermediary between you and your ancestors” (The Narrative, 2021).

Both photographs can be seen as a bodily testimony of a myriad of political resistances. The resistance of the African spiritual beliefs, the defiant strength of a young black woman, the construction of houses despite the atrocious dispossession of the land, and the persistence of the mountains and the sky, speak loudly across the camera lens. Siwani’s artwork allows us to understand the performativity of space through the juxtaposition of social and historical references to defy an organization of the same., understanding sites as spiritual, historical and cognitive landscapes that can be used or can inform an aesthetic practice. “To cleanse is therefore to exorcise the omnipresent spirit of colonialism that pervades the social landscape in South Africa” (Makhubu, 2020, p.587).

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