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Freeing Freedom: Decentering Dominant Narratives of Freedom in Post-Apartheid South Africa

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In March 2020, Toni Walker traveled to Cape Town and Johannesburg, South Africa, for a twelve-day research trip. She visited local neighborhoods, art galleries, and cultural centers and interviewed Black women and Black queer multidisciplinary artists to understand the complex meanings of freedom for marginalized communities. The result is a deeply moving and sensitive account of the experiences and voices of people at the margins, which we proudly present to you as CARGC Paper #16.

The end of Apartheid in South Africa culminated with the nation's first democratic elections on April 27, 1994. That historical moment has been celebrated as Freedom Day ever since. Yet, as Walker notes, discourses around freedom in post-apartheid South Africa are too often limited to that moment of transition. Mainstream freedom narratives tend to gloss over the experiences of marginalized people and the harms that existing systems continue to inflict on them.

In contrast to the freedom narratives dominated by the state, Black women and Black queer artists in South Africa have produced works that center the experiences of the marginalized. Through careful and sensitive readings of six music videos enriched with insights from her interviews with the artists, Toni Walker probes three ways in which these artistic works subvert

the dominant freedom narratives. Umlilo's "Magic Man" and Bonolo Kavula's "Messy" offer multisensory experiences of identity expressions which reject the binaries of dominant culture. Gyre's "Quarantine" and Andy Mkosi's "Set It Off" reveal new meanings of freedom that come through the intimate acts of exploring romantic love and vulnerability outside of the confines of cis-heterosexist and patriarchal norms. Finally, in "Is'phukphuku" by Mx Blouse and "Queenie" by the queer duo known as FAKA (Buyani Duma, aka Desire Marea and Thato Ramais, aka Fela Gucci), the artists challenge dominant meanings of belonging by presenting a world where nonnormative identified bodies move openly and unharmed. This is a world where (un)belonging becomes a practice of freedom.

While Toni Walker's study highlights the continuous struggle over meanings of freedom in post-apartheid South Africa, her stories have ramifications far beyond. Mainstream freedom narratives everywhere are dominated by the state and its ideological apparatus; they do not fully recognize the experiences of gender non-conforming people, people of color, poor people, indigenous people, and other marginalized peoples. We hope that Toni Walker's project to "free" freedom by centering the perspectives of marginalized people will inspire

both personal reflections and public conversations. As she puts it at the end of her essay, “continued efforts to reevaluate concepts such as freedom through the perspectives of those on

the ground will lead to more honest and nuanced reflections on the world we live in and the world we want to create.”



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Freeing Freedom: Decentering Dominant Narratives of Freedom in Post-Apartheid South Africa

INTRODUCTION

Mainstream discourses about freedom are often tied to dominant narratives around national progress. These narratives emphasize a universal definition of freedom centered around individual leaders and specific political moments. The 13th Amendment abolished slavery for non-incarcerated people in the US, thereby granting enslaved people their “freedom.” The decolonization of African countries which took place over a series of violent transitions from the 1950s to 1975 is commonly understood as the beginning of independence, and by extension freedom, for many African countries. Similarly, the 1994 democratic election in South Africa is regarded as the official end of apartheid and the beginning of freedom for the country famously known as the “rainbow nation.” This is further demonstrated by the establishment of “Freedom Day,” the public holiday celebrated on April 27 in remembrance of the nation’s first democratic elections.

In 1994, Nelson Mandela proudly declared in his world-renowned inaugural address that South Africa had successfully taken its “last steps to freedom.” Such a grandiose statement was fitting for the magnitude of that moment which marked the official end of over 300 years of white minority rule in the nation as the African National Congress came to power. But even Mandela realized that in many ways the work was just beginning. Nevertheless, in such celebratory moments, it is typical to frame freedom as an achievement rather than a complex and evolving journey.

Historical moments such as these are undoubtedly important, ushering in significant political, economic, and social opportunities. But too often the conversation around freedom becomes tethered to these moments, offering a linear account of freedom—a series of steps taken rather than a continuous struggle experienced on the ground in the everyday lives of the people. In the process, the voices of those at the margins who may offer alternative meanings of freedom tend to be silenced.

South Africans born after the 1994 election are commonly referred to as the “born-free” generation, a label that signifies the absence of the struggles faced by the generations before them. While this may hold true in significant ways, what does it mean to be “born-free” if you aren’t a wealthy, able bodied, cis-heterosexual man? Despite South Africa being the first nation to constitutionally prohibit discrimination based on gender and sexuality, there still exists a persistent gap between this national progressive message and the lived experiences of Black women, nonbinary, and LGBTQ+ South Africans. Twenty-six years since Mandela’s historical election, marginalized communities must ponder the far too common question: how far have we really come?

The end of the apartheid regime may have opened the door to new opportunities offered by democracy. But whose needs or freedoms were prioritized in this transition? How did the newfound promises and perils of democracy manifest in the lived experiences of the marginalized? These questions invite more complex meanings of freedom. Throughout this continuous struggle for freedom, people have been considering such questions across politics, education, the law, and various other sectors of society.

One area in which these questions can be explored by and for the people is through cultural production and circulation. Mpolokeng Bogatsu (2002) emphasizes the role of Black South African youth in producing, circulating, and remixing the cultural landscape in the years following the nation's first democratic election. In its accessibility and opportunity for creative expression, cultural avenues offered spaces where alternative understandings of freedom could be explored. Today, cultural production remains an important area where this type of work can be done as technological advancements have expanded the reach and modes of cultural expression.

However, culture in its consumption and circulation isn't immune to the social hierarchies which amplify cis-heterosexual male voices over others. Even in its potential to offer alternative expressions and meanings of freedom, culture can still function as a locus which silences marginalized experiences. While there is substantial scholarship on the growth of South African youth culture in response to the nation's political transition, there is less scholarship that explores the unique experiences and contributions of youth with overlapping marginalized identities.

Rather than continuing to overlook the cultural contributions of marginalized creators, this paper explores the meanings of freedom that emerge when these artists are centered. In the following pages, I offer a critical analysis of six different multimedia pieces by various contemporary South African Black women, nonbinary, and self-identifying queer artists. This is paired with insights from interviews with these artists and reflections from a twelve-day research trip to Cape Town and Johannesburg, during March 2020. In Cape Town and Johannesburg, I visited the neighborhoods, art galleries, and cultural centers where these artists live and work. Using a Black feminist framework, I highlight the ways that these marginalized artists leverage a multi-sensory approach in order to convey embodied meanings of freedom that emphasize themes such as identity, love, and (un)belonging.

This paper not only situates culture and lived experiences as important focal points for navigating meanings of freedom, but it also argues that some of the most expansive meanings of freedom can be found in the cultural expressions of marginalized Black creators. Through centering Black women, non-binary, and LGBTQ+ experiences in discourses of freedom, I hope to play a role in resisting cis-hetero-patriarchal narratives that dictate when freedom comes and what it can look like.

BLACK FEMINISM AND A NOTE ON POSITIONALITY

This paper highlights the continuous struggle over meanings of freedom in post-apartheid South Africa. As I write this in the middle of a global pandemic, people around the world have taken to the streets to protest the violent systems that have murdered countless Black people in the US and throughout the world. A mixture of rage, empowerment, heartbreak, and hope has gathered in my chest, as I make sense of these revolutionary times. But this conflicting range of emotions is a feeling that I have become quite familiar with.

In 1961, James Baldwin famously stated that to be Black in America and somewhat conscious was to be in an almost constant state of rage (Baldwin et al. 1961, 205). I wonder if he would have expected these words to ring true 59 years later for Black people, not only in America but throughout the world. The empowerment that I feel as I lean on the wisdom and experiences of the Black thinkers that came before me doesn't erase my disappointment that words spoken years ago still so accurately describe the inequalities that I, and many others, are witnessing today. This leads me to the same question I posed earlier: how far have we really come?

In many US schools, students learn of famous abolitionists, the 13th Amendment, the civil rights movement, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and all of the other celebrated Black history moments and figures which would suggest that the hardships that Black people face in the US is a thing of the past. Even less attention is given to Black diasporic struggles and triumphs and how that connects to historic moments in the US. Telling the story of the Black American struggle in this way upholds the illusion of a post-racial society among the many other false narratives that the nation tells itself about itself. Growing up, I watched this story unravel. I realized that conversations about freedom are not only especially relevant today, but also much more complex than most US history books or teachers were willing to capture.

So, I began to piece together an alternative story. This one relies on the work of Black scholars, activists, artists, my own experiences, the experiences of those around me, and the stories passed down to me from previous generations. More importantly, this story is global and ever-expanding. While mainstream discourses about freedom are often limited to a specific nation state, the story that I am piecing together connects and learns from the struggles for freedom around the world.

In the midst of this pandemic, the commonalities between the struggles that Black people face throughout the diaspora have been further exemplified with the rise of movements such as #EndSARS in Nigeria, #ShutItAllDown in Namibia, and countless others, all in resistance to the institutions that perpetuate oppression. These movements make clear the need for a Pan-Africanist response to oppressive systems which continue to dehumanize people of African descent throughout the world.

In *Africa in Stereo*, Tsitsi Jaji (2013) speaks of the continued relevance of pan-Africanism, noting that "it is precisely because the challenges of new forms of exploitation are so acute and pervasive that renewed perspectives on liberation movements and solidarity are so urgently needed" (8). Thus, I

turn to the voices and experiences of marginalized Black South Africans to identify opportunities for understanding and solidarity. The South African freedom struggle has much to offer toward understandings of freedom, not only because of the glaring similarities between apartheid and US Jim Crow Laws, but also because of the dynamic ways in which the South African struggle continues to evolve.

Throughout this paper, I lean heavily on teachings from Black feminism to guide me through my analysis and my own understanding of my positionality as a researcher. The Black feminist tradition is vast and complex, varying in approach and ideology across the diaspora. One of the foundational principles of Black feminism, specifically within the US, is the acknowledgement of the unique experiences of Black women produced by interlocking systems of oppression (Combahee River Collective 1977; Crenshaw 1989). This is echoed by the African Feminist Charter (2006) which argues that “to challenge patriarchy effectively also requires challenging other systems of oppression and exploitation, which frequently mutually support each other” (4). For Black women around the world, the impact of racism, heterosexism, ableism, classism, and all other oppressive systems cannot be separated as they are all experienced simultaneously. This paper leverages this intersectional framework rooted in Black feminism, to highlight the distinct struggles and contributions of Black South African marginalized creators informed by their experience of complex, interrelated forms of oppression.

Furthermore, this examination utilizes what Patricia Hill Collins (2002) identifies as a Black feminist epistemology. In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Collins describes Black feminist epistemology as an approach that privileges lived experience as a “criterion of meaning” (257). Rather than depending on white-dominated knowledge validation systems, the Black feminist tradition values the personal stories, experiences, and thoughts of Black women as important evidence for meaning-making.

Accordingly, this paper turns to the lived experiences and cultural expressions of marginalized South African artists to understand new meanings of freedom that don’t depend on what Collins (2002) describes as the “Eurocentric knowledge validation process” which typically rely on the verification of other white researchers who have deemed the work objective and measurable (253). Black feminism embraces and encourages the multiple levels of meaning that emerge through valuing concrete experiences. I use this as a point of departure to explore the multiple meanings of freedom that South African artists uncover by leveraging the wisdom they’ve gathered through their own experiences.

Another pillar of Black feminist epistemology that I embrace throughout this paper is an “ethic of personal accountability” (Collins 2002, 265). While Western social science theorists emphasize the importance of a positivist approach to research in which the researcher’s viewpoint and their knowledge claims remain separate, a Black feminist epistemology resists this separation. Instead, an ethic of personal accountability requires that researchers and thinkers actively interrogate the ways in which their viewpoint informs their work.

In alignment with this tradition, I would like to take this moment to also describe my own positionality briefly as it relates to this work. Although there are many ways in which my lived experience as a Black woman allows me to connect with this work, I also understand the limitations of my perspective as I engage the pieces. As a US-based, Black, cis-heterosexual woman, I am aware of my complex position within interlocking systems of oppression. My multiple identities are simultaneously targeted while also allowing me to experience certain benefits at the expense of other multiply marginalized communities. Throughout this research endeavor, my positionality has actively informed my analysis as I identify connections across freedom struggles while also keeping in mind the ways that certain privileges have shaped my experience and approach to this work. It is through centering an ethic of personal accountability throughout this research that I have been able to push my own analysis in directions that aim to dismantle systems of oppression.

IDENTITY

Similar to those of freedom, meanings and expressions of identity are often oversimplified in mainstream discourses. This is largely due to the ways that dominant understandings of fixed identity categories have been violently imposed upon people as soon as they enter this world. Marginalized identities bear the brunt of such policing. Not only have the experiences of marginalized communities historically been neglected in the construction of dominant identity categories, but these constructions are also specifically designed to further legitimize the power of the oppressor all while further marginalizing the oppressed. The oppressive aims of dominant identity discourses are evident in constructions of race, gender, and sexuality.

In an analysis of the construction of Black subjectivity, Michelle Wright (2004) highlights the ways that Black inferiority was constructed as a means of upholding whiteness: “For the West, the image of the Black Other is as vibrant as ever, reminding us that the belief in Black inferiority is the result not of objective observation but instead the need for self-definition. In order to posit itself as civilized, advanced, and superior, Western discourse must endlessly reify Africa and the Black as its binary opposite” (27). Oyeronke Oyewumi similarly observes the ways that dominant identities are constructed in opposition and as superior to the “other,” noting that “those in positions of power find it imperative to establish their superior biology as a way of affirming their privilege and dominance over ‘Others.’ Those who are different are seen as genetically inferior; and this, in turn, is used to account for their disadvantaged social positions” (Oyewumi 1997, 1). The centrality of the body in Western discourses of identity is of particular importance to Oyewumi (1997), who describes the body as “the bedrock on which the social order is founded.” As a result, she argues that “the body is always in view and on view. As such, it invites a gaze, a gaze of difference, a gaze of differentiation — the most historically constant being the gendered gaze” (2).

In response to the oppressive gendered and racialized gaze which render marginalized people inferior, Audre Lorde (1978) understands self-definition as a means of resistance: “For Black women as well as Black men, it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others for their use and to our detriment” (31). This is echoed by bell hooks (1989),

who argues that marginalized people have been objectified, stripped of the rights and humanity that she believes subjecthood offers: “As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. As objects, one’s reality is defined by others, one’s identity created by others, one’s history named only in ways that define one’s relationship to those who are subject.” Hooks (1989) describes the struggle to move from object to subject as an “effort to establish a liberatory voice” (42). This effort is oftentimes met with consequences ranging from social exclusion to violence, leading some to the fatalistic conclusion that identities outside of this hegemonic structure cannot exist.

Yet overwhelming evidence demonstrates that this isn’t the case. Even in the midst of oppressive forces which aim to flatten and silence identities that deviate from normative culture, the effort to establish a liberatory voice continues on. The lived experiences of marginalized people are a testament to this ongoing struggle toward self-definition and self-identification despite the relentlessness of dominant modes of identification. This struggle manifests as a negotiation between internal understandings of self and dominant external narratives of the self. As mentioned by José Muñoz (1999), “The use-value of any narrative identity that reduces subjectivity to either a social constructivist model or what has been called an essentialist understanding of the self is especially exhausted” (5). Identity is neither solely predetermined nor completely at the whim of societal norms but rather it is dynamic and constantly shifting.

Wright (2004) argues that “subjectivity is both always already present and constantly coming into being, derailed and reasserted by the paradox of the Black experience” (158). Achille Mbembe (2001) similarly resists reductive and essentialist understandings of African identity, arguing that it “is constituted, in varying forms, through a series of practices, notably *practices of the self*” (272). It is through practices of the self that one struggles toward establishing a liberatory voice. Because this struggle plays out in the everyday lives of those on the margins of society, it is no surprise that the nuances of it would be captured in the cultural productions of marginalized artists.

When I asked the artists I interviewed to describe the relationship between their work and their identities, many of them had different versions of the same response: one is always informing the other:

“I don’t think anyone who creates art can leave themselves out when they make art”

- Mkosi 2020

“I might as well start pushing the boundaries of what I do and change people’s perceptions because I don’t fit the mold...I might as well just do what I want and that’s where I included all parts of myself”

- Umlilo 2020

“The more I pursue music the more I would get confidence to present as myself. Performing allowed me to present in ways that made me comfortable”

- Ndlovu 2020

Critically engaging the connection between an artist's identity and the work they produce is especially important when reading through a Black feminist lens. The Western-influenced impulse to separate the art from the artist not only ignores the power dynamics which determine who can live off of their work and where art is circulated, but it also frames art as an objective space completely removed from the social world in which it is produced. Too often, this positivist approach allows white cisgender male artists to be hailed as creative geniuses without any mention or interrogation of the harm that they've caused to marginalized communities. The insistence on separating the art and the artist would also suggest that the erasure of the cultural contributions of marginalized creators has nothing to do with their identities. But diving deeper into the ways that identity emerges in and informs art allows for a more nuanced understanding of the stories that artists are telling through their work. While identity may not always be the central theme in an artist's work, it does play a role in the content and delivery.

In this section, I provide a critical analysis of two multimedia pieces where identity is a central theme. These pieces are read in conversation with insight taken from the interviews that I had with the artists themselves. The music video for Umlilo's "Magic Man" highlights the struggle to embrace an identity which rejects the restrictive binaries of dominant culture. Meanwhile, in "Messy," Bonolo Kavula introduces the persona, Black Monalisa, a self-proclaimed "rapper, artist, painter" whose embodiment of unapologetic confidence, boldly disrupts oppressive identity constructions that fix Black women into a one-dimensional mode of existence. Both of these pieces offer a multisensory experience that troubles, resists, or subverts dominant understandings of identity intended to police and further marginalize vulnerable communities. Through a deliberate destabilizing of what Judith Butler (1990) calls the "matrix of intelligibility," these pieces offer meanings of freedom which expand beyond dominant identity categories (24).

MAGIC MAN ANALYSIS

On the meaning of "Magic Man," Siya Ngcobo, famously known as Umlilo, shared in an interview with *Africa is a Country* that the song "represents a person's metamorphosis from a tortured outsider to a fully realized divine being and [they] wanted the music to reflect the transformation" (Umlilo n.d.). As someone who self-identifies as a queer, non-binary artist, Umlilo has described this piece as one of their most personal works.

The transformation depicted throughout the video's progression aligns with what queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz (1999) refers to as a performance of disidentification: "the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (4). While the South African Constitution has been lauded for its acknowledgement of the rights of sexual minorities, normative citizenship in South Africa is still entrenched in cis-hetero-patriarchal ideals.

In a study on violence perpetrated against LGBTQ+ people living in various African countries, researchers concluded that in South Africa, the legacy of apartheid and colonialism “can still be seen in prevailing moral codes around sex and sexuality.” In spite of a plethora of progressive legislation, the study notes that “there has been a considerable lag between the law and the lived experiences of LGBTI persons in South Africa. LGBTI persons in South Africa remain a vulnerable group susceptible to high levels of violence and stigma based on their gender expression, gender identity and sexual orientation” (Arcus Foundation, Iranti 2020, 58). The disconnect between the law and lived experiences was a common theme throughout my interviews:

“We were the second country to legalize gay marriage, but that doesn’t translate in real life. When you read the SA constitution you would think we are such a liberal country but we’re mostly quite conservative.”

- Mx Blouse

“We have a constitution and it promises so many things but so many unconstitutional things have happened in this country - the Marikana massacre, what’s happening to women and children everyday how does this document protect those people”

- Nkhensani Mkhari

In the face of social, cultural, and physical violence, Muñoz (1999) describes disidentification as a strategy in which marginalized subjects redefine normative or dominant cultural logics in ways that center the oppressed and expose the binaries constructed by the oppressor. Disidentification is conceptualized as an alternative to its counterparts, identification and counter-identification. Muñoz (1999) argues that while identification involves complete assimilation to normative culture and counter-identification aims to fully oppose normative culture—in many cases reproducing the same harmful logics promoted by dominant culture—disidentification is a strategy that involves reconfiguring normative culture in service of abolishing the binaries that fix identities as wholly one thing or another. He explains that “disidentification is, at its core, an ambivalent modality that cannot be conceptualized as a restrictive or ‘masterfully’ fixed mode of identification” (28).

It is the resistance to fixed identity categories that Umlilo explores throughout the sonic and visual journey of “Magic Man.” In the early scenes of the video, a slow-tempo, haunting, electronic beat plays as Umlilo and two other dancers appear as androgynous figures moving through a dimly lit hallway, rhythmically contorting and manipulating their bodies. From the chest up, they are covered in white paint, which Umlilo has described as a reference to various Xhosa rituals of masculinity.

During Ulwaluko, a Xhosa rite of passage marking the transition from boyhood to manhood, initiates’ bodies are painted with white clay which is understood to protect the initiates from witches and/or evil spirits. In an interview with feminist scholar Pumla Gqola, South African artist and art historian Thembinkosi Goniwe mentions that the whitening of faces is also prevalent during rituals led by sangomas, shamans, and amagqhira as it is “important for spirituality, curative

rites, healing, sanitising, and cleansing” (Goniwe and Gqola 2005, 92). In conversation with the various themes explored throughout the video, the multiple significations of whitened faces suggest a spiritual element of the protagonist’s transformation.



Figure 1. Still from “Magic Man”. 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kXBHRAAuewk>.

The white paint is contrasted by Umlilo’s bejeweled and colorfully made-up face featuring shades of purple, blue, and green complete with elongated eyelashes. A key element of disidentification according to Muñoz (1999) is the “recycling and rethinking of encoded meaning” (31). In this case, Umlilo reemploys the encoded meaning of white paint as a symbol of masculinity and makeup as the dominant signification of femininity. Umlilo’s ethereal look against the white paint not only suggests a meeting and redefining of both femininity and traditional Xhosa representations of masculinity, but it also situates the protagonist’s journey of disidentification as a rite of passage in itself, which is revealed as the video continues.

In an interview with *The Creators Project*, Umlilo spoke about the importance of white paint in “Magic Man,” noting that “In Xhosa culture, when young boys are sent to the mountains to be circumcised, white paint is used as part of the ritual. In “Magic Man” the white represents the metamorphosis and the ritual thereof of me becoming something, blossoming into something if you will” (Harrington-Johnson, 2015). In this performance of disidentifications, Umlilo takes white paint—a symbol traditionally associated with a ritual of manhood in Xhosa culture—and repurposes its meaning to convey a transformation which rejects the very binaries inherent in such rituals.

As Umlilo and the other dancers make their way down the hallway, a visual rippling effect briefly distorts the image at different points during the song, creating a disorienting effect. The beginning scenes of the video immediately bring the viewers into a journey of the unknown as many of the details and narrative aren’t yet clear. In one of these early scenes, Umlilo is shown with their face

wrapped in white bandage and only their eyes and lips visible as they sing the opening lines “He’s not a saint, he’s not a sinner”—the first of many binaries rejected throughout the song (Umlilo 2015).

This verse goes on to describe a man who feels trapped by normative identity standards which require people to fit neatly into society’s boxes and labels. The lyrics reveal that although this man realizes that his identity doesn’t align with the restrictive demands of society, he attempts to conform. But even in his attempt, he still desires to be seen for who he really is as he hopes “someone’s gonna look into his eyes / And see him cry as he walks into the glass houses that were built along his side” (Umlilo 2015). Throughout the song, glass houses are a prominent motif representing hegemonic social structures. Although the builder of the glass houses isn’t specifically named in this verse, the institutions responsible for the glass houses become clear as the song continues. These glass houses can be understood as the restrictive forces ordering society around normative ideals. However, glass houses are also see-through and fragile, suggesting that while limiting, these harmful standards can be shattered.



Figure 2. Still from “Magic Man”. 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kXBHRAAuewk>.

The lyrics of the first verse along with the ominous production and disorienting visuals paint a picture of someone distressed and confused as they yearn for a world free of the labels placed on their identity. Throughout this visual journey, we see the stages of the protagonist gradually removing himself from the dominant identity frameworks and embracing an identity that looks beyond such restrictions.

Toward the end of the first verse Umlilo repeats the phrase “He’s not a person anymore,” suggesting that the protagonist’s rejection of normative identity categories challenges the very meaning of personhood. Because dominant conceptions of humanity have become so attached to binaries, the refusal of such binaries can be likened to the refusal of humanity itself. The repetition of the phrase highlights the ways that society demonizes any sort of failure to conform

to prevailing understandings of identity and more specifically gender. This reveals the exclusionary and manipulative nature of humanity discourses as they often rest on conformity to the rules and modes of existence as outlined by the oppressor.

The restrictive tone of the first verse is contrasted by the freedom found in the chorus as the lyrics encourage the man to break free from the glass houses dictating when, where, and how his identity can show up:

Fly away Mr. Magic Man
The people wanna hold your hand
No one's laughing anymore
Please wake up don't be a fool
Say you're joking Magic Man
The people wanna hold your hand
Please wake up don't be a fool
(Umlilo 2015).

The chorus is accompanied by a visual of an elevated Umlilo performing on a stage with two background dancers. In this scene, Umlilo wears a Black laced blouse and floral skirt in addition to the colorful makeup and white bandage wrapped around their face from previous scenes. While the first verse depicts a person who feels powerless in their struggle to construct an identity outside of dominant categories, the chorus compares this person's resistance to "magic," encouraging the person to "wake up" and step firmly into their true self.



Figure 3. Still from "Magic Man". 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kXBHRAAuewk>.

By the beginning of the final verse, the production adopts a reggae inspired rhythm, as the lyrics shift from an internal struggle to a societal critique. Drawing from a genre that has historically carried political sentiments, the lyrics of the second verse go on to more explicitly condemn the societal binaries that dictate meanings and expressions of identity.

Live in a world where you're either man or woman
Black or white, Christian or heathen
The road where you're supposed to walk morally upright with your beliefs intact
Then comes the oppressor with his artifacts
When you're someone who's never fitted in
I always look beyond that road
It ain't easy being him (X4)
(Umlilo 2015)

The lyrics along with the shift in production help to establish a declarative tone as Umlilo challenges the idea that morality or worthiness is measured by one's ability to fit into binaries of gender, race, and/or religion. Although looking and living beyond these binaries is difficult, the sonic and visual escalation of the video conveys a feeling of empowerment at the dismantling of these binaries.

Throughout the second half of the video, visuals from later scenes are interspersed with visuals from earlier scenes as the beat grows in intensity and Umlilo's movements grow fiercer. The journey throughout the video is far from linear, another rejection of a dominant ideology which structures society. In addition to a reliance on binaries, mainstream constructions of identity are also characterized by a commitment to white-centered notions of linearity. Whether related to history or the present, linearity has enabled the erasure of coexisting narratives that don't fit the story or logic the state aims to preserve.

In her exploration of Western European philosophies of subjectivity, Michelle Wright (2004) discusses linearity as an example of "The manipulation of time and space to legitimate philosophies of the subject is central to the structural origins of the Black Other and the Black subject...to realize the white subject within a progressive narrative and dislocate the Black as Other and therefore outside this narrative" (137). Rather than embracing this linear approach that has never accounted for marginalized experiences, the music video adapts different methods such as the mixing of earlier scenes with later scenes to suggest that the transformative journey of living beyond society's boundaries doesn't have a clear beginning or end, but rather it is a constant journey.

Towards the end of the song, an electric guitar riff is added to the production, forming a blend of numerous genres including electronic, pop, rock and roll, and reggae. The music video rejects linearity and singularity not only in the lyrics and narrative progression but also in its merging of many different genres.

In the song's outro, the chant "bad boy" is repeated, a recall of the phrase's appearance in a previous verse. But the visuals and sound suggest a different connotation than its previous mention. While in the earlier verse it connotes a more antagonistic tone, in the outro, the chant is more akin to a reclaimed mantra. In this subversion of the "bad boy" label, nonconformity is embraced and the idea of neatly fitting into society's boxes and being a "good boy" is exposed, encouraging the viewer and listener to question the definitions of good and bad.

By the end of the video, the audience has witnessed a transformation that has decisively challenged and reimagined dominant structures of identity. Through bringing viewers into this personal journey, Umlilo artfully highlights the harm and limitations of strict identity categories which ultimately only serve those in power. As the protagonist becomes aware of and begins to transcend this binary approach to identity, they are able to encounter a truth much greater than the one imposed upon them.

But coming to this truth is a journey that is neither linear nor without hardship. This is illustrated in the final verse of the song as Umlilo repeats the phrase "It ain't easy being him" an acknowledgement of the physical, social, and cultural violence that come along with rejecting dominant roles.

These consequences make the journey that much harder and less straightforward as one must consistently resist such forces and claim their truth in the face of oppression. Umlilo offers a personal reflection on the multiplicity of identity which adds a layer to freedom that isn't always centered in dominant conversations—the freedom to reject and exist outside of the labels, rules, and definitions constructed to legitimize the oppressive tactics that further harm the oppressed.

MESSY ANALYSIS

Similar to "Magic Man," the music video for "Messy" offers another glimpse into a performance of disidentification—this time through the lens of a Black woman and self-proclaimed "rapper, artist, painter." Multidisciplinary artist Bonolo Kavula created and performs as the character Black Mona Lisa as an answer to a question she asked herself years ago: what does it look like to have a Black woman in the art world who is the complete opposite of silence? (Kavula 2020) On her sources of inspiration for the creation of Black Mona Lisa, Kavula credits the accumulation of her everyday experiences as a Black woman and artist. Describing Black Monalisa as an alternate hypervisible extension of herself, Kavula mentioned that the persona grew out of imagining herself "being present at a time where [she] couldn't say anything even if [she] wanted to" (Kavula 2020). Similar to the ways that Umlilo reemploys and rethinks encoded meanings in "Magic Man," Black Monalisa makes use of dominant cultural logics not only in her name but also in her exploration and subversion of stereotypes placed on Black women.

The Mona Lisa's quintessential role in the art world carries multilayered meanings around "high" art, beauty, and whiteness. Although these meanings have been challenged over the years through the recirculation and remixing of the Mona Lisa, da Vinci's masterpiece still serves as a marker of white European cultural superiority.

Kavula reappropriates this cultural artifact to create a character who directly challenges white male dominance, particularly in the art world. Throughout the video for "Messy," Black Monalisa simultaneously subverts white-dominated standards of art and beauty and reclaims controlling images of Black womanhood in order to explore a version of Black femininity which rejects the policing of Black women's identities. The visuals, delivery, and production draw heavily on hip hop aesthetics invoking a world often perceived as far removed from what has historically been lauded as "high" art. But the lyrics make it clear that this video is meant to engage directly with the gatekeepers of the art world.

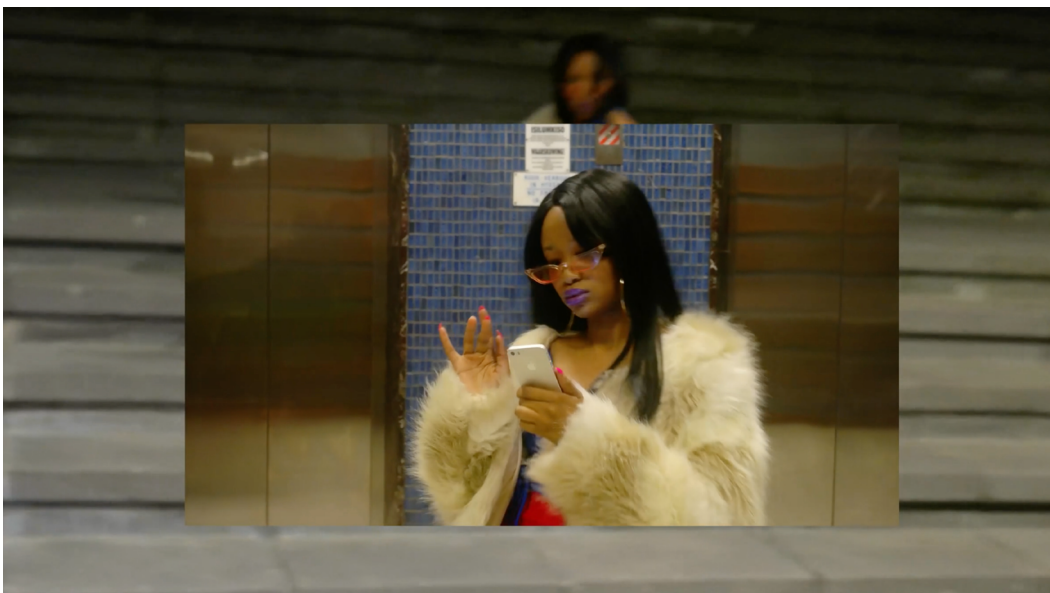


Figure 4. Still from "Messy". 2018. <https://archive.futurefairs.com/journal-posts-2/2020/5/6/gallery-bxje5>.

In the opening scene of the video, a voice recording plays a conversation between Kavula and another person during which Kavula distinguishes between herself and Black Mona Lisa, mentioning that "the character is an artwork, it's not me, it's a statement." Introducing Black Mona Lisa as both a self-portrayed character and work of art challenges dominant understandings of what qualifies something as art, particularly in the Eurocentric world of high art. By using her own body and performance as a "statement," Kavula blurs the boundary that Western-dominated spaces often set between the art and the artist. From the very beginning, Kavula uses Black Mona Lisa to push the limits of dominant perspectives of both art and Black women's identities.

As the song begins, a closeup reveals the details of Black Mona Lisa's outfit: large gold hoop earrings, matching gold chains, long straight, jet-black hair, a faux fur coat, and bejeweled acrylic nails. These details complete her bold, hip hop-influenced look which draws heavily on the aesthetic of women's fashion in the US Black working class youth culture.

The homage to Black women doesn't end there. Black Mona Lisa's statement to the gatekeepers of the art world begins in the first verse as she boasts that her "print game so good could be Kentrige's daughter," a nod to South African artist William Kentrige. She immediately situates herself at the same level of a white male artist, disrupting notions of Black artistic inferiority. From there, she turns her attention to Black women artists throughout the African diaspora as she shouts out Wangechi Mutu (Kenya), Mary Sibande (South Africa), Donna Kukama (South Africa), and Kara Walker (United States). By naming and uplifting other Black women breaking barriers in the art world, she acknowledges their collective struggle and centers the connection between their success and her own.

This practice of paying respect and learning from the experiences of other Black women is central to Black feminism. As stated in the Combahee River Collective Statement, "Contemporary Black feminism is the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters" (1977). Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins (2002) mentions that "For Black women, new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community" (260). Without universalizing the experience of Black women, Black feminism aims to learn from and through the varied experiences of Blackness. The importance of leveraging collective struggle and wisdom is captured in Black Mona Lisa's explicit naming of the Black women who have laid the foundation for her.

As the music video continues, Black Mona Lisa appears confidently dancing, strutting, and posing in a variety of locations. Whether she's fiercely twirling in the middle of a convenience store or lustfully stuffing her mouth with shredded newspaper in an empty diner, her body movements and sustained eye contact with the camera contribute to the unapologetic tone of the video.



Figure 5. Still from “Messy”. 2018. <https://archive.futurefairs.com/journal-posts-2/2020/5/6/gallery-bxje5>.

This is further emphasized by the lyrics, which continue to celebrate and uplift Black women. In the pre-chorus, she raps the following: “Next level thinkers, makers, trail blazers, Black women doing their thing, Mona Lisa famous.” This is accompanied by a closeup of Black Mona Lisa’s silver heels overlaid with a video from another scene where she dances and models for the camera. Her body language and performance is commanding, sexual, carefree, and joyous all at once. However, dominant understandings of Black womanhood have historically failed to make space for such multifaceted expressions.

Onyekere Oyewumi (1997) observes the biocentric process of colonization which invisibilized and deemed African women inferior. She mentions that “The emergence of women as an identifiable category, defined by their anatomy and subordinated to men in all situations, resulted, in part, from the imposition of a patriarchal colonial state. For females, colonization was a twofold process of racial inferiorization and gender subordination” (124). The combined impact of these oppressive institutions continues to contribute to a reality in which Black women’s identities are dictated and regulated by everyone but Black women themselves.

Desiree Lewis (2011) similarly highlights the role of colonization in constructing Black female inferiority: “By the 19th century, therefore, Africans were deemed innately, biologically different and degenerate. And central to this essentialist belief were ideas about their distinctively pathological sexuality” (200). The central role of sexuality in constructions of race and gender left women especially susceptible to dominant narratives which aimed to further subjugate Black women and justify the violence of colonization. Lewis (2011) argues that “Messages about African women’s sexual excess have justified their being scapegoats...such controls are anchored

in discursive representations of the sexualised degenerate female body, a body that threatens to pollute or weaken ‘healthy’ national body politic” (206). As a result, sexuality is weaponized and Black women’s pleasure is dismissed.

Patricia Hill Collins (2002) has also critically examined the ways that “controlling images” placed on Black women in the US have been weaponized against Black women: “Portraying African-American women as stereotypical mummies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify U.S. Black women’s oppression” (69). African feminists have similarly noted the ways in which colonialist myths simultaneously hypersexualize African women while also limiting them to the realm of motherhood. Nigerian feminist scholar Amina Mama (1997) highlights the connection between dominant discursive representations of African women and its relation to continued oppression, observing the “ways in which official ideologies interact with civil institutions to reinforce the subordination of women both directly and indirectly” (57).

In addition to the material (physical and economic) consequences of the pervasive stereotypes surrounding Black womanhood, this also results in limitations imposed on Black women’s identities. The stereotypes gradually cloud possibilities of identification that exist outside of these dominant narratives. In the process, Black women are stripped of their humanity—their capacity to contain multitudes. However, throughout the video for “Messy” Black Mona Lisa reclaims her multiplicity, as she reappropriates notable figures in the art world and subverts controlling images in order to assert her own complex, dynamic, and “messy” identity. This is further exemplified in the chorus:

I’m only down with one name
Call me Black Mona Lisa
Hot and famous
Rapper, artist, painter
I am your future
Like that?
Jackson Pollock (X3)
Cause I’m messy, messy, messy, messy
(Kavula 2018)

While controlling images have been constructed by white supremacist ideologies in order to name, define and rationalize Black women’s suffering, Black Mona Lisa’s performance exemplifies what Collins (2002) describes as the “power of self-definition” (36). Rather than allowing others to dictate her identity, Black Mona Lisa boldly demands that others respect the unique identity that she’s crafted for herself. Her refusal to be called anything other than her name is a testimony to

this. Her identity is messy in the sense that it can't be contained, silenced, or simplified. Continuing her citation of famous figures in the art world, she references and reappropriates Jackson Pollock's signature aesthetic in order to convey her own bold and unpredictable identity.

In the second verse, Black Mona Lisa proudly proclaims that she "single handedly annihilated every Black female stereotype in the building." She goes on to describe herself as "Lisa the loud, the ratchet, the messy, the first one on the dance floor, the one that likes to twerk." Joan Morgan's conceptualization of pleasure politics in Black feminism is particularly useful for breaking down Black Mona Lisa's performance. In "Why We Get Off: Moving Towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure," Morgan (2015) strongly urges Black feminist thought to critically engage Black women's pleasure and the possibilities it offers for understanding Black women's subjectivity. A politic of pleasure according to Morgan "encourages recognition of Black women's pleasure (sexual and otherwise) as not only an integral part of fully realized humanity, but one that understands that a politics of pleasure is capable of intersecting, challenging, and redefining dominant narratives about race, beauty, health and sex in ways that are generative and necessary" (44). This argument is echoed by Patricia McFadden (2003) who observes that "the connection between power and pleasure is not often recognised, and remains a largely unembraced and undefended heritage...when it is harnessed and 'deployed', it has the capacity to infuse every woman's personal experience of living and being with a liberating political force" (1).

Throughout the video for "Messy," Black Mona Lisa's pleasures are clearly communicated. The visuals and lyrics emphasize her desires with little regard for outsiders' perceptions of said desires. While characteristics like "loud," "ratchet," and "messy," are often used to characterize Black women, particularly in the US, who don't meet dominant standards of womanhood, Black Mona Lisa embraces these labels, as a means of expressing her own joy and agency.

The music video's final scene captures a visual of Black Mona Lisa sitting in a bathtub, staring enticingly into the camera, her body covered in soap suds. Similar to previous scenes, this visual overlays another visual showing a closeup of her as soap drips down her back. Unlike the previous scenes, Black Mona Lisa appears with short hair although she maintains her bejeweled nails and gold jewelry. This scene continues as Black Mona Lisa recites the final lyrics of the song:

I'm not tryna sound pedantic or anything but
ain't nobody gonna fuck around with my name
Not today
Black Mona Lisa
Try me....cause I'm messy

This exposed and unapologetic ending captures the sentiment of the entire music video as Black Mona Lisa willfully puts herself on display but refuses to allow the viewer to have control over her narrative.



Figure 6. Stills from “Messy”. 2018. <https://archive.futurefairs.com/journal-posts-2/2020/5/6/gallery-bxjc5>.

Throughout her performance, there is an implied awareness of the negative stereotypes that Black women face. But there is also a resistance to being wholly defined by them or allowing them to limit her expression of her own sexuality. Instead of letting others have the final say on her identity, she embraces her messiness and owns the narrative.

IDENTITY CONCLUSION

Umlilo and Bonolo Kavula both offer unique works which trouble dominant concepts of identity. While Umlilo’s video takes viewers through the journey of defying one-dimensional identity standards while explicitly naming the oppressive nature of such standards, Kavula’s performance as Black Mona Lisa resists these standards by boldly engaging, subverting, and reclaiming the same cultural logics used to dehumanize Black women. Ultimately, both artists demonstrate the intimate relationship between freedom and identity, as their work deliberately centers the freedom to be many things at once and the freedom to seek more than the dominant identity categories that have been violently framed as the only options.

LOVE

The role of love in discourses of freedom often seems at once ever-present and elusive. Undoubtedly, the love that people hold for their family, friends, and community has served as an important motivating factor in the struggle toward freedom. But the material interests of freedom are often framed as distinct from the emotional or sentimental interests. The act of love is relegated to private affairs while freedom is packaged as a more public and political issue. Thus, less room is made for the ways a critical engagement with love, in all of its dynamic forms and complexities, could illuminate more reflective understandings of freedom.

This has not gone unnoticed by many scholars and thinkers pondering the role of love and affect in liberation struggles. In “Love as a Practice of Freedom,” bell hooks (2006) suggests that the lack of love in struggles for freedom is a consequence of the “collective failure to acknowledge the needs of the spirit and overdetermined emphasis on material concerns” in discourses of freedom (240). Audre Lorde (1978) similarly observes “it has become fashionable to separate the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the political, to see them as contradictory or antithetical” (56). As hooks (2006) warns, a continual neglect of love in discourses of freedom is unsustainable: “As long as we refuse to address fully the place of love in struggles for liberation we will not be able to create a culture of conversion where there is a mass turning away from an ethic of domination” (240).

Centering a politics of love was also of importance to June Jordan. In her “Where is the Love?” speech delivered at the 1978 National Black Writers Conference at Howard University, June Jordan (2003) described Black feminism as rooted in love, “a steady-state deep caring and respect for every other human being, a love that can only derive from a secure and positive self-love” (272). Black feminists such as hooks, Lorde, and Jordan form part of a larger legacy of Black feminism’s love-politics. This legacy is further explored by Jennifer C. Nash (2011) who traces “a much longer, and largely unanalyzed, Black feminist tradition of love-politics, a tradition marked by transforming love from the personal...into a theory of justice” (2). Furthermore, Nash’s work locates the Black feminist tradition of love-politics within discourses of affective politics, a term she uses to describe “how bodies are organized around intensities, longings, desires, temporalities, repulsions, curiosities, fatigues, optimism, and how these affects produce political movements” (2).

By critically examining how emotions such as love shape struggles for liberation, Nash, like many other scholars, invites an understanding of freedom that expands and is expanded by the lived emotional experiences of marginalized communities. To ignore the utility of love-politics or affective politics in freedom struggles is to underestimate the lengths that oppressive systems have gone to deny marginalized people’s very being. Lorde (1978) reminds us that “In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives” (88). While Lorde confines her analysis to the suppression of the erotic in women, I argue that such suppression extends to all multiply marginalized gender identities and sexualities. The works that I analyze in this section demonstrate the ways that marginalized artists reclaim the power of the erotic that has been so vehemently denied to them.

In an interview with South African art historian Nomusa Makhubu, Khanyisile Mbongwa, a South African artist and curator, notes that “Every oppressive system that we have ever encountered denies us love, it denies us self-love and loving people who look like us” (Makhubu and Mbongwa 2019, 22). Embracing and interrogating love in discourses of freedom directly rejects oppressive attempts to dehumanize marginalized people and reduce them to emotionless bodies undeserving of pleasure.

In “Political Vernaculars: Freedom and Love,” Keguro Macharia proposes freedom and love as political vernaculars that transcend the limitations of other political vernaculars which remain married to the state: “In their simultaneity, freedom and love exist beyond what the state can tether. They push our imaginations in other directions” (2016). But this doesn’t mean that the state hasn’t tried its best to manipulate and misuse love as a means to validate state interests. Dawn Rae Davis (2002) outlines the role that “love” played in rationalizing colonizing projects, noting the ways that a “civilizing-Christianizing mission of colonization, drawing on the ethical-epistemological schemas of the Enlightenment, asserted a benevolent function, and Christian ideologies of love formed a supportive partnership with knowledge procedures imposed upon the colonized” (147). Domination under the guise of love and freedom allows the state to continue preserving oppressive systems while further limiting access to meanings of love that oppose state logics.

In this section, I offer a close reading of multidisciplinary pieces which, as described by Macharia, expand imaginations of freedom through exploring different variations of love. While the music video for Gyre’s “Quarantine” explores a journey of self-love through the support of community found in safe spaces, the video for Andy Mkosi’s “Set it Off” provides a glimpse into a queer love story captured through moments of intimacy and vulnerability. In their deviation from cis-hetero-patriarchal depictions of love rooted in domination, both videos encourage an understanding of freedom that centers sentimental needs and desires.

QUARANTINE ANALYSIS

In 2018, S’bonakaliso Nene, better known by his stage name, Gyre, released his debut album, “Queernomics,” a project divided into the following chapters: I am Human, I am Queer, I am Sex, I am Love, and I am Black. In “Quarantine,” the first track of the “I am Love” chapter, Gyre raps over a slow tempo, pulsing, hip hop beat. The song serves as both a coming out and coming home story with love as the central theme. This theme is further explored through the lyrics, narrative, and visuals of the video.

In the first few scenes of “Quarantine,” Gyre is led by a group of people into an empty underground parking garage. While their laughter and conversation suggest that the group is already quite familiar with each other, Gyre is clearly an outsider and appears to be confused about where they’re taking him and why. When he enters the garage, he is met with this same group who has now formed a staggered line, directly facing him. At the center of the group, stands another version of Gyre, dressed in black leggings and a purple cardigan.



Figure 7. Still from “Quarantine”. 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4u8zZm7r0gE>.

As the second version of Gyre begins singing the chorus, the camera pans across each face in the group, providing a close up of their pensive and reflective facial expressions. Although at first, the context of this group’s familiarity is unclear, the lyrics throughout the chorus shed light on what binds them together:

Quarantine
We called it our home
Quarantine
The disease that brought me home
Quarantine
Daddy tried to get me out
I told him I am home
Quarantine
Daddy, I’m diseased
I love a boy
(Gyre 2018)

While quarantine typically refers to the strict isolation protocols imposed to prevent the spread of disease, Gyre employs this term as a metaphor to describe the everyday lives for people who have been pushed to the margins of society. Throughout the chorus, he refers to quarantine as “the disease that brought me home” (Gyre 2018). In this case, the “disease” is the failure to conform to cis-hetero-patriarchal ideals of love and desire. While dominant culture rejects this sort of non-conformity, Gyre describes his journey of embracing it, finding love and community among others who have similarly been cast aside by society. The first verse begins with the following lyrics:

What a perfect disaster
Took all I could muster
Say the words to my father
That I love me some brothers
Sisters for others
Misters my Achilles tendon

The sentiment expressed throughout this moment of the verse is reflective of society's disapproval of experiences of love that don't fit within hegemonic structures. The lyrics liken this love to a weakness demonstrating public scrutiny and judgement that happens in response to existing and loving in alignment with one's truth. However, this experience isn't solely defined by the pain of rejection, as the verse goes on to describe the healing that comes along with embracing a love that deviates from definitions which have been used to enact violence:

Shot in the heel
Now I am healed
Pain opened my eyes to love that is real
Is it signed is it sealed
Does sex appeal
Shit don't matter when it's love you feel
When it's love that heals

"We need to interrogate what freedom is internally but it's hard to do in a world that's so devoid of spiritual connection whatsoever and that doesn't necessarily mean religion but rather one's connection to one's purpose and oneself."

- Gyre 2020

In *Uses of the Erotic*, Lorde (1978) conceptualizes the erotic as a feeling that isn't limited to sexual pleasure but rather it is "a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire" (89). By this definition, the erotic is an expression of love at its deepest. In many ways, this music video is about the journey of firmly resisting oppressive forces in order to access the power of the erotic. Lorde notes that "we have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings. But, once recognized, those which do not enhance our future lose their power and can be altered" (90). The lyrics of the song go on to describe exactly how that fear operates in the lives of the oppressed. However, as Lorde mentions, the recognition of one's deepest cravings allows for alternative possibilities. More specifically, the music video highlights what's possible when one seeks the love and support of those who do enhance their futures.



Figure 8. Still from “Quarantine”. 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4u8zZm7r0gE>.

Towards the second half of the video, the group disperses and begins inaudibly mingling, conversing, and dancing. Among the crowd, Gyre makes eye contact with another version of himself, this time dressed in a purple collared shirt and long black trench coat. Soon after, he spots the third and final version of himself who wears a pink knee-length waistcoat paired with pink leggings. Gazing into the eyes of three different versions of himself, Gyre resolutely delivers the next verse of the song. Similar to the first verse, the lyrics of the second verse begin by detailing the painful road towards self-love:

Cuts that were deepened by words
Sliced through by murmurs
Severed by sermons
We were destined for the pits when we saw each other's iris
Try as we might, seemed so silly for us to fight it
(Gyre 2018)

In his description of the brutal physical and emotional distress enacted in the name of cis-hetero-normativity, Gyre highlights the violent ways that oppressive systems aim to lock marginalized communities in a perpetual state of lovelessness. He emphasizes the role of society and institutions such as the church in sustaining oppression. Describing this journey toward self-love as “destined for the pits,” these lyrics capture a pointed observation of the ways that dominant forces relentlessly demonize marginalized people for embracing difference. The video visualizes this moment of self-recognition as the lyrics are delivered during a heartfelt encounter between Gyre and himself:

The greatest thing about I see you is that I see you
Every breath I'm gasping for grasping to hold on to you

I don't worry about an inch or a strand on my hair
Between quarantine and your arms I'm in intensive care
(Gyre 2018)

For Gyre, the path to resistance means finding power and comfort in his truth and self-love. The multitudes of his truth are visually captured as Gyre comes face to face with distinct versions of himself, all representing a different fashioning of his identity. While oppressive logics would demand singularity, this depiction situates love as a dynamic and evolving feeling that welcomes multiplicity. This verse is reflective of Lorde's (1978) description of the moment "when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense" (90). The loving and committed relationship that Gyre has cultivated with himself lends itself to a community that mirrors this relationship.



Figure 9. Still from "Quarantine". 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4u8zZm7r0gE>.

"People always thought I was speaking about an external boy. I didn't have a boy in my life, I was the boy in my life. I was the boy I was loving...I finally looked in the mirror and I loved that person. It's me learning to love me in different forms."

- Gyre 2020

During the second chorus, the visuals center moments of joy as the group basks in community, dancing to their heart's desire. In other scenes, close-ups capture instances of romantic intimacy between different members of the group. The lyrics and visuals suggest that quarantine provides a safe space for love—and by extension healing—in all its forms and expressions. Lorde (1978) outlines various functions of the erotic, one of which is "providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them" (89). This function comes to life throughout the video as Gyre and the rest of the cast exude a shared joy made possible through

a safe space created for and by them. In the final scene of the video, Gyre stands across from the three different versions of himself and stares into the eyes of each version. Just before the screen goes black, Gyre walks toward them in an act that suggests a union between himself and his truth, a final homecoming of sorts.

In its prioritization of self-love and communal love, the music video resists dominant understandings of love as a means to harm or maintain hierarchies. Instead, this video unpacks what love looks like for those who have been deemed unlovable. It is in this depiction that love becomes an inherent and embodied experience of freedom. The video makes clear that freedom without a deliberate engagement with love is hollow as it is empty of a full commitment to self or community.

SET IT OFF ANALYSIS

In 2016, Andy released a two-track EP titled *Ndine Feelings*, which she briefly described on SoundCloud as “two songs that were inspired by [her] funny dealings with love interest/s or lack thereof, [her] wet dreams, the women [she] crush over and never get to do anything about it” (Mkosi 2017). On the first song of this EP, “Set It Off,” Mkosi raps over a mellow hip hop beat, divulging the details of the feelings she has for an unidentified lover. In 2017, Mkosi released a video to accompany the song, starring herself and Sandile Ndelu, a Black trans feminist and activist. Throughout the video, intimate moments between Ndelu and Mkosi are carefully and attentively captured. The visuals in collaboration with the laid-back production bring the viewer further into their world.

The video begins in silence, as the opening credits flash upon the screen, interspersed with brief clips offering a preview of the visuals to come. The first clip flashes a black and white closeup of two pairs of legs resting on a wrinkled sheet, as their feet gently rub against each other. In the second clip, the black and white footage shows two hands caressing each other, fingers gradually interlocking. These brief moments draw viewers into the ways that intimacy is explored through different variations of body language. The feelings that the two individuals have for each other come alive through their gentle and sensual interactions. This is further explored throughout the progression of the video as the camera continues to focus on different parts of their bodies with particular attention to how they use their bodies to comfort and affirm one another.

As the music begins, the visual narrative unfolds through a series of black and white closeup shots. The camera often lingers on different parts of their bodies, drawing the viewer further into the subtle details of their body language. Rarely does the music video depict a full body shot of either Mkosi or Ndelu. Instead, the camera offers a cropped view focusing on the details of their movements as their bodies interact. Although the power of the erotic is one which Lorde (1978) describes as deeply internal, she also emphasizes the ways that it comes to life as a shared experience. She describes the erotic as the “bridge” between the spiritual and the political—“those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within

each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings” (89). Throughout the video, a range of physical and emotional expressions are captured demonstrating the unwavering connection shared between the two protagonists.



Figure 10. Still from “Set It Off”. 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMRuPIgUXn0>.

One shot reveals a close-up of Mkosi’s hands as she tenderly runs her fingers through and embraces Ndelu’s dreadlocks. This gesture is reciprocated later in the video in a close up of Ndelu gently twisting Mkosi’s hair and caressing her arm. Much like the rest of the shots throughout the video, these moments only last for about three seconds before switching to another intimate shot. However, the details of the visuals make these shots feel longer as it draws viewers to the affectionate ways that they both handle each other’s hair. It is clear from the delicate and intentional ways they interact that this shared experience is one in which they are both equally and willfully engaged.

Another shot depicts a close-up of Mkosi’s hands wrapped around Ndelu’s waist as her fingers gently rub and caress her back. This visual coincides with the lyrics “Butterflies in my tummy this feeling is foreign,” further illustrating their chemistry. Throughout the video, this chemistry continues to be explored through poetic lyrics and endearing gestures. In one shot, the camera focuses in on Ndelu lying down on her back, inaudibly speaking, as her fingers intertwine with Mkosi’s. Later in the video, another angle of this shot quickly flashes by, offering a bird’s eye view of both Mkosi and Ndelu gazing into each other’s eyes.

Vulnerability is a key theme in the video. Throughout the entire piece, both of their bodies are mostly uncovered—Ndelu wears a black bra and black underwear while Mkosi wears a long-sleeved, black, mesh top and black underwear. Vulnerability is also depicted through the close-up shots which capture elements like their stretch marks, body fat, scars, and other fine details of their bodies. Not only are these features visible, but they are loved on, as demonstrated by their body language and interactions. It is in these moments that intimacy is created through vulnerability, as they let their guards down and intuitively explore each other's bodies. The lyrics continue painting this picture:

The four letter word has me lost for words
It's time for tongues untied
Call it a day retire in your arms
There's fire in my heart let's set it off (X2)
(Mkosi 2017)

Through a reference to the critically acclaimed Marlon Riggs documentary *Tongues Untied*, Mkosi describes her own submission to love. While *Tongues Untied* amplified the voices and experiences of Black gay men, Mkosi adapts the film title into her own lyrical wordplay as a declaration of letting love take its course. The theme of allowing love to take over continues throughout the chorus:

Now baby let's set it off (X2)
Now baby let's set it off in this lonely cold world
(Mkosi 2017)

As the chorus repeats itself, the visuals continue highlighting different sensual moments between Mkosi and Ndelu. In one of the shots, the camera slowly pans across their bodies as they lay on top of one another, skin to skin, rubbing and holding each other. The last shot captures a close up of Mkosi's face as she leans her head on Ndelu's shoulder. The camera slowly pans to the right, revealing a close up shot of Ndelu whose face looks just as blissful and content as Mkosi's.

"In South Africa, people have their defenses up all the time and so it makes it so much more difficult to be vulnerable and relate to another person...Freedom is to be vulnerable with other people and not feel like you need to guard yourself."

- Mbete 2020

The peace and comfort revealed through their facial expressions is reflective of another function of the erotic that Lorde (1978) outlines—an honoring of our ability to feel fully and deeply. She describes the erotic as an "open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy...a reminder of my capacity for feeling" (89). This quote speaks directly to the ways that dominant culture creates little to no space for marginalized people to access deep and sustained satisfaction. However, Lorde argues that the erotic functions not only as a reminder that such satisfaction is attainable but that it should be demanded in all elements of life.



Figure 11. Still from “Set It Off”. 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMRuPIgUXn0>.

Throughout the video, Mkosi’s and Ndelu’s full surrender to the satisfaction and joy of being in each other’s presence also serves as a resistance to oppressive forces that attempt to deny such expressions. During this peaceful moment between Mkosi and Ndelu in the final scene of the video, the chorus fades out with the repeated phrase, “This world is cold,” another reminder of the ways in which the world often fails to make room for the type of intimacies explored throughout this video.

In a Facebook post for *Vocal Revolutionaries*, Mkosi further explained the motivation behind creating the video for “Set it Off,” mentioning that she “wanted to be vulnerable in my nakedness and embrace my body... And while doing that, explore queer intimacies.” She added, “The intention was to break the whole ideology of tomboys only laying with feminine lesbians. Not only do I have a crush on Sandy, but I wanted to share in her energy. Sandy beams with confidence in her body, and that is a lovely energy to be around in this difficult society we exist in” (Mkosi, 2017). Mkosi’s intention with this video is clearly communicated through the lyrics, lingering frames, and body language which capture a vision of intimacy that is felt fully and with ease. The natural yet deliberate engagement between the two protagonists throughout the video speaks to what Lorde (1978) describes as the attentive and necessarily participatory nature of the erotic. She condemns the tendency to mindlessly engage the erotic without wholly honoring the power of both the self and the shared experience: “when we look away from ourselves as we satisfy our erotic needs in concert with others, we use each other as objects of satisfaction rather than share our joy in the satisfying, rather than make connection with our similarities and our differences” (91).

Throughout the video, Mkosi and Ndelu aren't interested in running away from vulnerability. Instead, they embrace it and leverage it to explore each other even further and strengthen their connection. It is through this genuine engagement with each other, that another understanding of freedom is rendered—the freedom to feel intimate joy and relief in the presence of another, especially in the face of a dominant culture which discourages anything of the sort for marginalized people.

LOVE CONCLUSION

Dominant conceptions of love and freedom are strategically intertwined to construct a message of equality. But ultimately, these narratives only end up reinforcing ideologies which justify oppression and demonize the oppressed. This is exemplified by the ways that these concepts have been woven into institutional rhetoric only for a closer look to reveal that the definitions of love and freedom that they are prioritizing center the most powerful members of society. This leaves marginalized communities to either attempt to assimilate to a narrative never intended to care for them or develop alternative narratives.

In “Quarantine” and “Set It Off,” Gyre and Mkosi offer distinct and impactful contributions to alternative depictions of the freedom that comes through loving. While Gyre takes viewers through the difficult yet rewarding journey toward self-love and the ways that it lends itself to community, Mkosi offers a window into an intimate space exploring what love looks like when it is at its most intentional and vulnerable. In their resistance of cis-heterosexist and patriarchal adaptations of love, these artists shed light on overlooked elements of love such as embracing difference, vulnerability, intimacy (platonic and/or romantic), community, and love of all variations of self.

(UN)BELONGING

Over the past few decades, the concept of belonging has been readily adapted into mainstream discourses around diversity and inclusion. In relation to a country, a school, the workplace, etc. belonging is often discussed as a top priority among dominant institutions with the alleged goal of making the “other” feel accepted. However, most marginalized people realize early on that these discourses of belonging actually refer to one's ability to assimilate to the socio-cultural norms of the society that they live in. Those who belong are those who fit or can be molded to fit within the realm of a society's criteria for normative citizenship.

“No one is actually telling us about the damage that apartheid has done and what we need to do to actually attain freedom in our everyday lives... People haven't spoken about the fact that I feel uncomfortable around certain spaces because I'm Black or queer.”

- Ndlovu 2020

Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) offers an analytical framework for the study of belonging, noting that for the politics of belonging, “The central question here is what is required from a specific person for him/her to be entitled to belong, to be considered as belonging, to the collectivity” (209). Furthermore, Yuval-Davis mentions that these requisites change according to the particular political project of the moment.

However, in addition to its adaptation into various political projects, belonging is also a feeling that people experience in ways that may be unrelated to the mainstream discourses helmed by the state. Thus belonging, similar to freedom, is simultaneously a dynamic political project constructed by the state as well as a sentimental and personal experience that cannot be simplified. For people in the margins, prioritizing liberation and their own personal sense of belonging also means resisting the politics of belonging wielded by institutions of the state which enable violence against marginalized communities.

This sentiment is reflected in Dionne Brand’s (2002) *A Map to the Door of No Return*, where she states “Belonging does not interest me. Once I thought that it did. Until I examined the underpinnings” (85). In a critical analysis of texts by Brand, Johanna X. K. Garvey (2011) cites this as she conceptualizes spaces of queer (un)belonging which she describes as “spaces that undo belonging while not leading to the destructive nature of not belonging” (758). According to Garvey, these spaces reject normative criteria of belonging and specifically in Brand’s work “shape a different relation to time and place” (760).

Belonging has been heavily incorporated into post-apartheid South African political vernacular, as demonstrated by the prevalence of the rainbow nation narrative. This proclaimed commitment to belonging is further captured in the nation’s progressive constitution which legally protects the rights of women and LGBTQ+ people. However, even in its constitutional effort to cultivate belonging, this political project of belonging still fails marginalized communities. This was echoed throughout the interviews that I conducted with the artists. During my sit-down with S’bonakaliso, he described the gap between constitutional rights and lived experiences mentioning, “South Africa is lucky in the sense that we have the rights on paper. But everyone will tell you the rights on paper don’t necessarily translate to rights in real life. And it’s kind of scary because for a country that has those rights why do we have one of the highest rates of deaths of queer people” (Gyre, 2020).

Although the post-apartheid political project of belonging claims to embrace and protect the most vulnerable communities, firsthand accounts from these communities suggest otherwise. As Yuval-Davis (2006) mentions, “some political projects of belonging can present themselves as promoting more open boundaries than they actually do” (209). While the progressive claims outlined in the South African constitution and in other mainstream discourses of belonging promote an ideal of widespread acceptance, this version of belonging is still measured by one’s ability to conform. According to Garvey (2011), queer (un)belonging exposes and rejects the cis-heteronormative standards of belonging and instead embraces a belonging that centers the experiences of the most marginalized.

In the following sections, I provide a close read of two pieces that engage the theme of belonging through music, visuals, and sound bites. In their intentional disruption of normative conceptions of belonging, these videos highlight the ways that (un)belonging can reveal a vision of freedom rooted in resistance and reclamation.

QUEENIE ANALYSIS

In 2015, copywriter Buyani Duma (aka Desire Marea) joined photographer Thato Ramais (aka Fela Gucci) to form FAKA, a collaboration which started out as a performance art duo but has now transformed into a “cultural movement” (FAKA 2015). Their manifesto is *Siyakaka*, a word which, according to Desire, means “We don’t owe anybody an apology. We will do what we want. Nobody will police our bodies” (Marea 2016). Their goal is to use art to normalize Black LGBTQ+ visibility in order to foster a culture that accepts and celebrates Black LGBTQ+ identities. In a presentation titled “*Siyakaka: A Healing Manifesto*,” Desire Marea situates FAKA as a “counter institution that is meant to shelter everybody who’s alienated by mainstream culture.” Marea goes on to say that “if we really wanted to make an impactful change on South African society at large, we would have to start by influencing culture” (Marea 2016). The importance of shifting culture as an entry point for freedom is echoed by Xavier Livermon (2012) who argues that “Black queers create freedom through forms of...cultural labor” (300).

The recurrent theme throughout FAKA’s art is the deliberate destabilization of heteronormative expressions of concepts such as freedom, sex, and belonging. One of the most recent examples of this can be seen in their music video entitled “Queenie,” released in 2018. Through music, visuals, and personal anecdotes communicated via voice notes, the video offers an unapologetic performance of queer (un)belonging with a focus on reclaiming spaces and concepts that have historically rejected LGBTQ+ people.

The first scene of the “Queenie” music video begins as the camera gradually zooms out to reveal what appears to be an old bookshelf decorated with porcelain dishes and multiple framed photographs of FAKA captured at different points throughout their career. The setting mirrors the inside of a living room — only in this case, pictures of a narrowly defined nuclear family are replaced with the visibly queer duo. This image is paired with the accompanying voice notes that overlay the beat as various LGBTQ+ people share how they came out to their families — an often intimidating and/or traumatic experience. Within the first 10 seconds, the video conveys the complex relationships that many LGBTQ+ people share with their biological families. Because of this, it is common for Black LGBTQ+ people to find community among one another in the formation of a new family of sorts.

This can be seen in Black and Latinx ballroom culture as houses are established not only to participate in drag competitions but also to support Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ youth who have been neglected by their biological families. In a study on the role of ballroom culture in constructing familial ties for the Black and Latinx queer community, Emily Arnold and Marlon

Bailey (2009) observe that “houses within the ballroom community constitute figurative, and sometimes literal, ‘homes’ for the diverse range of members involved in them” (174). The houses facilitate a new family structure that embraces and celebrates the range of Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ experiences, thereby redefining the cis-heteronormative standard of familial belonging.

Ballroom culture also serves as a response to the harmful discourse surrounding the HIV/AIDS crisis which has demonized people living with HIV/AIDS as a means to justify and perpetuate their oppression. Marlon Bailey (2009) details how this functions in a US context, critiquing “the public discourses of infection and the governmentalities that construct Black queer people as dysfunctional and dangerous, as nothing more than vectors of disease” (123). The spread of HIV/AIDS throughout Africa resulted in similar vilifying discourses resulting in the suppression of sexual agency particularly among marginalized communities such as women and LGBTQ+ people. On the subject of public discourses around HIV/AIDS in Africa, Patricia McFadden (2003) mentions that they “impose hegemonic notions of sexual behaviour and heterosexist expectations, while reinforcing the deeply embedded cultural taboos and claims that define sexual pleasure and freedom as ‘dangerous’ and ‘irresponsible’” (1).



Figure 12. Still from “Queenie”. 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LcpCBwqGIkk>.

The social, physical, and emotional violence that the state and society commit against marginalized genders creates a reality in which alternative spaces and communities are especially needed. Bailey (2009) argues that in the US, ballroom culture has offered an alternative experience, as it not only “facilitates HIV/AIDs prevention,” but it also “provides a space where a labor of care is performed to make members feel that they are part of a supportive social unit” (117-118). This function of ballroom culture is echoed by Treyvonne Moo, one of the founders of Le Grand Ball held in Johannesburg in 2019. In an interview for the South African outlet, *New Frame*, Moo mentions that they were inspired to organize the ball after one of their trans friends was assaulted at a gay club.

“I was like, ‘No, this cannot be a real thing, where gender non-conforming bodies just really, really do not have a space in the world.’ It shook me to my core. I was like I need to create a space where everybody – whatever your gender variant – has a place”

- (Collison 2019)

The video “Queenie” captures the essence of experiences such as Le Grand Ball and Vogue Night Jozi, which was founded in 2018 as South Africa’s first official ballroom event. While “Queenie” draws on many elements of US ballroom culture from the dress to the body movements, the depiction is adapted to the unique experiences of the Black South African LGBTQ+ community. In one scene, Desire and Fela appear identically dressed in elaborate white gowns paired with baggy leather pants. This scene is accompanied by a voice note which plays over the beat: “And I never really was given the luxury of discovering my sexuality I think at the age of three, I was told that I was gay” (FAKA, 2018). This is the reality for many Black LGBTQ+ people who are put into boxes before they themselves have the chance to decide who they are and how they want to present.

As Desire and Fela begin delivering the opening verse of the song in Zulu, they’ve turned a school auditorium into their stage, posing voguing and strutting through the room. The importance of utilizing this particular space is captured by Maneo Mohale who writes, “We watch them reclaim a school hall with their bodies, a space that remains deeply stifling to so many trans and queer children, in real time” (Mohale 2018). By reorienting this space to center their joy and self-expression, FAKA calls viewers’ attention to the failures of institutional claims of inclusion.



Figure 13. Still from “Queenie”. 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LcpCBwqG1kk>.

Through their fierce, feminine, and visibly queer performance in “Queenie,” FAKA creates a world where Black LGBTQ+ people are able to name their own experiences and freely explore their sexuality on their own terms. This is further demonstrated in the next few scenes where

FAKA is joined by various South African LGBTQ+ creatives and activists including Angel-Ho, DJ K-\$, and content creator/activist Glow Mami.

One scene shows the group gathered around a dining room table inside the same house from the opening scene. A voice note is followed by a buildup in the production: “But after I came out at the end of grade 10, I just started taking shit from no one” (FAKA, 2018). This voice note captures a poignant moment of queer (un)belonging, as it represents an abolishment of the longing to belong or be accepted by a normative culture that enables violence towards marginalized communities. Instead, this person has found a new confidence and sense of belonging which is captured visually throughout the scene.

“A lot of the time Black people don’t necessarily always communicate love verbally but they find different ways to say I love you through caring for you, cooking for you, gifting you clothing or making you clothing...gestures like that.”

- Mbeti 2020



Figure 14. Still from “Queenie”. 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LcpCBwqGIkk>.

Fela Gucci sits at the head of the dinner table wearing a gray mink hat, bold yellow and green earrings, along with a red dress and matching red gloves. The rest of the friends and family are also glamorously dressed, as they drink wine, eat food, take selfies, and dance to their heart’s desire. The electronic influenced beat grows in intensity as the celebration moves from the living room to the club. Filmed inside of Zer021 Social club, this lively party scene serves as a continued expression of Black LGBTQ+ joy. As the video comes to an end, multiple LGBTQ+ couples are depicted engaged in moments of romantic intimacy, mirroring the final scenes of Gyre’s “Quarantine,” which shares a similar theme of (un)belonging.

The video takes viewers through FAKA’s world where Black LGBTQ+ people are validated, cared for, and given the freedom to be their full selves. The voice notes scattered throughout the video serve as a reminder that such a world often comes at the price of experiencing the violence

of normative standards of belonging. The costs of being Black and LGBTQ+ are high—whether physical violence, social isolation, or economic disenfranchisement. However, in the midst of this there is also community, play, and care. In their disruption of heteronormativity, FAKA uses the video platform to showcase the joy of a belonging that isn't measured by normative ideals but one that is created through a deliberate reimagining of what belonging can look like.

IS'PHUKPHUKU ANALYSIS

In 2017, Sandiso Ngubane, more famously known as Mx Blouse, released their debut EP, “Believe in Bloom,” where they rap over 90s-inspired hip hop beats. Since then, they’ve been exploring different sounds, refusing to be bound by any singular genre. In a *TIMESLive* interview, Blouse spoke on their sonic development, saying they’re “incorporating lots more local influences—there’s a little bit of gqom, there’s a little bit of kwaito” (Tsotetsi 2018).

“People don’t quite know where to put me, how to categorize the music, how to categorize me as an artist..I don’t pay much attention to that I just do what I do”

- Mx Blouse, 2020

Blouse was initially hesitant to enter the music scene as they mention in an interview with Stefanie Jason, “I never felt like there was space there for me as someone who is neither cis or hetero. That’s one of the main reasons why, at almost 30, it’s taken me so long to decide ‘fuck it’” (Jason, 2017). Since making the decision to enter the music scene, Blouse has used their music to not only share their story but also empower marginalized identities.

This can be seen and heard in their music video for the single “Is’phukphuku,” a Zulu word which translates to idiot. Released in 2018, this song examines and challenges normative ideas of belonging for Black women, non-binary, and LGBTQ+ people through a reimagining of safe spaces.

In the first scene, Mx Blouse stands in the middle of a mall wearing a mini black one-shoulder dress made of the material used for winter coats. They wear a black couture church hat on their head, and a choker around their neck. Just as viewers are processing the intricacy and details of the outfit, the scene switches to another setting where Blouse is seen wearing a different yet equally unconventional outfit. This is a recurring feature of the video as Mx Blouse moves throughout different spaces either alone or joined by others, all expressing themselves differently through dress. In addition to the mall, Mx Blouse is seen walking and/or dancing in a beauty supply store, a hair salon, a fast-food restaurant, a corner store, and a club. Johanna Garvey (2011) argues that queer unbelonging “can accommodate multiple identities and respond to normative attitudes that rely on racism and other forms of violent categorisation” (759). This is captured in the video as Mx Blouse places marginalized bodies in spaces that have historically not been welcoming.

During my interview with Blouse, they mentioned that the decision to showcase these types

of settings was intentional: “In the video I’ve got so many different bodies being themselves in spaces that you typically wouldn’t find them. There’s a lot of violence that comes with that. It was interesting to take these bodies as they are, as they like expressing themselves and putting them in a fish and chips shop. I don’t want to limit myself in how I express myself” (Mx Blouse 2020). Through this depiction, Mx Blouse presents a narrative that actively unravels the meaning of belonging in these spaces.



Figure 15. Stills from “Is’phukphuku”. 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lt2zRiyyzyY>.

Xavier Livermon (2012) argues that the “cultural labor of visibility occurs when black queers bring dissident sexualities and gender nonconformity into the public arena” (300). By exploring the presence of non-conforming bodies taking up everyday spaces, this video challenges heteronormative representations of the public sphere and reaffirms Black LGBTQ+ belonging in any space they choose to enter. This sentiment is also expressed in the lyrics as Blouse raps, “Times, they are changing/ It’s a revolution/ When someone like me has your ears when I speak” (Mx Blouse, 2018). The lyrics and the visuals work in tandem to celebrate the voices and visibility of Black LGBTQ+ and gender nonconforming people in spaces they have historically been denied access to.



Figure 16. Still from “Is’phukphuku”. 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lt2zRiyyzpyY>.

The final verse of the song is rapped in both English and Zulu as Mx Blouse tells the story of a woman who turns down a man offering to buy her a drink. The man proceeds to call the woman a “bitch,” demonstrating the often aggressive reactions that women face when they reject men’s advances.

He offers her drinks/ She doesn’t want it
She thanks him and leaves/ Now he’s here talking shit
He calls her a bitch just ’cause he couldn’t stick it
(Mx Blouse 2018)

While the man’s reaction challenges a woman’s right to say no, Blouse acknowledges her agency, highlighting her independence and freedom to do what she wants, when she wants, and how she wants:

She couldn't be bothered/ She's got her own cheese
Got her own wheels/ And she only smokes weed
Her IQ is mental/ He couldn't compete
Um'thatha kancane/ 'Cause she loves to party
It don't even matter how she makes her money
Just don't be a dick and she might let you in
(Mx Blouse, 2018)

On the importance of the second verse, Mx Blouse mentioned, "The second verse of that song is about that and watching the anxiety that my female friends go through in party spaces...you just see how being there as a female body can be stressful. That track was about safe spaces and what that looks like" (Mx Blouse, 2020).



Figure 17. Still from "Is'phukphuku". 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lt2zRiypY>.

Read in conversation with the lyrics of the second verse, Blouse's comment gestures to the limitations and threats that come along with dominant understandings of belonging, particularly for bodies identified as women or LGBTQ+. What does it mean to belong in a space that threatens violence against those who don't meet the requirements of normative identity performance? Rather than shrinking identities to fit these requirements, this video offers a glimpse into what it looks like to celebrate full expression and have ownership over everyday spaces.

Throughout the video, Mx Blouse is joined by a range of people joyously dancing along with them in celebration of their ability to live and express themselves in spaces and ways that are not dictated by others. This is communicated through their free and improvised body movements

and by the last phrase of the final verse: “Just let all the kids live their lives how they wanna” (Mx Blouse, 2018).

Similar to “Queenie,” this video is simultaneously a challenge of dominant conceptions of belonging and an exploration of (un)belonging as a form of resistance to oppression. Through its subversive and creative use of public spaces, the video works to undermine heteronormative structures that dictate who is allowed to exist freely in certain places. For three and a half minutes, the video takes viewers into a world where heteronormativity takes a backseat and non-normative identified bodies are able to move throughout the world openly and unharmed. However, reality fails to reflect the world created in “Is’phukphuku.” Thus, the video serves as a representation of what could be rather than what currently is. In the tradition of Kwaito musicians of the 90s, Mx Blouse uses their art to navigate the new possibilities of freedom in post-apartheid South Africa, in this case through reenvisioning the meaning of belonging.

CONCLUSION

When I initially started working on this paper, I hoped to explore the conversations around freedom in post-apartheid South Africa that deviated from mainstream discourses. While I already had a general knowledge about the important dates, figures, and legislative milestones that are associated with freedom in South Africa, I knew that the more reflective experiences and imaginations of freedom existed in the lives of the people on the ground. Since these experiences aren’t centered in the national narratives that dominate freedom conversations, I looked to the sectors of society where overlooked perspectives have an opportunity to thrive.

Art seemed like a natural place to begin as it is a dynamic medium that prioritizes personal experiences and encourages self-expression. Through centering the works of marginalized artists who came of age in the early years of post-apartheid South Africa, I hoped to glean meanings of freedom that go beyond the fixed, flattened narratives that are easily incorporated into dominant political vernaculars. In this process of looking critically at artwork and engaging directly with multidisciplinary artists, I was able to identify central themes through which alternative understandings of freedom are conveyed. Identity, love and belonging/(un)belonging, as explored throughout the videos analyzed in this article all reveal different yet interrelated layers of freedom.

The videos for “Magic Man” and “Messy” center the freedom experienced through directly challenging hegemonic structures of identity. In their depiction of characters who refuse to be wholly defined by the identity categories imposed on them, Umlilo and Bonolo Kavuula emphasize the power to create multifold identities that aren’t bound to or limited by oppressive standards. While identity plays a role in all of the videos mentioned in this piece, these particular videos poignantly craft narratives around identity that unpack meaningful elements of freedom.

In “Quarantine” and “Set It Off,” Gyre and Andy Mkosi use their works to engage different adaptations of love which ultimately resist mainstream notions of love rooted in hierarchies,

violence, and the exclusion of marginalized people. The importance of self-love, communal love, and romantic love is communicated throughout different moments in the videos demonstrating love's multiple functions in fostering freedom. Furthermore, these pieces highlight the overlooked importance of the personal and the interpersonal as political experiences that contribute immensely to meanings of freedom.

Finally, in “Queenie” and “Is’phukphuku,” FAKA and Mx Blouse expose the social and physical violence associated with the concept of belonging for those who don’t meet normative expectations. However, rather than recreating traumatizing experiences that speak to this reality, these videos focus on the reclamation of different spaces in an effort to refuse traditional notions of belonging and breathe new life into the power of (un)belonging. Without ignoring the consequences of (un)belonging, these videos highlight a persistent commitment to the freedom possible through a belonging that centers the needs and joy of those who have been consistently targeted and exploited.

All of these themes come alive in the videos in the form of multisensory experiences as the artists draw on sonic and visual elements to tell their stories. While I chose to explore identity, love, and belonging as separate themes in the videos, these concepts speak to and through each other in all of the videos. Their interconnectedness reveals another facet of freedom: it cannot be experienced or understood in isolation despite aims to decontextualize it. Meanings of freedom that uplift mainstream narratives, but gloss over the nuanced experiences of those who are targeted by the system in intricate and related ways, fail to fully expose the harm that existing systems continue to inflict. In the process, themes related to freedom are limited and manipulated by the state to continue painting an image that best serves state interests under the guise of serving the interests of the people.

An analysis of the ways that non-binary, LGBTQ+ and women artists explore meanings of freedom in their work must also consider the diverse pasts and presents—known and unknown—that are actively shaping these conversations. Artists and activists such as Brenda Fassie, Lebo Mathosa, Zanele Muhole, and Simon Nkoli came up throughout my interviews as just a few of the many South Africans that form the living legacy of those who dared to envision and embody meanings of freedom that didn’t hold back.

Another contextual factor that can’t be overlooked is the influence of different movements and political moments that have evolved in the post-apartheid era in response to state violence. From the protests that broke out in response to the Marikana Massacre of 2012 to the rise of #FeesMustFall in 2016, there are a number of national and grassroots movements that encapsulate the persistent and multifaceted struggles toward freedom. The energy and experiences of these movements are captured in the art that comes out of them. Furthermore, all of the art produced by marginalized multidisciplinary artists exists against the backdrop of the many lives known and unknown that have been stolen by the state and by a society who targets and exploits minoritized communities as a means to uphold hierarchies.

This paper has demonstrated that meanings of freedom are just as diverse and complex as the people experiencing “freedom” on the ground. Therefore, the work presented in this paper can be expanded into many different directions. For example, while it focused on the implications of racism and cis-heterosexism on dominant narratives around freedom, future inquiries could conduct a more thorough analysis on the intersecting role of ableism and classism. This work exists within a larger legacy of research endeavors centering marginalized multidisciplinary artists to unpack political concepts that have been manipulated and controlled by the state. It is my hope that continued efforts to reevaluate concepts such as freedom through the perspectives of those on the ground will lead to more honest and nuanced reflections on the world we live in and the world we want to create.

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