

# Drinking from Our Own Wells Endarkened Feminist Epistemology as Praxis in a Persistent Economy of Lack

Part of Living with Ghosts: Legacies of Colonialism and Fascism

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**Installation view:** *Speculative Inquiry #1 (On Abstraction)*, curated by Nkule Mabaso. Photo: Cassandra Jacobs. Courtesy of Michaelis Galleries, University of Cape Town.

The basis of this presentation will draw from a current project which Nontobeko Ntombela and I are currently working on, provisionally titled *The Painterly Tradition and Black Women*. The project stems from Nontobeko's long-term research into feminist positions in contemporary South African art, as exemplified through her research on the historical positions of Gladys Mgudlandlu and Valerie Desmore,<sup>1</sup> and my own projects which set out to complicate and trouble the persistent absence of black women artists. Together we endeavour to produce intergenerational research into black (understood in the broad term as per Steve Biko) female artists in South Africa, in order to articulate other frameworks as well as reconfigure the concepts and spaces which continue to support exclusion. Here, I will engage our knowledge focuses and how these inform our 'theorising' and doing as black African women. Our positionality is prompted by feminist and postcolonial revisions of knowledge production which raise questions concerning black women's

1. Ntombela, Nontobeko Mabongi. 2013. 'A Fragile Archive: Refiguring | Rethinking| Reimagining | Re-presenting Gladys Mgudlandlu' (master's thesis). University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

history and its representation, primarily in the aesthetic and experimental ways of the expanded field of artistic practice.

The project is a gesture towards exploring and theorising aesthetic questions from black female points of view (note the plural), which particularly address the fact that presently there is not a single volume dedicated to the painterly contributions of black women in South Africa. Our contribution is instead about inclusive representation and creating another historiography of painterly traditions of modernist and contemporary black women artists. It is seen as having epistemic importance in terms of reworking the past, focusing efforts on unveiling repressed women histories in ways that are both critical and formally experimental; our project is centred on 'South African women's subjectivities and forms of agency and their futurity'.

Patricia McFadden gave a speech at the University of Pretoria on 'thought leadership' titled 'African Thought Leadership: Writing as/for Resistance'.<sup>2</sup> She spoke about two features of writing: writing as process and writing as being. Her breakdown of these two terms offers a methodology towards writing as a revolutionary choice and revolutionary practice. Of particular interest to me are McFadden's thoughts on writing as being. She positions 'writing as being' as an embodied expression premised on attachments and which can occupy a space of resistance to unequal and exploitative systems and practices: for example, writing and speaking against normativity. She says, 'I insist upon my individuality and my particularities – as a female, intellectual, writer ...'<sup>3</sup> This insistence of writing as resistance applies to patriarchal claims which subjugate women to gendered normativity.

Such a moment of encounter became one of self-reflection on my own practice of writing, a consideration of what it is that I'm really doing with my writing and related practices. Cynthia Dillard's *The Substance of Things Hoped for, the Evidence of Things Not Seen: Examining an Endarkened Feminist Epistemology in Educational Research and Leadership* also becomes an anchoring text for me in the ways it lays out how feminists of colour have chosen to 'construct theory as a political agenda for achieving social justice rather than only engaging in intellectual debates that deconstruct existing paradigms'.<sup>4</sup> As a framework, endarkened feminist epistemologies theorises a social science that refuses to sidestep African women's perspectives. And as a corrective to conceptual quarantining of black (African and African diasporic) feminist thought, Dillard offers a framework that helps to legitimate the languages, discourses, challenges, unique perspectives, divergent life experiences and intersecting oppressions and privileges of African women and girls.

In my own writing as a method of enquiry, my stance and voice as researcher does not pretend to be neutral and objective but is attached to this subjectivity and performs an advocating role. For example, my recent project *Speculative Inquiry #1 (On Abstraction)* is an exercise of writing about the exhibition which recently opened at the Michaelis Galleries, University of Cape Town. As the title states it is a speculative, non-exhaustive reconsideration of abstraction through the practices of living black women artists. The project sits in relation to another recent exhibition *Assessing Abstraction* at the Iziko Museums of South Africa in Cape Town, curated by Hayden Proud. Promotional material of that exhibition reads:

2. McFadden, Patricia. 2017. 'African Thought Leadership: Writing as/for Resistance', *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* 10, no. 2 (April): [thabombekiafricanleadershipinstitute.blogspot.com](http://thabombekiafricanleadershipinstitute.blogspot.com) (last accessed 29 August 2019).

3. Ibid.

4. Dillard, Cynthia. 2006. *The Substance of Things Hoped for, the Evidence of Things Not Seen: Examining an Endarkened Feminist Epistemology in Educational Research and Leadership*. State University of New York, Albany NY.

**As the scratchings on the 70,000-year-old Blombos ochre reveal, non-figurative mark-marking long predates the very notion of "art" itself. While abstraction's "invention" in the early twentieth century by the European avant-garde is now being celebrated, its traditions are ancient. Resisted in colonial South Africa, and belatedly accepted as part of the "international" mainstream of modern art, disillusionment later arose as to its political relevance. Despite this, many artists persisted with abstraction as an expression of personal and spiritual freedom.**

On my visit an assessment of the exhibition confirmed:

1. The exhibition had no artworks on display by black women artists, perhaps this is a reflection of the gaps in the collection of the National Gallery – I can't not venture to say.
2. When the works were attributed to ethnic people the captions refer to 'maker unknown', this too likely speaks to the collection policies and the history of the gallery.
3. But most problematically, the premise of the exhibition connects abstraction (in the African sense) with the distant past of rock art, etc., perhaps this is what justifies and qualifies the inclusion of objects by 'unknown makers' of 'unknown origin'.

Similarly, in the survey exhibition *Abstract South African Art from the Isolation Years* which took place as three annual iterations from 2007–09 at Smac Gallery in Cape Town, curated by Marilyn Martin, former director of the South African National Gallery, you could not find one work by a black woman artist – even though Esther Mahlangu was active and working within this period. The point is, South African art history and contemporary practices in painting are disproportionately biased and make it appear as though black South African women have made no contribution to the material expansion of painting as a genre – when it comes to the mounting of an exhibition on abstract art in South Africa the practices of black women artists just don't seem to make the cut.

In light of these and other absences which black women face, there are efforts performed to fill these apparent voids through attempts that 'dig up examples of worthy or insufficiently appreciated women artists throughout history; and "rediscover" forgotten female practitioners and make out a case for them'.<sup>5</sup>

5. Nochlin, Linda. 1988. 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays*,

But as worthwhile as this exercise may be, it is necessarily flawed since it seemingly has done nothing to question the assumptions lying behind the persistent obscurity and continued institutional and historical omission of black women. There can be no other way of writing this when we consider that black female practices in the arts are fundamentally embedded in a context that has challenged their very right to exist, resulting in the 'economy of lack' of black women in the art-historical canon. The contradiction of addressing the 'question' of black women and their attendant 'absences' falsifies the nature of the issue and tacitly reinforces negative stereotypes presented as simple 'reflections of reality', when in fact they are 'ideologically or culturally constructed'.<sup>6</sup> For example, the absence of black women artists and their work is actually a problem of working in an environment in which the life experiences and traditions of black producers in general are not recognised.

*Speculative Inquiry #1 (On Abstraction)* then positions living black women artists foremost and considers the potential contribution their practices and work make to the study and visual language of abstraction. The works on show may for the most part still be read as painterly, but by complicating the material concern and thereby stretching abstraction's modernist connection beyond 'traditional' concepts around painting the exhibition expands the reach of the framework to incorporate practices which a narrow framing might otherwise invalidate.

## Who Writes the Future

Given this backdrop, how do the knowledges that we choose to focus on then inform our theorising and doing as black African women? Perhaps by focusing on the conceptual frameworks of womanist, feminist and Indigenous studies, which are theoretically aligned to African womanism and existential phenomenology, we can begin to consider how the ideas and the work of women who have been silenced may be reclaimed in ways that shift the assumptions of how we come to know as well as how knowledge is shaped. Making this move means exposing the fragility of a knowledge assembly. It involves the question of ethics: What is involved in modes of telling? What are the sensory and affective responses to the material production of research? What are the forms of violence committed in narrating the stories of 'absent' others? It also requires a responsive methodology that unsettles assumptive modalities involved in the practices of research and writing, which are commensurable with ethical action and the temporal relation between ethics and epistemology.

Since we are not interested in debunking and deconstructing existing paradigms, how then do we put ourselves in our own texts and with what consequences? In the project that Nontobeko and I are embarking on, its framing touches on the writing of feminist accounts of 'excluded voices' as essentially flawed. But it is also about how these voices may be rescued by Dillard's theorising of the need not to deconstruct existing paradigms but to actually work on the construction of an alternative historiography of practices.

Nontobeko is a researcher and art historian based in the art history department at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Her restaging in 2012 of Mgudlandlu's first commercial exhibition at the *Contact* magazine boardroom in

Westview Press, Boulder CO, pp. 147–58: [writing.upenn.edu](http://writing.upenn.edu) (last accessed 29 August 2019).

6. Mabaso, Nkule. 2017. 'On Black Women's Creativity and the Future Imperfect: Thoughts, Propositions, Issues,' *Arena for Contemporary African, African American and Caribbean Art*, [africanah.org](http://africanah.org) (last accessed 29 August 2019).

Cape Town in 1961 drew on curatorial and exhibition practices to navigate Mgudlandlu's archive, both the material of public acclaim and the lack of its positioning within histories of South African art. Besides the use of art-historical provenance to recuperate details of the works in the original exhibition, her effort involved locating unrecognised and unheralded works which had either dispersed or were long out of circulation. She coupled these with the work by Desmore. It is 'extraordinary' that these two artists managed to have their ideas and production preserved and yet they remained absent from the art histories of South Africa, bearing the contradictions of a canon which relegates such work to the margins.

What Nontobeko and I are trying to find out together is why such biographies and accounts are persistently missing from the art-historical landscape. Our crucial question has become, what is it that maintains this marginal positionality? We regard this project as having political importance as a work of transmission, which speaks through historical narratives to tenderly bring forward 'new' historical figures and to position current practitioners within a historically grounded continuum.

By way of concluding, I ask, how do we nurture our individuality and at the same time lay claim to 'knowing' something shared? My engagement with feminist methodological strategies is specifically related to working with intersecting feminist and postcolonial critiques and approaches that call attention to the ways in which erasures can occur to the specificities of subjects and their particular bodies. I would like to draw again from McFadden who points out that it is the male writer who is projected into the future as a knower, the position where theory lies quintessentially. Women generally, and women who write in particular, are largely relegated to the margins of writing, textuality, narration, knowledge creation and retrieval. If research and writing remain in this masculinist hegemonic thinking space, we will not see or be enriched by the various communities that make up the diversity of worldviews.

My recent realisation is that by drinking from our own wells and asserting the validity of our own ways of knowing and being in resistance to the intensifying hegemony of mainstream epistemology, one can begin to build new reference points to positively construct narrative forms. This means that as long as we are not dictating the questions and how the questions are to be written and responded to, we will remain within this economy of lack brought on by Anglo-European cosmology and an epistemology which refuses to expand to accommodate other worlds, other knowledges, other ways of knowing beyond tokenism.

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