

*Uviwe Umthandazo*

By  
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for a Master of Fine Arts degree

At Rhodes University

**Supervisors**

Professor Ruth Simbao

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## **Declaration of Originality**

I declare that this thesis is my work and that all the sources I have used have been acknowledged by complete bibliographic references. This thesis is being submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for a Master of Fine Art at Rhodes University. I declare that it has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at another university.

Viwe Madinda

DATE: 08 February 2023

## Abstract

The discourse of identity and community are topics of interest to me. As a citizen living in post-apartheid South Africa, I am captivated by the re-emerging wisdom and knowledge of Nguni cultural philosophies and practices. My practice-based research is interested in a creative interpretation of these ancient philosophies and practices in the context of postcolonial life. The project in many ways *re-members* through observation of socio-political issues such as inequality, violence, and vandalism as reflections of internal challenges of the individual *self* in current reality. In essence, my discussion in this paper highlights the need for healing grief and loss for the well-being – physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual – of society.

Self-definition is the core of any community and we see this in the philosophy of the African proverb *umntu ngumntu ngabantu*, ‘I am because you are’. ‘I am’ is a set of beliefs that construct the individual *self*; our life’s course then becomes a constant molding of the body and the world around us. The wisdom of *ubuntu* was, and is, a catalyst for many African cultures, as this law recognizes each individual as important and equal in the community. As a descendant of various indigenous clans originating in Africa the well-being and balance of my being is determined by how much I know about who *I am*. Consequently, being a part of the generation that is experiencing the transitioning phases from apartheid I question the ways we are dealing with the residue of coloniality concerning all aspects of self; the physical, emotional, and mental bodies of self. My creative work is a reflection of the exercises I implemented to cultivate selfhood as a way to participate in and control my reality as a marginalized member of society. The different chapters touch on many intersecting theories about tools for healing/soothing the *self*. The creative process experimented with the various concepts embedded in the expression ‘I am because you are’. In the process of this research, I learned that knowing yourself is one of the principles of *ubuntu*, which teaches me that I cannot be or give what I do not have. The themes I explore through the above expression are self-love, self-acceptance, and self-respect using a creative lens. This practice-based research proposes a concept; the act of love as a decolonial gesture.

My exhibition *Vuleka Mhlaba Ndinene*<sup>1</sup> utilizes visual language to convey the need for more conversations on healing using natural elements, as a way to make a connection between *self*, the natural environment, and community. In the first and second chapters, the paper focuses on practices employed by artists such as Lhola Amira, Guadalupe Maravilla, Buhlebezwe Siwani,

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<sup>1</sup> A Xhosa expression for shame or embarrassment ‘I wish the ground can swallow me’

Tony Gum, Lina Iris Viktor, and Aida Muleneh, to relate the various approaches to *re-member* the severed connection between self, nature, and community. This study looks at theories on; holding space, sound healing, earthing, shadow work, astrology, and human consciousness.

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*Kokhokho nezihlele zasekhaya. OoStathu, amaQadi, amaTolo, amaNtankwenda, nakooDlomo CAMAGU!*

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## Introduction

*The central teaching of Buntu is that all things originate from UQOBO and evolve in response to the challenge of their nature; that a person is a self-defining value... (the person is human it is the person who knows best the workings of his body) and that life's purpose for the person is perpetual evolution (Jordan Ngubane, 1979:77)*

This written component is an extension of my exhibition titled *Vuleka Mhlaba Ndingene*. 'I wish the ground would swallow me' is an expression used when one feels embarrassment or humiliation. The work speaks abstractly to finding refuge in the earth, in solitude. What follows in this text is an analysis of the lessons learned in this solitude. Therefore the use of creative writing is a methodological approach to the ideas discussed in the research. To go beyond the personal requires a channel, what began as an ethnographic study revolutionized into a journey within the *self*. In reflection of the process, in the conceptual phases of the work, I didn't realize how much of myself would be explored and exposed. Practically I document these intimate moments with *self* through photography, video, and performance. The thread that runs through my writing and making is that of finding healing and alternative therapeutic methods.

The practice-based element of this project began with the personal intention to understand what I consider the essence of my being, *uqobo*, the original *self*. Jordan Ngubane (1979) explains that the teaching of *ubuntu* emphasizes that *uqobo*, the nature or essence of *self*, adapts in response to the changing environment. In my process of interpreting this perspective, I got to a point where I wondered about the many ways neocolonialism shapes cultures and societies in Africa today.

*Ubuntu* in Nguni languages such as isiXhosa, isiZulu, isiNdebele, and isiSwati is a philosophy that defines what it means to be *umntu*, human. In the African continent, spirituality and diplomacy are founded on this philosophy. *Ubuntu* is essentially an abstract noun that denotes natural human qualities that are taught through culture and language, which are embodied as a moral code. The English translation 'I am because you are' cannot fully capture the semantics of this wisdom. So I tasked myself with an investigation to learn the meaning from an African perspective in the context of postcolonial reality. I extended the general comprehension of the philosophy through idioms

such as ‘*Intaka yakha ngoboya benye*’, a bird builds its nest with the feathers of other birds (Fikeni, 2006: 237) and ‘it takes a village to raise a child’, both of which point to the creed that the foundation of any community is unity. For months I became occupied with Ngubane’s interpretation of *ubuntu*, observing how my individual *self* plays a role in the harmony of my community and country.

In the Xhosa culture, I have witnessed how language and culture are intertwined, whether it be through *intsomi*<sup>2</sup> poetry, music, laws that govern traditional ceremonies, the meaning of different traditional objects, or simply reciting *isiduko*, your clan name. *Ubuntu* essentially means to be empathic, intuitive, honest, have integrity, to be respectful and self-aware. In my understanding, these qualities form what the Xhosa people consider *umntu onobulungisa*, a just person. I’ve come to learn through conversations with elders and different people that the wisdom of *ubuntu* goes beyond describing the human character, it also explains that the qualities you adopt as a person determine your reality. Like the meaning ‘what goes around, comes around’ of Karma in Hinduism and Buddhism, it is the principle of cause and effect (Felton 2022). Unity cannot be achieved without the consent and intention of each *self* of a community, therefore this principle affirms the value and contribution of each individual as being equally important. This means that the community is held by each person's contribution. In present-day South Africa, however, this has changed to ‘every man for himself’, which is evident in the culture of violence, corruption, and the rate of poverty. My work is a response to how the evolution of *self* in such a climate can be disrupted and neglected. I focus on themes such as humiliation, trauma, and spiritual misalignment as factors that influence selfhood and the self’s relationship with the natural environment and the community.

I began my investigation by attempting to understand the political and social disharmony in my hometown, Makhanda. This social landscape would point me to the root of many beliefs I held about myself, other people, and the world. The first question I asked myself was ‘Who do I come from?’ which was followed by a series of other questions such as ‘Where do I come from’ and ‘What am I created from?’ This would help me understand the nature of *uqobo lwam*, what makes me who I am. I was led to a myriad of unresolved trauma, which is the material I worked with on this project.

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<sup>2</sup> A traditional practice of storytelling

The first matter was that of identity. I grew up in a Christian household and went to a multiracial school. For the majority of my life, I have been prescribed labels of who I am supposed to be. The church insisted that I was to be a humble servant of God and was subordinate to men. The Eurocentric culture of my school reminded me of my backwardness and blackness. In both places, I have always felt rejected and dominated. Years leading up to this moment have been an undoing and rebuilding from this past. As I reflect now I would say that researching the meaning of *Ubuntu* saved me. To prove this, in 2016 I began my academic journey as a 21-year-old who couldn't even say the eulogy of my clan names, as it didn't bear any significance or relevance in the urban area and contemporary culture I grew up in. However, this changed when life challenges required me to know who I am. My research began as a study of *iziduko*, clan names, and the Xhosa definition of identity. This tradition of *iziduko* extends to what is known as *ukuzithutha* or *ukuzilanda*, which can be translated as fetching or transporting yourself. An English translation, however, cannot capture this idea of a person going to fetch and bringing themselves back. This oral tradition, essentially, is a practice of preserving cultural knowledge, ancestry, and language. My investigation continues from this study I did on indigenous cultural conventions of identity, as a creative decolonial act of self-defining in post-colonial reality (Madinda, 2019).

In my culture, it is a demonstration of pride to be able to recite this poetic narration of one's clan history and knowledge. In many instances *xa umntu ezityibela*, when a person performs this act of self-admiration and praise, people find that they share the same clan or that they have a connection through other family members (Fikeni, 2006: 231). This complex network of information also serves as a form of collective memory that I have access to as a descendant. Fikeni (2006) clarifies that this cultural device goes beyond the idea of just a poetic narration of clan histories, that it has various functions and one of them is illustrating our connectedness as people; the language, Xhosa idioms, and proverbs demonstrate an interconnectedness among people as well as connection to the physical environment and the spiritual world.

My ventures went deeper into the philosophical underpinnings of this oral practice of *ukuzithutha* as a way to understand its relevance in present reality. Fikeni's (2006) explanation highlights that, to a greater extent, *isiduko* assists in informing the question of who we are. I am captured by the connection Fikeni makes between the self-defining act of *ukuzithutha* as an enactment that counters modern-day labels that split the *self* into name, gender, nationality, ethnicity, and occupation.

Chapter One focuses on the *self* and different physiological aspects of the physical body, emotions,

mind, and soul. In this chapter, I observe how the acts of self-love and self-care are essential in the development of *self* from a young age, something that is missing in the modern-day culture of the society I grew up in. Furthermore, I discuss the effect of trauma on personal and collective consciousness. My discussion is based on how consciousness is the reality of *self*. In observing how the body, specifically my body, functions in different states of consciousness, I learned that it is a bodily function of awareness of our physical and mental experience that varies from low to high levels (Cherry, 2022). At low levels, the brain is still able to process any signals it receives, such as when we are asleep. Whereas in a high level of awareness, the brain tends to function in a way where thoughts can be controlled (Cherry, 2022). My discussion asks the question: Are we created by our circumstances or do we create our circumstances? Through Lhola Amira's performative interventions of gestural healing, I discuss how the collective wound of apartheid still bleeds in many ways today. My analysis extends to practices of healing and catharsis analyzing two performance artists, Guadalupe Maravilla and Buhlebezwe Siwani, on traditional healing practices and objects. Essentially I am interested in demonstrating how the gesture of holding space can initiate the healing of the *self* and the collective.

In the second chapter, I unpack the two primary aspects of *self*, the physical and emotional bodies characterized by the natural elements of earth and water. The central topic of my discussion is the history of colorism in black communities. I draw from my childhood experiences and depict my inner child as a character responding to these issues. The works *Ifirstborn Yelahle* and *BLACKY* depict my experiences with colorism as a dark-skinned woman. I employ self-love as a healing medium for the body, the earth element representation of the physical body. The water element is a representation of emotion and its fluid nature. The video work *Inertia – ukuthetha ubomi* is a water blessing ritual and an observation of how our emotions are a powerful free-flowing body inside of us.

The final chapter looks at the elements of air and fire. The former represents the mental body and the latter is a symbol for the spiritual body of *self*. Through the work's title and *Uviwe umthandazo*, I conceptualize how the *self* becomes whole through thought and connection to source. I narrate the ways *ubuntu* could shape the mindset and be a spiritual compass for the *self*.

The scope of my practice-based research is accompanied by this written thesis, which I should also highlight is intended to express and expand my creative process. Consequently, the writing itself

becomes a medium of *re-membering*<sup>3</sup> the *self*. The word *re-member* evokes the coming together of severed parts, fragments becoming a whole (hooks 1995: 64).

With no definite end goal for my exploration, my creative investigation over three years has evolved to create a connection between my performative practice and photographic work. The story told by the body of work in *Vuleka Mhlaba Ndingene* speaks of typical internal conflicts of *self* and how they influence physical reality. This literary process involves the analysis of the therapeutic processes represented in creative practice that address or engage these conflicts.

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<sup>3</sup> a concept of re-membering; the coming together of separate parts; I elaborate in the following chapters

## Chapter 1

### **The self**

*Ndingu Masthathu, uChisane, uNdebe, uKhophoyi, uNkomo'zbomvu ezimnyama ziyaxhelwa.* This is how we as Xhosa people respond to the question *ungubani*, who are you? My response, in this case, can be a quick-expression: I am *Masthathu*. A more elaborate response lets the person asking to know that I am a descendant of Queen *Hoho*. My people call themselves *Chisana, Ndebe, Khophoyi*. Whilst this may seem as just a brief history of my ancestry, each time I declare it I begin to feel a subtle pleasure in my being. This is because the tradition of *isiduko*, clan name, allows me the agency to affirm myself according to my will. Physically and spiritually *isiduko* connects me to the earth and to those who have walked it before me. It always reminds me that I am never alone, as I am a part of the millions of *ooSthathu* I have encountered in this lifetime.

Ngubane (1979) unpacks the underpinning principle of the proverb *umntu ngumntu ngabantu*, which is understood in Africa and the world as 'I am because you are'. In his analysis Ngubane (1979: 77) states that this teaching works on the premise that each individual is the face of humanity and each self is a unique value, *uqobo*, that 'evolves in response to the challenge of its nature'. The expression *uqobo* can be defined as the original or truth. Concerning *umntu*<sup>4</sup>, this means the essence, which then describes the *self* as a unique and authentic substance. Fikeni (2006: 236) reinforces this observation with the expression '*ndim uqobo*', meaning 'this is the quintessential me' and is used when a person is 'in a state of being that best describes the way they understand themselves'.

The nature of this essence of *self* is my hypothesis for the body of work titled *Vuleka Mhlaba Ndingene*. In my investigation, I began with a standard dictionary definition of the *self*: a person's personality or character that makes them different from other people. Interestingly, personality is translated as *ubuntu* in isiXhosa and refers to characteristics that influence the way a person behaves. These characteristics range from emotional patterns, beliefs, self-concept, traits, and assimilation. Ngubane's (1979: 78) observation on *uqobo* reveals how self-defined individual identities serve the purpose of an 'exploration of the person and his environment to enable him to discover more satisfying dimensions of being human'.

My creative exploration follows a three-year process of collecting data that maps out the different

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<sup>4</sup> *umntu*: means person or human in isiXhosa.

dimensions of being human. These dimensions are noted as bodies and are the different parts of *self*, namely, the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. The physical body can be understood by characteristics like the ‘skin and everything under the skin’ (Willard 2015). This part of *self* Willard explains, includes all the organs in the body, such as the brain, heart, and liver; it also includes our skeletal system, the blood in our veins, and even ligaments. This part of the *self* is recognizable and the signs generally vary from being full, injured, or healthy (Willard 2015). Emmanuel (2020) defines the next body of *self* as ‘the bridge between the physical and mental’ – the emotional body. This body is made up of the nervous system, water release and absorption, hormones, and the sense of touch (Emmanuel 2020). Ways we recognize the state of the emotional body are ‘represented by how calm or rough the waters are in our thoughts and our dream state’ (Willard 2015). The third body is the ‘complex duality of mind and brain’, however in the context of this research, I am referring to the mind (Theosophy World 2023). The mental body represents primarily how we perceive ourselves and the world, which is influenced by thoughts, mindsets, judgments, and prejudices (Willard 2015). This is where ‘self-actualization’ inevitably becomes ‘the highest point in one’s sense of being, self-understanding, self-love and ultimately intrinsic human dignity’ (Fikeni 2006: 226). The fourth body is known as the spiritual body, which is believed to connect us all and is translated in the spirit of interconnectedness in *ubuntu*. The spiritual body can also be conceptualized as a higher *self* or our soul, which becomes our guidance system in life that communicates through our intuition, dreams, and imagination (Laz 2020). Willard (2015) states that this non-material body of *self* ‘represents the synthesis and balance of the other three’ and forms part of the whole of *self*.

### **Fragments of *self***

These four bodies split between a dual force known as masculine and feminine energy (Willard 2015). Although many people think that a person has only one of these attributes, Willard (2015) explains that the masculine side affects the physical and mental, whilst the feminine governs the emotional and spiritual bodies. This duality is not foreign to the philosophy of *ubuntu*; the concept is about giving and doing, while it also includes loving and nurturing. The physical and mental bodies give the *self* the ability of action and motion, logic, and critical thinking. These mentioned functions are what make the self-active, assertive, and authoritative (s. me 2022). The emotional and spiritual bodies connect the *self* to intuition and creativity. Which govern emotional intelligence, connection to others, and empathy of *self* (Willard 2015). These attributes are not to

be mistaken for gender, an imbalance in the duality impacts our actions and behaviors as well as a disconnect to our emotions and creative flow. A dominant imbalanced masculine creates an aggressive, violent, and controlling or dominating self, and the self becomes powerless, oversensitive, and co-dependent when the feminine is dominant and imbalanced (Meloy 2015). These fragments that make the whole of *self* demonstrate how internal factors determine ubuntu, the character of the *self*.

At the end of 2019, I completed my fourth year of study in performance art with a task to take what I had learned and share it with my family and community back home. This was inspired, or rather it was directed, by my spiritual path. At first, I thought I had to physically teach and share all the information I had acquired, however now, on reflection, the path pointed in the direction of home as a metaphor; to return to the *self*. I had just completed my degree, which was so challenging and life-changing for me so I thought the journey would be easier from there. I also thought that my career would unfold effortlessly and I would get the chance to create work with lighter concepts such as love and beauty. And so this project began as an exploration of my interest in African folklore, experimenting with the aesthetic of Afrofuturism.<sup>5</sup> The objective was to create a new narrative of freedom both personally and creatively.

Things took a turn in the third month of this study. On the evening of 26 March 2020, the president announced that the country was going into a 21-day nationwide lockdown due to the coronavirus. This meant that during the 21 days, only essential services could operate and everyone had to be confined to their place of residence. This was an anxious time for me, mainly because I was away from home and I was living by myself. Days turned into weeks which turned into months with no access to the studio or having visited home. And so whether or not I began or was successful in exploring my concept for this project, my mind started to wonder about issues such as freedom, selfhood, and generational patterns. I was thinking of the ways the past informs the present and how that shapes the perception of the future personally and in a collective capacity for the country.

During my spare time, which was now my whole day, I studied the science of the law of attraction. While this was not formal research, I was however interested in proving the hypothesis that the mind and heart are two major components that govern the reality of the self. I had been introduced

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<sup>5</sup> Afrofuturism, more concretely, can be understood as a wide-ranging social, political and artistic movement that dares to imagine a world where African-descended peoples and their cultures play a central role in the creation of that world.

to the law of attraction by a friend of mine in my former undergraduate years which has now influenced my spiritual practice. Primarily this pseudoscience is based on the philosophy that describes how thoughts are a form of energy, based on the belief that positive thoughts can manifest our intentions, while negative thoughts attract the things we don't want (Scott 2022). More importantly, I was interrogating how practicing this law is a method to consciously create your reality. When I began applying this science in my own life the first step was to sift through the desires I wanted to achieve. I will just mention three: the first was gaining independence from my mother, then it was creating an income and the third was the desire to attract 'true' love. I sometimes cringe at my memory of these aspirations because they reflect some of the unlearned beliefs of my younger self. And so the following step to this practice was to visualize a desired reality, based on the principle that what the mind focused on was what would transpire in reality. My new motto became 'where focus goes, energy flows' (Tony Robbins, 2022) which became a ritual of imagining all the future events I wanted to experience as my now.



**Figure 1** Viwe Madinda. *Inertia – Ubungeyo mpazamo*, 2021. Live performance (photograph captured by Mark Wessels)

## Space

My performance practice has evolved over the years and it has been my method of merging my reality and art. Initially, when I started I was interested in how the audience reacts to two elements, the body or presence and, the enactment, to stimulate the three senses of touch, sight, and hearing. This developed with new incorporations like audio, candles, and *impepho*<sup>6</sup> as a method of creating alternative spaces. Space can be interpreted as being our immediate surroundings, area, or location; it is essentially a dimension where the *self* exists. A common element between space and *self* is vibrational energy; a non-physical pulsation that can only be felt and sensed (Regan 2021). According to the law of vibration ‘matter and energy are explained primarily by... vibratory motions’ for example light, electricity, and sound are forms of ‘vibratory motion’ just as trees, flowers, and the body (Bacote 2020). When things vibrate very slowly, we hear no noise. Physical objects vibrate slowly, which is why we cannot hear any sounds emanating from them. As vibration is increased, we begin to hear lower-pitched sounds. The same principles of vibration that apply to the physical world also apply to us and our thoughts, feelings, desires, and will (Bacote 202).

In works like *Inertia – ubungeyo mpazamo* I interrogate how the energy of the space affects the feeling and reaction of the self. In African spirituality, cleansing a space is a practice performed regularly or ceremonially. My concept was inspired by the practice of catharsis; while we can release repressed trauma and emotion via therapy or expression, I was interested in how land has memory and how that affects those who occupy that particular space. In the context of the town of Makhanda, history tells us that a series of wars took place between the Xhosa kingdom and the British Empire as well as the Trekboers. Monuments and museums have records of the events that transpired between the Xhosa warriors and the British soldiers. The battle site continues to be called Egazini, which means ‘the place of blood. *Umsebenzi* – I am careful to not use performance but rather the word ceremony – probes at how the memory of the people and the land ultimately influences the atmosphere of the town. Essentially the work is a ritual of purging the feeling of inertia that blankets the town. It deals with the unfinished business of postcolonial life, it asks: As Xhosa people what have we done to cleanse such spaces to stop recurring violence?

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<sup>6</sup> *Imphepho* is an indigenous herb of any of several species of *Helichrysum*, burned as a type of incense in traditional ceremonies, also used in traditional medicine.

At the time of this ceremony the annual National Arts Festival program, hosted in Makhanda, had to find an alternative way of existing during the pandemic era. The show became a digital experience where people could view shows and broadcasts from anywhere in the world on their electronic devices. Without intentionally excluding the majority of the Makhanda community, the initiative could only be accessed by those who had internet and smartphones. As a response a three-part interdisciplinary live performance in the form of performance, music, and poetry probes at this reality. *Inertia – Ubungeyo mpazamo* is a live intervention by myself, together with my mother and three friends; Zodwa, Nomaphelo, and Yandiswa. In thinking through the curation of this project Zodwa Tutani-Skeyi (2021) states that the concept is a negotiation with the healing and cleansing, ‘as well as the reimagining of self in post-colonial times’. As a response, *re-membering* became a central theme of interest; remembering the past to be conscious of the present. The piece was an enactment of a ritual known as *ukunxenxeza*, to ask for forgiveness. It is a Xhosa custom performed to appease ancestors and the gods. When a family or a community experiences troubling or challenging events, the ancestors, spirits, and God are offered a sacrifice for their intervention. Likewise, there are celebrations and blessing rituals such as *ukuvula ulibo*, which is a celebration of the produce of the first crop to thank the gods for a successful harvest. In many African cultures, the natural environment is central to spirituality and way of living. In the Xhosa culture, for instance, some customs acknowledge various spirits and deities of nature. This is with the philosophy that a balance has to be maintained between the physical world and the spiritual world, for we believe that we are spiritual beings governed by natural laws and phenomena. For example, a successful planting and harvesting season is considered a blessing from the gods, and if the land is struck by famine and drought the people perform rituals to appease the sovereign spirits who have the power to transform the land. In the town I come from, such rituals are scarce, and culture and spirituality are doctrines performed by a few. The town is also riddled with a high rate of crime, unemployment, and school drop-out. There are also a few if any, creative initiatives for the youth to express themselves. *Ukungxengeza* is a probe into the current atmosphere of things, the afterlife of colonial rule.

The items sourced for this ritual were based on the intention to cleanse the land and appease uQamata, the creator and protector of heaven and earth. A plant called *impepho*, also known as sage, is lit for two reasons, to cleanse the atmosphere and to connect to the spirit world where ancestors reside. A very important item is *ibhekile yomqombothi*, a traditional sorghum beer, which

I had brewed from scratch a few days before. The success of the fermentation process is considered a sign of approval from the ancestors. This was accompanied by fresh cow's milk, *isonka samanzi*, known as steam bread, which I had to prepare the night before. Some honey and a variety of fruits and flowers were also offered.

### **Holding space; the art of *re-membering***



**Figure 2** Lhola Amira *SINKING: Xa Sinqamla Unxubo*, 2018. Short Film: Audio & Video 10:27 minutes

I've been stuck on this page for some moments, the emotion felt is so overwhelming that I can only sit in silence and wait for the feeling to pass. I believe that as a race, as black African people, we are experiencing a time where we are called to heal and to be healed. One of the South African artists who have given me ways to articulate what I experience in my practice as a black spiritually gifted woman is Lhola Amira. In thinking of the ways we reckon with the past I am inspired by the boldness and love exuded by this artist. Collective healing is central to the film in Figure 2, and having only seen it once I was captivated by Lhola Amira's gesture to mourn the souls that sank with the SS *Mendi* in 1917.<sup>7</sup> The film's title, which means 'a curbing of agony or stop to the flow of agony' is a description of the act of transmuting and clearing the energy of this memory of the tragic event (Mavura 2018).

The ocean is sacred amongst Africans; it is a space that is believed to be where 'sea and land spiritual energies converge' (Siwani 2015: 28). As a spiritually inclined person, I think it is courageous of Lhola Amira to enter that space to do *umsebenzi* of healing because in that moment they could relive or experience the violent tragedies of that event. This is also the main reason for undertaking such a daring task; Amira believes going to the 'source of the wound' is essential in the process of healing. By examining the wound of the SS *Mendi*, Lhola Amira with love and care looks at:

How to stop the S.S Mendi from continuously sinking! The 1960 Sharpeville massacre is another Mendi sinking; the June 16 1976 Soweto uprisings is another Mendi sinking; the 2012 Marikana massacre is yet another Mendi Sinking; and somewhere in South Africa every day – a Mendi sinks (Mavura 2018).

Analysis of such work is a complex task. The viewer or reader has to understand that the aesthetics and visual language are a result of the process which is otherwise unseen but felt in the space. In essence, with this work, we can start to see how the presence of the self, intention, and space become a way to reckon with the past. Lhola Amira's work is concerned with observing and listening, to make meaning of how the past keeps repeating and what that does to a place, its people, cultures, and even the ways people speak. *Sinking* is a gesture 'to heal within the pain' collectively, the practice then extends to the art of holding space (Mavura 2018). Holding space can be a simple

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<sup>7</sup> A total of 616 South Africans, including 607 Black men serving in the South African Native Labour Contingent, died when the steamship sank in the English Channel on its way to France to fight, on the side of the British in the First World War.

gesture that can be a conversation with a loved one or a stranger, it is essentially the act of providing support ‘physically, mentally and emotionally present’ (GSTherapy 2022). It is a metaphor for providing a safe environment where others can feel and express their feelings. For instance in the Xhosa culture mourning is considered sacred, when a family is bereaved the community gathers daily to comfort the family. This practice is known as *ukukhunga*, it is translated as the act of praying or interceding, and in the case of death, it means to hold space. This can be in the form of daily short church services until the funeral or to just assist the family where you can; helping to cook, clean the space, or helping to usher other visitors that come to the home.

Observing the state of affairs in my hometown as a citizen and as an artist makes me feel helpless. Speaking about high vibrations and positive thinking is a complex task because there is no language for it in the context of ordinary people I interact with daily and even with my own family. The act of holding space became an alternative method to speak on collective healing and transformation of the *self* in my practice. The concept of *Inertia; Ubungeyo Mpazamo* employs performance and symbolism which is also a gesture towards individual and collective healing.

*Take me to the place  
Where we talk with our eyes  
To the place where even winter is warm  
To the place where music is played all  
day To the place where we sit next to God*  
Zama Jobe, Ndawo yami (2009)

I consider myself a music lover and while I’m not drawn to a specific music genre, I have noticed how I am drawn to soulful songs but mostly lyric content that speaks to hurt, healing, love, joy, and peace. As a child all of the games we played as kids pertained to some kind of musical elements like a rhythm or song; games like *ugqapsi*<sup>8</sup>, *uroundy*<sup>9</sup>, *umshinxi*,<sup>10</sup> and even musical performances. One of my favorite songs since I heard its release in 2004 is *Ndawo Yami* by the graceful South African jazz vocalist Zama Jobe. I was very young, 10 years old to be exact, to articulate why I was moved when Zama chanted *Indawo yami* in the chorus, which means ‘my place’. Now that I am older I realize that it is the feeling that those words, her voice and the musical arrangement

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<sup>8</sup> Translation for skipping rope; a series of games and songs with a skipping rope

<sup>9</sup> Clapping and singing in a circle where two people hold hands and spin until the next round/song

<sup>10</sup> Requires certain actions to mimic the song as the person moves in between others

invoke. A feeling of freedom and bliss. Eighteen years later the song is like a prayer of mine that takes me to a place where I can feel and just be, which is what the song is about.

The sound of the flute for me always brings relaxation and a feeling of tranquillity. Another sound that always moves me is that of *umrhubhe*<sup>11</sup>, a stringed mouth-bow, which sounds like a vibration of varying pitches of a faint whistle. I never really understood why this sound had a soothing effect on me until I learned about sound therapy. Sound healing is a practice of therapy that uses aspects of music to reduce stress by promoting relaxation as an alternative way to improve physical and



emotional well-being (Watson 2020). As a result, my spiritual journey influenced the addition of sound in my practice. I would wake with a certain chant or song in my ear that stays with me for days, then I would have to mix the sound using digital applications and sound clips of different audios. In my latest installation the sound, according to the few people who spoke to me, had a calming and meditative effect; the audio was created as a welcoming prayer, combining throat singing and various instruments.

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<sup>11</sup> A traditional mouth bow played by the Xhosa people of the eastern Cape of South Africa. It is played by drawing a straight stick across the string of the bow whilst using your mouth as a resonator. A simultaneous inward whistling action produces additional sounds.

**Figure 3** Guadalupe Maravilla *Disease Throwers*, 2021. Installation, Cast aluminum, steel tubing, assorted welded details. Dimensions variable.

This is how I was introduced to the practice of sound baths. Although I've never experienced a full sound bath session I have been a part of meditative and grounding practices in a few musical shows. Sculptor and performer Guadalupe Maravilla, who creates life-size installations and sculptures, is also inspired by his experience with sound healing. In a short film, Maravilla shares how sound became an important element in his healing as a cancer survivor (Art21 2021). The multifaceted use of shrines, ancient musical instruments, and rituals, bathes participants with sound waves using wind and percussion instruments to promote a therapeutic process. A series of steps are involved in a sound bath, such as lying down and performing yoga and meditation exercises following the lead of a trained practitioner (Watson 2020). Although there is not much research on this method of healing Watson (2020) states that the instruments create soothing vibrations that lead the participants 'into a state of contemplation or relaxation' improving mood and releasing tension in the body. A sound bath can be a preventive method for conditions like diabetes and heart disease (Watson 2020).

In the case of Maravilla, he believes his diagnosis of colon cancer was a manifestation of the trauma he endured as a child. He had to flee his country, El Salvador, due to a civil war and journey alone, separated from his family to the United States border (Art21 2021). In the film, he recalls having an intense feeling in his stomach, which later in adulthood created a physical wound. His first experience with sound healing was a method to assist the radiation treatment for cancer, which then inspired Maravilla's creative practice of sound healing. In this particular installation the video documents how the artist casts recycled aluminum which takes a 'coral-like' form and is placed in the center of the demarcated outdoor space (Art21 2021). These towering sculptures, titled *Disease Throwers*, are coupled with instruments and objects collected by the artist and become a shrine. The instruments used for the sound bath vary from singing bowls, gongs, and conch shells. The participants gather in a circle for the healing workshop as cancer survivors or people who have lost loved ones to cancer. In the video Maravilla states that, 'Having a community that has gone through similar experiences can be empowering. Making these elaborate *Disease Throwers* is not just about telling a story from my past, but it's also about how this healing ritual can continue in the future, long after I'm gone.

Healing in this case becomes the method of *re-membering* the self. Moreover, this gesture

demonstrates in practice the principle of giving in the teaching of *ubuntu*. Maravilla could have survived cancer and moved on with his life; instead, he shows compassion by training and learning this practice of healing so he could extend it to other survivors. This also depicts the profound nature of performance, as it enables the space to be an extension of the artist and the creative process.

Another example of how space becomes an extension of the artist is the installation *Vutha umlilo*, which can be translated as ‘a blazing fire’. In 2021, the National Arts Festival returned to its traditional ten-day program. As a citizen of Makhanda, I was excited to see what the festival had in store. Even more so, I was excited for the 2021 Standard Bank Young Artist exhibition. This is because one of my favorite South African contemporary artists, Buhlebezwe Siwani, was the recipient of the Young Artist Award. I have only read and seen works by Siwani on the internet and in art books. Moreover, the opportunity was exciting because the theme for the work, *Iyeza*, centered on healing connected to the earth and water elements, both of which are concepts I explore in my work. *Iyeza* in isiXhosa means medicine, and Siwani explores this conceptually as a substance that can be used to cleanse the self (Siwani 2022).



**Figure 4** Buhlebezwe Siwani *Vutha Umlilo* 2022. Installation: wool, eucalyptus tree stumps, grass, soil and leopard print cloth

This particular installation is a fragment of a three-part narrative on ritual and traditional healing practice. The location of the installation, known as the Gallery in the Round, is in the basement of

the 1820 Settlers Monument. I have always felt that the atmosphere of this particular space was different from that of a traditional white cube gallery. It is a circular structure with minimal lighting where you hear echoes of the stage in the room above. It is almost creepy but has a tranquil element to it, which fits the ambiance of the work. When I entered this dim room I was immediately greeted by the smell of the soil, which I came to find blanketed the whole floor of the gallery. We were instructed to take our shoes off at the entrance and as I placed my first step I felt the different texture of soil under my feet. A yellow light cast a trail of shadows on the walls around the gallery. I visited the space with my mother and a colleague before it was open to the public. So it was quiet in the room. In a section of the space hung ropes from the ceiling and tree stumps circled the room.

The space felt meditative, and in her opening speech, Siwani mentioned that the ropes made from multicolored wools were inspired by girdles that are normally worn in some South African churches. The ropes represented prayer, so essentially the space was a prayer room and spoke to 'taking the familiar and making it unfamiliar, the same way African spiritual practices had to codify their practices' (Siwani 2022). A significant element for me was how Siwani utilized the earth. As the viewer, I sort of participated in the ritual of walking the earth, which is known to be another therapeutic process. Walking is a habitual practice for everyone. It also illustrates how the act of moving from one place to another is an unconscious decision to move our bodies in the direction of our desire. Shoes and our feet become a mode of transport. As a child, playing barefoot was common in my community, it was a choice for kids like me but for others, it was simply because they didn't own a pair of shoes. Now that I am an adult, wearing shoes becomes a requirement because walking barefoot superstitiously alludes to madness or being eccentric. However cultural knowledge and science theory prove that there are benefits to walking barefoot. Having no shoes on means that you have direct contact with the electrons on the surface of the earth. Chevalier et al. (2012) suggest that research indicates that a 'reconnection with the Earth's electrons has been found to promote intriguing physiological changes and subjective reports of well-being'. The practice of grounding, or earthing, 'electrically reconnects you to the earth'; it aids ailments such as inflammation, cardiovascular disease, and chronic pain, and elevates mood (Lockett 2019). This home remedy involves just walking the earth with bare feet, holding the earth in your palms, or lying down for a few minutes. Lockett (2019) explains that earthing regularly 'may influence healing abilities' for 'pain, stress, depression, and fatigue'. I have been practicing grounding as a form of therapy and have been interested in the concept of walking the earth as healing. Moreover,

I am interested in the concept that the physical body resembles or rather is connected to the earth element. In my creative process, I have been exploring how each of the different elements, earth, water, air, and fire, are connected to each of the different bodies of self; the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual.

In the initial stages of this research, I experimented with this process of earthing. On the morning of a warm summer Wednesday, fellow artists, Juanito Featherstone, N'lamwai Chithambo and I congregated to install the last touch-ups to our group exhibition. The three of us have been classmates since 2016. Now that I reflect, we are some of the few students in the fine art department who come from the town of Makhanda. At the time of thinking through the curatorial concept, I was interested in forming an effect on the presence and movement of other bodies in a space. The use of the different elements was my way of conceptualizing methods of stimulating all five senses. For example, the installation was accompanied by a melody that served to call the audience into the space. Inside the room, you can smell and see the smoke of burning *impepho* that guides the viewer into the installation. For this particular piece, I gathered a heap of eucalyptus leaves under a tree nearby to cover the floor. When you walked in you could smell the medley of the *impepho* and the eucalyptus scent. The leaves rustled under the feet that moved in the space and released this medicinal fragrance. On the day of our first exhibition walkabout, I noticed people approached the installation with hesitation; the small room the installation occupied was dimly lit with red lighting and poles that filled the room. The audience had to navigate through the maze of the poles immersed in the aroma.

However, the year began with the pandemic of the coronavirus. What began as an uncertain period in the world transformed into eons of *self*. This influenced the direction of my creative process. It became a quest to unpack the understanding of *ubuntu* as an act of self-care and love.

## Chapter 2

### A love letter to my inner child

*We've made it this far little one. We have survived the storms and hurricanes of our past. Remember we used to hide when it thundered? Now we stand to watch and marvel at the beauty of lightning. Hateful words don't sting anymore because we know who we are. They call us beautiful and shower us with all kinds of compliments because we now know that we come from the stars. We are loved by our family and friends; it feels peaceful here. Thank you for all the times you protected us. Now it is time to let go of the past. The path is pointing to the North. We must carry light on our journey. You are beautiful. You are loved. You are special. Nothing can hurt you anymore. I am here. I will protect you.*

The concept of walking has been a thread that runs through my creative practice, whether it is to metaphorically depict the act of walking or physically walking the earth in performance. In the instance of this project, I am thinking through the idea of journeying back home from distant lands. Home is a metaphor for *self*. In essence, a return to *self*. My creative interpretation of this experience depicts various moments in psychological therapy, solitude, journaling, and the event of physically moving back home. In this chapter, the earth becomes a significant theme. I discuss how journeying back to *self* is a ritual and a form of self-care, concerning the concept that the physical body is a manifestation of the earth element. I developed this analogy by observing how the practice of self-love is significant to this evolution of *self*.

### **Re-membering: How to love even when it hurts**

In the initial stages of my research, I had this urge to probe into my experience of living between two worlds. By world, I am referring to cultural and social norms as well as types of people. In one world I have what I call home, this is where I grew up. The other world is a place I have to visit frequently to get food, clothing, and my education; this is where most people dream of living and going. The small urban area in the town of Makhanda is a space I have been familiar with since I was a child. 'Ufunda etown' is a phrase used to refer to people who attend school in town. In my township, it is considered a privilege for us black people to attend 'white' schools. On the other hand, I was subjected to racial discrimination and colorism in this supposedly distinguished place. I often heard slurs like 'You are another hooligan from the township' or 'Your language sounds barbaric, don't speak it in the school building.' Essentially this is to illustrate my struggle with belonging.



**Figure 5** Viwe Madinda, *Ifirst Born Yelahla* (2022). Black and white photographs, 84.1 x 118.9 cm

In the photographic series *Ifirst Born Yelahle*, I explore this narrative of not belonging – being alien. The expression can be translated as ‘child of a burnt amber’ and was used by my peers to mock me because of my dark pigmented skin. In the series, I am photographed holding a white baby doll to represent this history of idolization of whiteness in black communities. My figure represents the adult version of myself and the doll is a fantasy of my inner child. I employ self-portraiture as a form of self-definition and actualization, one of the many moments I have had to deal with this hurtful memory of my childhood.

In the performative photographic series, I play with and carry the doll as a portrayal of reconciliation with my inner child. The doll in this case no longer represents an idea of beauty but is an object that symbolizes my triumph over my experience with colorism.

As a process in psychological therapy, I had to *re-member* this memory, and though I had forgotten it, it had been imprinted in my subconscious. In essence, the inner child is a part of the subconscious

mind that ‘holds emotions, memories, and beliefs from the past as well as hopes and dreams for the future’ (Goldstein 2018). While this theory seems far-fetched it proves why we react the way we do to triggering situations and how our defense mechanisms are patterns learned in childhood. Returning home is essentially the idea of revisiting these childhood memories and dreams to acknowledge and transform them. The photographic series portrays this acknowledgment. After asking myself countless times during my creative process why my anxiety was constantly triggered, the answer came as an epiphany: You can’t be or do what you don’t have or know. My heart was in the right place, however; if I wanted to extend compassion genuinely to others it needed to be something I practised for myself.

The earth, in this context, becomes a place of refuge where I can speak this truth. I speak to my body, my skin. I reclaim what I once considered unpleasant and ugly as the place where I belong. Numerous beliefs speak of human flesh being created from soil. In my culture, a person is considered *umntana womgquba*, a child of the soil. We see this in the Bible as well, which refers to the first man, Adam, being created by God from the dust of the ground (Genesis 2:7). In astrology the concept of earth element extends from just matter but also represents ‘our finances, the food we eat and our daily routine’ (ZodiacSign 2023).

Although my trauma was just a bad memory and not a physical threat, it became a belief that held me physically. I internalized the assumption that I was ugly and undesirable. My first understanding of my form was through another’s perception. The images begin with a blurry double exposure of my being to represent a visual memory, which was now distorted. The work also functions as a comment on the impact and residue of racial discrimination on the esteem of black South African people. Telling these stories has invoked movements like the hashtag **#blackgirlmagic** and **#melaninpoppin** to eradicate this stigma of dark skin amongst people of color.

In 2002, I remember being an eight-year-old girl who believed in the magic of shooting stars. As a result, I often gazed up at the stars in the night sky before heading into the house after playtime outside. One particular evening I was standing alone in my parent’s backyard and I saw a tiny flash trail across the sky. I also held the belief in the concept of heaven as a place where God lived and where prayers are answered. After seeing the falling star I quickly closed my eyes and made a wish. I only had three wishes; to have long straight hair, to live in a big house, and to have fair skin. Yes, I wanted the life and body of a white girl. Like the ones I saw on television and the ones I went to school with. In the eyes of my younger *self*, these girls seemed to have the perfect life, and the

perfect life at the time was to be beautiful and come from wealth. I had to pick one wish and it was to have fair skin, to be beautiful. So that night I went to sleep hoping I would wake up transformed into my preferred prototype, Belle. She is famously known as a character from the story of *Beauty and the Beast*. I had a copy of the book amongst a few other stories: *The Little Mermaid*, *Cinderella*, and *Pocahontas*. It was through these stories that I entered the world of Disney and magic.

When it dawned the following day I woke up with an exciting feeling as I remembered that I had made a wish. I ran out of bed to the mirror, with my eyes closed for the reveal of my magical transformation. This deep-seated desire was motivated by a nickname I got from my elementary school. I remember my teachers and the other kids all called me by that name. Originally the term *Blacky* was a derogatory slur that was used by white racists to refer to black people, which was then adopted by black people too. In the case of black people, it meant that the person was too dark and ugly. When I opened my eyes, instant sadness overwhelmed me as this meant I was still *uBlacky*.



**Figure 6** Viwe Madinda *Blacky* 2022. Black and white photographs, 84.1 x 118.9 cm

*UBlacky 2022* is a photographic series, with five images, is essentially a piece that grapples with societal standards of beauty. I do this by consciously subverting this legacy of beauty in society by employing symbolism and witty allusions to speak to issues of colorism. The images focus on different parts of *BLACKY*'s body like the head and the back and front of her torso as areas where emotional wounding manifested. The images are delivered through gestures combined with symbolism, using my body and objects like a tin of shoe polish as earrings that label my figure. The shoe polish tin symbolically references the jokes used to compare dark skin people to the black pigment of the polish. While this might have seemed like a harmless joke it was entrenched in white racist ideology. Consequently, as a millennial, I grew up constrained by images and ideas of beauty that idolized whiteness as the ideal definition of aesthetics. Accordingly, the first theme's motif traces the form of the physical self, focusing on the visual and somatosensory attributes.

There is a term in psychology for aspects of ourselves we hide from others. Maggie Wooll (2022) defines the shadow as traits we are embarrassed about that form a dark or shadow side of our personality. She maintains that at the core of shadow work is acknowledging and exploring this innate side of *self* and that working with the shadow is both a spiritual and therapeutic activity. Thus, the creative process has been many moments in the solitude of documenting my shadow work, where I am working with positive affirmations and rituals.

My discussion follows this whole process of facing my issues of self-acceptance. In the work I also employ three techniques for shadow work; one is to write/identify, two is to speak/express and third is this creative response. The images depict the act of reimagining my shadow side.

As a woman holding the belief that I am unattractive affects me in different areas of my life, such as in my finances and my relationship with others. In my process of this journey, I have been led to understand that a part of *uqobo lwam*, my essence, is feminine energy. My perception of beauty has caused me to suppress and abandon this aspect of *self*. Through this process, I am *re-membering* my feminine qualities. *Re-membering* becomes my metaphor for reclaiming.

Wooll (2022) also states that the process of shadow work requires you to embrace all parts of *self*. So, in continuing the task of uncovering more shame from my past, one way I do this is by employing affirmations. Moore (2021) simply describes affirmations as positive statements or words used to challenge negative thoughts, and that the theory behind affirmations is to repeat the phrases to affect the existing subconscious patterns. Affirmations can be written down, played as

audio, or put up on a wall. In the case of my installation, they are displayed as finely printed text found within the images. At a distance, the text is invisible to the viewer and requires a close viewing to read it. The affirmations are composed from the written text of a personal journal.



**Figure 7** Tony Gum *Milked in Africa (MIA)* series 2021. 4 c-prints

As a creative, I am inspired by the different ways visual art allows one to tell their story. I regard storytelling as a creative and therapeutic practice for both the storyteller and the audience. In the act of expressing themselves, the storyteller takes you on their journey where you leave your reality to visit another. This is the power of performance. The green urban figure does this for the artist Tony Gum. For Gum, the freedom of being nude speaks to her Xhosa roots and also the empowerment of the self. In the majority of her work, Gum is seen wearing and holding traditional objects and in one of her reflections she notes that in the Xhosa culture *intombi*, a girl, has ‘physiological practices like exposure of the breasts’ which is ‘a symbolic point of differentiation from *abafazi*, or woman, *umfazi* who will generally wear Xhosa attire from the bosom down’. As a Xhosa young woman I have never experienced this freedom because I have always had to be covered up, being naked is seen as indecent in society today. In a conversation with my mother, this custom was practiced to give a girl child autonomy over her body. It was to show pride and confidence, which Gum notes is different today because we are so self-aware of our bodies.

In my practice, I attempt to make a distinction between my cultural identity and *self* as a way to explore the complexities of what it means to be a black woman living in a diverse reality. I am mostly interested in Gum's radical approach to reimagining her identity and culture in a contemporary context, where she depicts the evolution of *intombi* in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This evolution is something I am probing in my creative process, looking at the importance and influence of my Xhosa heritage in my daily life and disposition of *self*.

In her latest photographic series, *MIA*, Gum's image manifests as a green subject interacting with different dairy products like milk and cheese. The processed products represent *uqobo*, the original, the essence, as the source that cannot be diminished (Ngema 2018). As a way of returning to *self* Gum portrays an urban version of this Xhosa girl who embraces these many versions of herself that have manifested because of circumstance. Ngema (2018) notes that imagery is a reflection of where Gum is as a young Xhosa woman, which is a commentary on her experience with her culture and traditions being diluted because she lives in a city. Gum states that it is also intending to pay an ode to 'history and culture', as her endeavor to connect with who she is. Gum's identity requires a balancing of both worlds for her.

While she embraces her roots, Gum has had to deal with accepting being 'a city girl' (Ngema 2018). She notes that in this reality culture and traditions might not be able to exist in their 'organic state' and translates this by refashioning traditional dress and motifs into contemporary vogue looks. As a tool for introspection Gum turns the lens to her audience the last line of the blurb states 'Being Mia has little to do with the show, it has more to do with you, the person who is reading this' (Ngema 2018). Gum addresses the viewer and their internal conflict as she carries on to say: 'You may have not come to the surface with [them] or maybe you haven't had the time to confront them just yet. But you're going to have to eventually go through this, it's going to happen without you being prepared for it, right?' (Gum [2018] cited in Ngema 2018).

Gum employs metaphor to challenge the pervasiveness of postcolonial reality through portraiture and playfully raises awareness of the 'exploitative legacy of colonialism and its implications in present-day reality (Fotografiska New York 2023).

I am interested in the way Gum works within these contrasting dimensions and narratives of life. I have come to learn that there are universal laws that govern the reality of the *self*. Daily ritualistic practices like how we talk, think, breathe, feel, and move become a pattern that creates an

archetypal structure that the psyche embodies. My creative endeavour is concerned with observing and working with these patterns for two reasons; the first is to understand how I embody these fragments of self, and the second is to document the reimagining of the whole of *self* coming together.

My creative process over the past five years has been trying to articulate this discomfort as a black creative. It is having to oversimplify my artistic concepts and inspirations concerning traditional European art processes. My identity as an artist, a black African, and as a woman, have co-existed alongside each other as fractures of the same being, so it is my creative endeavor to have a way of acknowledging these fractures, *re-membering* them into one whole. Primarily this roots my sense of belonging in the creative space.



**Figure 8** Lina Iris Viktor *Eleventh* (from the series *A Haven. A Hell. A Dream Deferred*) 2018. Pure 24 Carat Gold, Acrylic, Ink, Copolymer Resin, Print on Matte Canvas. 50 x 65 in. / 127 x 165.1 cm

We can see another demonstration of *re-remembering* as a tool to explore untold stories in the work *A Haven. A Hell. A Dream Deferred* by Liberian artist Lina Iris Viktor. In the colorful photographic series, Viktor reckons with the past, as a way to pave the way for the future of *self*. As a response

to the site of the exhibition, the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA), she probes the consequence of the haunting American history of the slave trade. Through metaphor and philosophical commentary she addresses ‘the socio-political and historical preconceptions surrounding blackness and its universal implications’, said NOMA curatorial fellow, Allison Young, in her opening speech of this exhibition.

The first implication Viktor deals with is the forgotten history of African-American descent. She explores stories and narratives that are underexplored in American history. For Viktor history is a great teacher, which she believes is essential to the learning for human beings to realise the future. The photographic series focuses on the founding history of Liberia, which was founded in 1879 as a colony for freed and born free black slaves (NOMA 2018). Viktor reveals that at least 13,000 people during the time migrated there, under the American Colonization Society founded by Robert Finley (NOMA 2018). Referencing the archived documents of this history, Viktor hopes to shed light on this narrative. These primary documents, Viktor states, are letters, maps, and books from the 20th century. She inserts these objects in the images as props for the composition. For example, in the *Eleventh* (Fig. 8) she casts the map of the tribal divisions of Liberia as a backdrop to her figure. In one of the other images, Viktor holds open in her hand one of the books she found in the archive. These subtle references speak to the first migration and the development of this nation.

Another reference Viktor makes is to the figure of Libyan Sibyl, through whom she reimagines Liberia’s colonial past (NOMA, 2018). It is said that this figure of ‘classical antiquity’ predicted ill-fated futures and ‘later re-emerges as a common motif in the art and literature of the American abolitionist movement’ (NOMA, 2018). The Sibyl was essentially a seer who foretold catastrophes of the future. Viktor notes how this figure ironically re-emerged after the predicted misfortune of slavery 300 years ago and is used retroactively. Viktor found the connection interesting and in her work Sibyl points things out, like this forgotten American history as a truth of the implications seen in present-day reality.

The photo-based works are painted and gilded with 4-carat gold and as an experiment, Viktor explores the use of colour. This is different from her signature black and gold compositions, which symbolize the reverence Viktor has for those colors. In her opening speech, Viktor states that she explores this meaning from ‘a metaphysical and humanist level’ that reflects on society's relationship with gold, from a financial and spiritual aspect. Viktor is interested in society's relationship with the mineral and how it has evolved and civilizations. By linking this forgotten

history, Viktor intends to reinvoked the spiritual facets of gold that may be forgotten and lost in the present day. This particular work, in experimenting with color, has been a personal jump for Viktor. She describes the red in her dress as an exploration of the iconography that links Liberia with the United States. Viktor believes that people are not aware that Liberia was founded as an image of America, a sister state/country. All the iconography, memorabilia, city names, and currency are made in the image of American visual schematics. The color scheme is a commentary on this connection, with the idea of Liberia being a sister to America across the waters, but also how this country has a very different story to the rest of the African continent.

Viktor draws from the history of West African studio portraiture, which historically subverts the colonial project that worked to depress the image and also the way people viewed Africans. So she employs anatomy and agency as a way to look back at the gaze. The red and blue textile is Viktor's attempt to employ this cross-referencing, which she also does by wearing different traditional hairstyles from West Africa.

Viktor reveals that she uses black pigment on her face and body to symbolize supreme beauty. She also engages the history of blackface and the negative associations with the color black. As a way to address this, she replaces or repositions these subversions by emphasizing that black symbolizes the dark matter of the universe she points out that 'from blackness, everything was birthed'.

### **Self-care; a principle of *Ubuntu***

*No Greater Agony Than An Untold Story*  
– Maya Angelou

My first encounter with performance art was at the 2018 African feminism conference hosted by the Rhodes Fine Art Department. Moments leading to this event transformed my practice, which also provoked change within my own life. I realized that my work and purpose were bigger than mine. Therefore creative practice became a space where I explored these concepts of blackness, identity, cultural practices, and spirituality. These are all subject matters that are otherwise part and parcel of my reality as a black woman. Whether it be my body, memory, thoughts, or life experiences, my being is the source I draw from. This part of the discussion includes other innate qualities of self, such as the emotional body. The focus is on the ways emotion and unhealed trauma impact one's reality.



**Figure 9** Viwe Madinda *Inertia – ukuthetha ubomi*, 2020. Video 15:03 minutes

*Inertia; Ukuthetha Ubomi* 2021 for instance begins during a process of spiritual transformation. I recall moments of being alone, confined to one space, and having no contact with other people. It felt like a long walk to an unknown destination with no company. During this time I began my journey of independence, I had moved out of home and was living by myself. I was also starting my postgraduate studies. I was still in the process of grief for my former *self* which was projected by my inner child. My spiritual path was unfolding in phases and before this stage of my life, I had experienced an identity crisis. A painful and complex process that has been the material for my creative practice; in a way the art also became a medium of interpretation and expression. The work traces where I began unintentionally leaving clues for myself.

In this sense, my consciousness stagnated in the reality of the unknown and foreign. My work was to find ways to redefine who I am through daily ritualistic practice. Through this repetition, I cultivated selfhood, which resulted in movement and healing for *myself*. This process began as an experiment in response to Ngubane's (1979) interpretation of *ubuntu*, which is the act of looking at reality as a reflection of the internal state of self. The emotional body reveals that how I perceive and feel about myself is rooted in my life experience, which doesn't have to determine my definition and present experience of life.

A constant uncomfortable feeling came up during this process. It is an uneasy feeling in the middle of my chest, I often feel it when I'm around other people, or when I am thinking of situations involving other people. I used to describe this feeling as being shy or introverted, however, I've come to learn that the feeling was rooted in the fear of looking awkward or being humiliated. I think this is an effect of experiencing bullying from both adults and other kids as a child and being picked on in front of others. As a result, anxiety developed, and I would be triggered by small things like oral presentations, answering questions in class, or even participating in group chats. So I avoided situations where I had to speak or perform in front of an audience. For years I mastered blending into the background which consequently left me feeling inferior. It felt like whatever I did was never good enough and that it never would be. This anxiety was triggered when I had to do a presentation for the proposal of this project. The fear of rejection and failure might not be a distinct memory of an event but my emotional body remembers its feeling.

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit the shores of South Africa, I found a lot of time on my hands. I didn't have the distractions from the outside world and I wasn't operating on an automatic daily regime. Whatever feeling I woke up with would stick through the day. As the days progressed I developed a peevish disposition. It became an inertia that pushed me into a depression. Even though I knew that the cause was the lack of movement and good nutrition, it felt like things would never get better and the state of the country and the continent would get worse. Collective anxiety grew as we saw many people being economically and psychologically affected by the lockdown. We witnessed the rise in gender-based violence, rape, and the unemployment rate. Watching reports on these events affected me emotionally. In the depths of my persistent dark mood, I would have moments of light shining through my blues, and it is during these times I would find ways of lifting the intense feeling of hopelessness. Self-care became one of the solutions to my disposition. The act of washing my hair, cooking a nutritious meal, or stretching my body became small treasures that caused small but effective ripples in the inertia.

To find balance within myself, I established rituals that would assist in practicing compassion for myself. How I wake up in the morning became an important factor. Before this resolution, I used to wake up and ruminate over memories and imagine future events. This would affect my mood and productivity for the day. So I begin the day by waking up to practice at least one act of self-love. Like letting fresh air and natural light into my bedroom after I wake up in the morning. Another is to keep the spaces I live in tidy. This comes after recognizing how our surrounding environment also

has an impact on emotional and mental states.

The act of clearing the space is symbolic of clearing the mind. One of my favorite things to do is lighting a scented candle or burning incense to illuminate and cleanse the atmosphere of the space.

A year later the pandemic regulations were slowly lifting and during this time I was inspired to do my first-ever public creative initiative in my hometown. As a response to the moment we were in, this event was intended to open a space where we could gather as a community to speak on the healing and therapy in the township spaces, where these things aren't found. The discussion became a sharing of personal and collective healing tips. That event manifested a live screening of short video works with an interweaving theme of healing.

The video work *Inertia - ukuthetha ubomi* depicts a water blessing ritual. This video is based on the experiment of how water and prayer can be used to soothe and ease emotions. This was inspired by explorations on the internet where I came across the Japanese pseudo-scientist, Dr Masaru Emoto. Dr. Emoto (2004) created this experiment to make what he calls beautiful or ugly water. The experiment considered how water holds a kind of memory that changes when it comes in contact with vibrations from words, thoughts, or feelings. Dr. Emoto's theory is that water reacts to human consciousness. I could consciously enhance my mood by using just a glass of water and positive affirmation. I became interested in this practice of 'bending water'; the concept of the performance is a depiction of how I adopted this practice as a personal self-soothing ritual. In the video, I begin by placing a jug of water and a cup in front of me where I am seated. Then I pour the water from the jug into a cup which I hold for a few seconds. The concept is that the water is transformed by intention, so in one of the frames I hold the cup close to my lips and begin to speak a blessing. Thirty seconds is enough to set this intention and can be a repetition of positive affirmations, or a short prayer. The effect of this ritual is a boost in emotion, which links the 70% of water that makes up the body. This water in the body takes the form of our mood and temperament manifesting as the emotional.

Water goes beyond making up a majority of our bodies. In this section, I intend to discuss the many ways water keeps the flow of everyday life. Having to live through the experience of a water crisis has resulted in stagnation in many areas of my life. For instance not having access to safe drinking water has added another expense to my financial budget as I have to travel to town to buy water. There are days when I cannot attend university seminars and obligations because I cannot have a

bath or wash my clothes. This is the reality for many residents of Makhanda living in the township. Water shutdown has gradually become an issue for livelihoods and health in our community.



**Figure 10** Aida Muluneh *Access (Water Life Series)* 2018. Archival Digital Print. 80 x 80 cm. (31.5 x 31.5 in.)

The *Water Life Series* by Ethiopian photographer Aida Muluneh creatively objectifies the reality of water scarcity in African countries. In this particular frame, *Access* (Fig. 10) represents the cruel irony that in her country, Ethiopia, which has vast underground water reserves, ordinary people have

no access to drinking water. Muleneh states that the project was created to raise awareness of the issue of irrigation. In the image, a graphic illustration of water pipes represents the urban water grid which the blue taps have no connection to. ‘Some areas in Addis Ababa can go for weeks without access to clean water’ says Muleneh. Something we are experiencing in my town.



**Figure 11** Aida Muleneh *The Shackles of Limitations (Water Life Series)* 2018. Archival Digital Print. 80 x 80 cm. (31.5 x 31.5 in.)

Muleneh is a photojournalist and as a way to combat the reality of the public being numbed to photojournalistic-style images, she employs representational imagery that draws in the attention of the viewer. The series features theatrical staging, body paint, and models in bright blue and red dresses. I am amazed by the way Muleneh communicates this environmental issue and how she avoids the clichés of mainstream media of representing Africa. Muleneh says that:

People don't realize how water impacts everything. I realized a lack of access to water affects women not only concerning health but also in education.

During menstruation, for example, girls often choose not to attend school because of the lack of proper facilities. I decided to use each image to address a different topic (Muleneh [date?] cited in Canon [date?]).

Muleneh's approach is to conceptually layer the images, employing cultural references that Ethiopians would recognize instantly, essentially to spark the imagination of the viewer. For instance, she shares that she uses primary colors, red, yellow, and blue for their intensity but these colors are also familiar to her childhood memory of the colors of Ethiopian Orthodox churches. 'The yellow of the jerry can, which features throughout, is a symbol of water transportation across Africa' and so Muleneh is also painting an ode to the women she has seen across Africa wandering long distances carrying these jerry cans to collect water. Another signature of Muleneh's work is the body paint, which shows her fascination with how this creative cultural practice is a universal tradition.



**Figure 12** Aida Muluneh *Steps (Water Life Series)* 2018. Archival Digital Print. 80 x 80 cm.

Another strategy the artist employs is the costumes, which are inspired by historic Ethiopian portraits where subjects wore flowing capes that give off a regal aesthetic for Muleneh. In the work *Steps* (Fig.12) two figures stand beside a structure that is meant to represent a toilet. The door of the toilet is raised and painted red to indicate the result of a lack of access to water. These performative pieces are a form of advocacy for Muleneh, which she feels is showing solidarity for her country Ethiopia, and the African continent. She intends to offer another perspective as she says, ‘We need as many perspectives as possible’ (Muleneh 2023, cited in Canon 2023).

## Chapter 3

*Knowledge can exist in the absence of intellectualism since much of what is worth knowing is quite literally self-evident. The self, in other words, becomes evident through a visible demonstration of its connectedness – David Napier (1992)*

### Embodying the spirit of *ubuntu* – regarding spirituality as an approach to creative practice

#### A generational curse



**Figure 13** Viwe Madinda *Uzoy’thola kanjani uhleli ekhoneni? 1 (Ngobani lababantu?)* 2022. Color photograph series, 84.1 x 118.9 cm

The images from the series *Uzoy’thola kanjani?* 2022 were shot in eight specific locations that trace the town of Makhanda. The title is inspired by the Kwaito song *Uzoyithola kanjani* by the legendary Mandazo. The title, abstractly asks ‘How can you make things happen if you just sit by the corner?’, which speaks to the culture of young men who gather in numbers to sit at the entrance of township residential areas to beg for money from passers-by. The song is also an encouragement to those who find themselves in such a reality. The concept of the work seeks to employ this encouragement through an enactment of solidarity.

The performance begins at the west entrance/exit of the town, marked by the 1820 Settlers

Monument, and ends at the east entrance/ exit of the town where the Joza township ends. The landmarks of the town are materials I have used before in my work. The photographic series is essentially an act of walking back home. The movement through the town represents my adventures from childhood between the invisible peripheries of the city and the township. In thinking through my concept I have always wanted to take the knowledge and information I have learned as a student to the broader community of Makhanda whether it be through conversation or creative intervention. I am interested in portraying how the demarcation of the town influences how bodies act and think, for instance, highlighting how the city is seen as the ultimate space to be while our residential areas are seen as unsophisticated spaces. Many university students come and leave without really interacting with the heart of the town, the people, and their stories. Very few narratives exist about the history of the town, so I am interested in capturing this moment in time as a way of documenting Makhanda at this time. The images are metaphorically asking: What do we remember and how do we remember it?



**Figure 14** Viwe Madinda *Uzoy'thola kanjani uhleli ekhoneni?* III (Every exit is an entrance somewhere else) 2022. Color photograph series, 84.1 x 118.9 cm

This performative piece entails me walking through the town and stopping at specific historic landmarks. I hold cardboard plaques with 'messages' as a form of silent advocacy. Each location has a different encapsulation that speaks to the history or meaning of the space. For example, one of

the locations is the Rhodes entrance known locally as *Esangweni*, a Xhosa word for an entrance or door. The plaque reads 'Every exit is an entrance somewhere', which is a representation of how this entrance is considered as some kind of portal to success. The university is perceived as another world within the town by locals, which is something I have seen in my interactions with people. You are treated with some kind of reverence when people know you study at Rhodes, as I have seen with my family. The piece also playfully alludes to the myth of this arch; in the first year, we were told that if we walked under the arch as a first year we would have bad luck and never graduate. Another dark story about this arch is that it was a location that was used for executions by the colonial authorities. The work explores this narrative of this space being a portal between two worlds. In my reflection now, *Esangweni* also metaphorically symbolizes the completion of my journey and exit from the university.

Practicing performance art for the past five years has been a challenge to my anxiety about public appearance. In making this work I wanted to challenge myself to face this fear. I aspire to overtly express my discomforts as a member of this society and to contribute to the socio-political conversations of the town. I must say that the whole process went against my expectations. The people I interacted with were curious about my work and were respectful. Some came up to read the plaques, others engaged in conversation and I met a few who complimented how I looked. Sharing my narrative about Makhanda is a process that has required me to go through my process of internal introspection. The many interactions along my path are the untold stories of the town. I am proud to have finally asked the questions I have been waiting to ask and engaging other people outside of the institution. In hindsight, my time in solitude of learning how to show up for myself has inspired me to actively show solidarity for my community.



**Figure 15** Viwe Madinda *Uzoy' thola kanjani uhleli ekhoneni?* II (If one is free at heart no made chains can bind one to servitude) 2022. Color photograph series, 84.1 x 118.9 cm

The last frame (Fig. 16) is a probe into the decay of our society, which I feel is a result of the lack of *ubuntu* in children and elders of the community of Extension Seven. This is where my home is, this school stands in front of my mother's house. After the shutdown of Benjamin Mahlasela Secondary School some years ago the whole structure of the school was vandalised to a point where only a skeleton of the school is left. In a way, this reflects the reality of black communities in South Africa, which in turn reflects the internal state of members of the collective. The township is a space that has no creative or sports facilities, which leaves people to find ways to keep themselves preoccupied and make money. Not having resources to express your hobbies or dreams results in this dystopian atmosphere we have to live in daily.



**Figure 16** Viwe Madinda *Uzoy'thola kanjani uhleli ekhoneni? 1V* (*Ubuntu is the education that is key to our success*) 2022. Color photograph series, 84.1 x 118.9 cm

*Thyini kutheni na, ngathi's libele ilizwe liyafa, sice'ulwazi ngoba silibele  
 Sonini, nanini naphakade,  
 Thyini kutheni na, ngathi nis'libele ilizwe liyafa, sice'ulwazi ngoba silibele  
 Sonini, nanini naphakade*  
 - Simphiwe Dana (2006)

One of my favorite songs helps me articulate this feeling. *Umthandazo wase Africa* by Simphiwe Dana, who is asking *tyini kutheni na?* Which means ‘what is happening?’ You can hear the disappointment in Dana’s voice when she begins with a sigh. ‘Ey!’ This expression is commonly used for greeting or, in this case, sighing, *Ingathi nisilibele* ‘it seems you have forgotten us’, ‘*ilizwe liyafa*’, the world is dying, which is an invocation Dana is making to *UTHixo* who is God, and the ancestors. In her prayer, Dana pleads *sice'ulwazi, ngoba silibele* which means ‘we ask for knowledge because we have forgotten’. *Umthandazo*, prayer, is an ancient practice in Africa and we see many African musicians and creatives employing it in their creative endeavors. In the case of this project, it is also the material I use to make my work, whether it is moments that happen in

unseen moments of the process or used as a symbol of the work. I am praying for a law of respect and unity.

## Chapter 4

### **Renewal: You can't create or destroy energy**

This is the point I have been trying to get to. I didn't know what the moment would look like or what would be required of me. The many challenges have made it seem impossible. If a year ago I was told what this moment would look like and what it required of me, I would have resisted. Now that I have walked the journey I accept my reality. This closing chapter talks about renewal as a necessary process in the coming together of self and the community.

In the video walk titled *Uviwe umthandazo*, I enact letting go, as this act of regenerating. In the video, I do this by shaving off all of my beautiful long dreadlocks. The moments leading up to this were no coincidence as I have been receiving spiritual messages about a new start. This point requires me to let go of old hurtful memories and reconcile with my traumas. I do not know what is going to happen after this but I have faith in the way this journey has manifested. The cutting of hair symbolizes the faith I have for my future and of South Africa. This is an epiphany I am having as I conclude this project.

Fire is, therefore, the last element theme I discuss in my work. Fire has been a universal tool from the beginning of civilization. It cooks food, keeps us warm, and provides light (Oken, 1988). This force is considered dangerous, as it can burn down a whole forest, village, or nation. In Oken's (1988) study of the elements, fire represents 'the desire of life and also destruction'. I am interested in exploring how new life emerges after a fire. The concept revolves around the cleansing property of fire. In the video work, I conclude my hair-cutting ritual with the burning of my hair. A literal cleanse for my spiritual body, as hair is considered sacred in the Xhosa culture. Hair is said to have a memory and it connects the body to the spiritual world.



**Figure 17** Viwe Madinda *Uviwe umthandazo*, 2022. Documented performance, 5 minutes [Image to be taken once the installation is set up]

Renewal is a biological and spiritual process that happens without us being conscious sometimes. It is a necessary process in the growth and evolution of the *self*. I see this in two major events in my own life as I am completing my master's studies and having my 'Saturn return'<sup>12</sup>. I marvel at how things have come together and how my observation and interpretation of *Ubuntu* took me on a journey of *re-membering* the self as a form of healing. In essence, this project attempts to articulate the process of the healing that has taken place, as an answer or requirement to understand and experience the profound meaning of *ubuntu*.

Each of us is here to discover our true *self*, to find on our own that our true *self* is spiritual, that essentially we are spiritual beings that have taken manifestation in physical form. We are not human beings that have occasional spiritual experiences – it is the other way around; we are spiritual beings

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<sup>12</sup> An innate interval in the spiritual development of a person. The planet Saturn metaphorically represents a teacher that tests self-discipline (Oken 1988)

that have occasional human experiences (Chopra 1994: 33).

## Conclusion

The inspiration behind my study is an issue I recognized from my personal life experience, which is similar to that of my family, friends, and many black fellow South Africans. It is the reality of having a fragmented *self*. It is being born into a dystopic landscape you call home. Where the earth you walk on constantly reminds you of your traumatic past. The location of your homestead determines if you have access to safe drinking water. And your childhood dream shrinks to an aspiration to just survive tomorrow because your days are constantly bombarded by scenes of crime and poverty. Being constantly reminded that you are black. You are born and instinctively learn that the color of your skin disqualifies you from the right to access resources and education to empower yourself. With no positive reference to your family lineage, you struggle with the reality of knowing your roots are corrupted and distorted. Not knowing where and whom you come from or the lack of positive definitions for the kind of being you are. What kind of *self* is constructed from such a place?

In reflecting on this reality I come from and live in, I have employed my memory as a generator for the construction of a protagonist for the *self*. A shadow from a distant past holds the foreground of my first theme. The physical *self*. In my analysis of the nature of the self, the physical body is the first evident feature we notice. The characters introduced in the photographic series *Ifirst Yelahle* and *BLACKY* are a reflection of the challenges of discrimination and colorism. As a response, I use agency and autonomy to conceptualize these memories of myself from childhood. *Inertia – ukuthetha ubomi* employs gestural healing as a method of engaging the emotional body of *self*. In my analysis, I note this aspect of *self* as the natural element of water. This is influenced by selecting cultural, scientific, and spiritual references to the nature of water.

The third chapter proved to be the most complex in my creative and personal process. This portion of the research looks at the hidden parts of the *self*. The mind, which operates from the organ of the brain, like the element of air, is invisible to the eye. This section of the research draws from psychological and spiritual data that are principles governing this aspect of the *self*. Interpreted through an audio piece this part of the exhibition focuses on breath and sound, essentially how speaking influences our external reality. An analysis of *Umoya*, as the element of air and an embodiment of the unconscious mind, looks at practices of chanting or praying. At this point in

my process, it felt as if I was walking in the dark. I wasn't sure what I was searching for but it became apparent when I asked myself the question 'Who do I come from?' In Xhosa and other Nguni cultures, the cosmology of *izinyanya*, *izithixo*, and *Qamata*, our ancestors exist: deities and God. We believe that a part of ourselves connects us to the realms where these entities exist; this part is known as *umphefumlo*, the soul. Whilst this is not the entire essence of the *self* it is the life force of the brain, heart, and the body. In my culture, this aspect of the self comes from *ethongweni*, a dreamscape where ancestors reside. In Western spirituality, this is known as the higher self, an energy force that cannot be created or destroyed. *Umphefulo wam* is a documented performance video. It is primarily a ritual of renewal. The fire element is a medium through which renewal is achieved, together with the concept of letting go. Fire in this case is used to cleanse my aura. This is with the understanding that to transform the self completely you first purify the body on a physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual level. Fire is an embodiment of the source of the self. This part does not need healing or transformation; it is the point where the *self* convenes as a whole.

I have tried to give an account of a journey that only travels inwards, giving articulation to many unspoken truths. As I have discussed, the individual *self* is connected to the natural world and the collective. This intricate relationship impacts and wields our reality collectively and individually. The task of understanding and healing myself is an aspiration to not only interpret *ubuntu* but to also embody it.

My first task was to study and expand my understanding of the meaning of *self*, starting with different language interpretations, examining scientific theories and cultural philosophies, and exploring various spiritual insights. This process informs the creative experiments I have tested as my interpretations of *self*, which manifests as this evolving body of work. A probe into how the mind, body, and spirit converge as consciousness that governs reality. While this study does not address all the complexities of the issues of society and the country, my dedication is to use creative practice as a tool for learning and even healing.

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