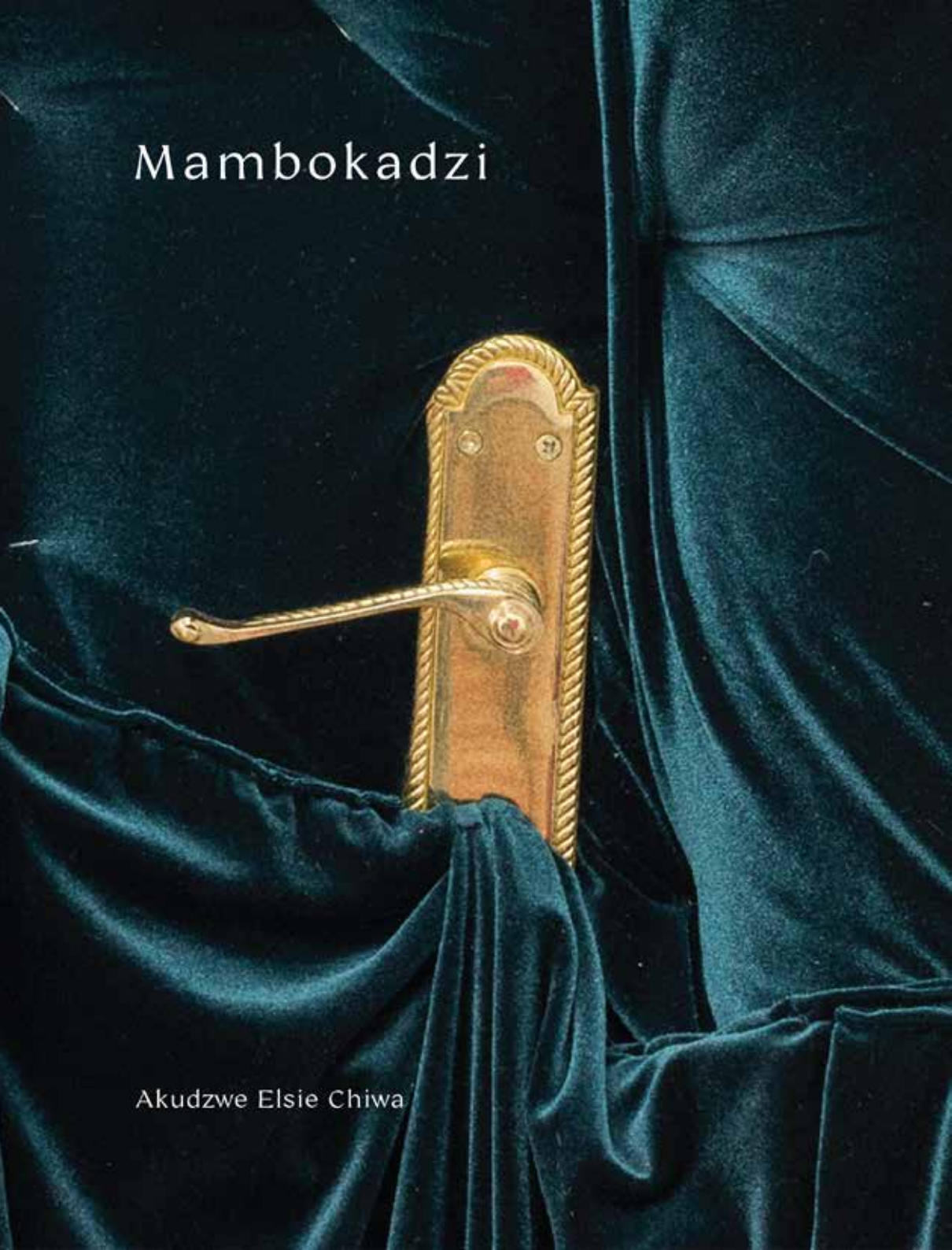
Mambokadzi



Akudzwe Elsie Chiwa

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For the ones who live in the rivers and the seas.

"Aive Madziva ave Mazambuko"
'What once where rivers and lakes are now bridges and paths.'
-A chiKaranga/Shona Proverb

University of Cape Town
Michaelis School of Fine Art

MFA Research Paper

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Sculpture

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MAMBOKADZI

Akudzwe Elsie Chiwa CHWAKU001

A dissertation submitted in *fulfillment* of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Fine Art

Faculty of the Humanities

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature:_____ Date:_____

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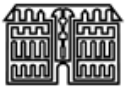

Michaelis School *of* Fine art

Abstract

Mambokadzi is built around the stories of my matrilineal histories and centred on the intimate space in which my grandmother, mother and I exist. It also seeks to recognize the collective space of Black womxn through an exploration of the royal ancestral spirit Nehanda who instigated the first Chimurenga (resistance-struggle) of 1896-97. This space is one tainted by colonial and patriarchal trauma, yet concurrently subverts colonial ideas of gender, particularly the feminine. *Mambokadzi* is intended to embody a decolonial idea of gender and femininity. In this collective space, womxn have consciously and unconsciously cultivated power within the confines of patriarchy, masculinity and coloniality. Through sculpture, I interrogate learned perceptions about gender and reflect on experiences of womxn in my family as a way to discuss womxnhood in Southern Africa and the diaspora broadly.

Introduction

Mambokadzi is a Shona term that is used to address a womxn in a position of power. Directly translated, *Mambokadzi* means woman king/leader/chief/spiritual leader. In this project, I probe the power dynamics within my matrilineal family as well as generational trauma in Zimbabwe in the period 1896 to the present. I focus on the home, or, as bell hooks (1990) terms it, the "homeplace", as a site of affirmation and the locus for the articulation of identity. I do this through a body of intuitive sculptural works created from narrative recollection/memory and experience. The works reference contemporary discourse, including Black feminist theory, as well as religion and spirituality, in order to navigate a decolonial afro-feminist identity and explore ways in which gender and gender roles have been constructed in the post-independence era in southern Africa. In using the term *Mambokadzi*, I am alluding to the repressed violence that is inherent in the silencing of the herstories[1] of the womxn within my ancestral collective so as to better understand the power dynamics of womxn within current southern African societies. By referring to my matrilineal herstories, homeplace and oral recollections to create a visual language, I seek to navigate the complexities of womxnhood. I locate myself in relation to my ancestral embodied knowledges to deconstruct what is known, in a bid to make space for what is lost and/or unknown of my ancestral history so as to better navigate my present and future.

The homeplace, as a spatial and psychosocial concept, can be regarded as an empowering site in which Black womxn can affirm their identities and value. The concept of homeplace marks the domestic home as a sanctuary, through domestic objects, materiality and aesthetics. Reflections on the herstories of *Mambokadzi* therefore necessitate a conscientious engagement with the homeplace. The feminist scholar, bell hooks (1990), defines the

1 I expand on herstories in the section on femininity, narrativity and herstory.

homeplace as a site where resistance can be articulated, not just through the objects found in the home but in how Black womxn have constructed a space where generations of people have found affirmation and safety and been rejuvenated from the oppressive nature of being Black in a Euro-American and discriminatory society. Although the domestic space has been seen as confining for womxn (Young, 2005), it is also regarded as the space where Black subjectivities can be affirmed.

It is from this familial space that one has the first experience of community, where rules of conduct, behaviour and positionality are enforced. It is a microcosm – a space that reflects the broader society – and, in order to understand the collective, it is necessary to understand the intimate domestic spaces. The homeplace exists in a paradigm of push and pull where womxn learn to survive patriarchy by first learning how to navigate their most immediate community, the familial home. Applying hooks' (1990) theory to my experience, I critique the oppressive nature of the domestic space, but I also revalue it as a sphere of subversion, security (as in safety), privacy and self-affirmation, especially considering how it functions in Zimbabwe and by extension in the southern African arena. I elaborate on this in the section, "Home – Gender and Domestic Spaces".

In thinking about Black womxn and space, I began with the multiple meanings of words that evoke what womxn are within Shona-ChiKaranga[2] cultures, as well as how different forms of the word evoke multiple interpretations and contexts of use between the practical and spiritual. The word for "girl" in Shona is *musikana*. In Zimbabwe, womxn manage self-owned mini markets that one would find on the side of the road or outside of a supermarket where womxn mostly sell home- grown and home-made goods. This space is called *musika*. It roughly translates to

2 Shona is a group of dialects spoken in large parts of Zimbabwe. ChiKaranga is a sub-dialect of Shona spoken mostly within the Masvingo Province of Zimbabwe.

"a place where I sell things I have made/created." When cooking *sadza*[3], the staple food source of Zimbabwe, the second and most important stage is when one whisks away the bubbles of dry mealie meal that form when the porridge boils (*kukwata*), the cooking stick used for that stage is (like the market space) also called a *musika*. In this usage the term is therefore associated with the process of creating food and giving life. Perhaps from similar etymological roots, the name for God within the Shona cultures is "Musikavanhu"- the creator of people. When deciphering the language, one finds that *musikana*, the word for girl, roughly links to the process of creation and also to that of space. This hints at a space and time in which the roles and positions of womxn were not always dependent on what they can/could achieve within the confines of domesticity and patriarchy.

My previous work done in 2018 for my Bachelor of Fine Art degree informs my current practice through the use of oral recollections and transgenerational embodied knowledges. I have consistently referred to the home environment as a gendered space that reflects the position of womxn; at times through objects and cloth that reinforce and define the place of a womxn. I play with the idea of the homeplace and its gendered nuances to critique the space in which womxn exist. I use fabric/cloth and objects associated with domestic spaces to engage with the gendering of spaces, places and things in the form of multiple sculpted works.

This body of work is created as a realm in which different forms of feminine power are negotiated in the homeplace. My aim is to elicit responses to the conception of intersectional spaces. Here, I consider how positionality, femininity and spirituality question prevailing ideas about power, access and leadership. Using found objects associated with my personal experiences (both intimate and collective), such as wood, stone and fabric, to explore the positionality of womxn, I refer to the daily

3 The type of stiff porridge (pap) eaten in Zimbabwe.

performances of womxn in the homeplace (looking after, maintaining, mending and nurturing); the spirituality associated with feminine structures of power; and the objectification of the feminine through the reduction of the important practical space they hold. I pay close attention to elements that are associated with femininity and spirituality through the process of abstraction and bricolage. I engage with the process of intuitive artmaking as an element of embodied knowledge.

The use of fabric in my work is informed by my mother and grandmother, particularly in how they worked as seamstresses, using cloth to cover our bodies as well as objects and the domestic space. Within the collective Shona cultures, fabric is a meaningful gift and has cultural significance. Love is expressed through the exchange of cloth/clothes, as a sign of engagement or affection. Spaces in which one loves, or experiences love, are characterized by nostalgia for particular kinds of cloth. The covering of objects, such as couches, chairs, television sets, tables and toilets, was a form of protection and care and also an aesthetic statement. My use of velvet is a considered form of care. Growing up, my mother prized her clothes treating them in higher regard than all her garments. She used protective covering for the velvet couches and kept her velvet clothes in garment bags. It represented comfort, aesthetic and lifestyle. Fabric allows me to tell stories about trauma through care and consideration.

This is echoed in my work through the tufting of upholstery and the articulation of drapery. In the Shona languages, words for cloth and material are *jira* and *mucheka*. *Jira* also means blanket (something to cover with) and *mucheka* alludes to the process of cutting, or something that cuts, or something you cut.

Throughout my creative work, I have explored biographical elements of my life, as a means of healing personal and inherited traumas. I have used hair, fabric and found objects to investigate the memory of events in

my life so as to understand who I am, which I see as a way to discover where I came from and hopefully inform where I am going. While working with these materials, I found that they evoked traces of trauma and could be seen as conveyors of intangible knowledge that is reflective of my experiences within the sensory environment that I grew up in. The processes of working with materials (cloth, synthetic hair and found objects) that I have used came from my memory – they are skills I learnt from my community and/or family. In general, my work is driven by a yearning to understand my surroundings in a quest to uncover individual and collective trauma so as to better understand who I am and how to navigate the present.

My grandmother would always say to me: *"Ziva kwaunobva kwaunoenda"* (you must know where you are coming from so that you understand where you are going). This phrase has remained with me over the years. Although I carry the trauma of my matrilineal ancestors, I also inherit their strength and their stories. As I begin to understand trauma and its destructive nature if left unchecked, I am exploring processes of gendering power. It is imperative that I know my ancestral narratives and the erased herstories of powerful womxn. Understanding them enables me to create a framework for navigating a decolonial, afro-feminist identity. I anchor this concept in the theories of feminist scholars, such as bell hooks, Oyeronke Oyewumi, Ifi Amadiume, Josephine Beoku-Betts and Wairimu Ngaruiya Njambi, whose ideas have guided me in understanding this identity and narrativity in *Mambokadzi*.

In creating this body of work, I had discussions with my mother and grandmother in order to unearth the narratives that formulate the essence of *Mambokadzi*. The layering of the stories, herstories and perceptions is what informs my work and my identity. I seek to recuperate oral herstories and engage with suppressed herstories in a visual language that is as dynamic as the culture of storytelling within the context of

Shona cultures. Storytelling, within the Shona-ChiKaranga perspective, is as layered as the language itself. The stories play with the multiple meanings of the words; the adoption of the different Shona dialects; and the intention of the story and its teller. My creative approach is based on the collation of narratives and the resonance of those narratives with familiar objects in response to a silencing of documented history. The objective is to engage with questions about spirituality and gender and their dual and hybridised existence as a way to inform or understand how to navigate politics and positionality in a post-independence Zimbabwe using the homeplace and familial herstories.

I engage with the constructed nature of history (time) and the ways in which narratives of womxn subvert a single-hero model of history. As a *medium* hosted by many bodies, Nehanda's spirit enables me to find the textured, tangled narratives of womxn in my family. Her essence redefines and exists beyond the construct of feminism and stands alone as an entity that represents the strength of womxn in a construct that is not subjected to, defined by, or policed by colonial ideas of gender, position and power. In Shona mysticism the spirit of the struggle is signified by a womxn. The physical embodiment of struggle was a womxn; a grand matriarch. *Mambokadzi*, as a concept, hones in on the collective dynamics of feminist existence within the context of the African homeplace. Likewise, struggle has been a part of my life and that of my matrilineal ancestors.

Mbuya Nehanda - The spirit of the struggle

My connection to Mbuya Nehanda comes as a very distant clan relation. I grew up listening to songs about Mbuya Nehanda. I grew up around *their* spirit – here and elsewhere, the use of the plural "their" is deliberate, in acknowledgement of the plurality of Nehanda's existence which is not defined by the confines of their corporality. I saw and felt their spirit in the womxn in my spaces and in their stories. As a child I remember being enthralled by their story. It allowed me to imagine more than the space that I occupied. I saw my mother and grandmother in Mbuya Nehanda's story and as I became older and more aware of my position in society, I began to question the collective space of Zimbabwean womxn and why it didn't resemble or command the same reverence as the space in which Mbuya Nehanda existed.

Mbuya Nehanda is and was a Mhondoro, one of the most powerful ancestral lion spirits within Shona spirituality. The Mhondoro are spirits who have a direct line to Mwari/Musikavanhu – the creator of all within Shona spirituality. The spirit of Nehanda manifests itself in times of great struggle and only appears to womxn of great strength. In oral recollections, the first Nehanda is said to have been a womxn who equalled her brother in strength, wealth and influence. Drawing from Beach (1998), her existence and what she represents compels me to question the positionality, suppressed roles and history of womxn within the dynamics of gender, power and leadership within Zimbabwe.

Nehanda's narrative brings to light the importance of womxn within the politics of power and the context in which the dynamics of afro- femininity exist. This spirit represents a femininity that extends beyond the confines of domestic space and patriarchal expectations. Their narrative has become integral to my engagement with personal narratives, including those of the womxn in my own family, especially in relation to the notion of transcendence. Transcendence, in my work, denotes the importance of embodied knowledges from our own herstories as legitimate forms that we can still use to counteract colonial erasure and concurrently rebuild, repurpose and restructure old knowledges so as to cultivate new and decolonised identities.

Mhondoro Musango[4] *2020*
faux velvet, satin, lace and pinewood
76cm x 67 cm x 20cm

4 Translation: Royal Ancestral spirit in the forest/wilderness

I grew up in a matricentric household that had a dual and hybridised idea of power, position and gender roles/identity. While my grandmother was the leader of the household her power would at times be limited by a pervasive patriarchy. This duality of leadership is a key element in my work. For example, *Mhondoro Musango* 2020 represents the collective space of my ancestral stories. Satin, velvet and lace are durable but delicate materials. The wilderness and nature are no place for the delicate, and yet it's a space where it exists and maybe even thrive. These materials are used in spaces of power, the ancestral spirit is both a stranger and a relative in these spaces. The work arose from the intersection of the powerful stories of my matrilineal ancestors and the ideas of transcendence drawn from Mbuya Nehanda. In it, I imagine the duality of this boundless, intangible space. It is both a forest and a wilderness. This is the Mhondoro's home, close to the creator. As with the Mhondoro, the space is both terrifying and exciting. It is reflective of the Shona God, who is both good and evil. These intersections are where the Mhondoro operates in balance with space, self and the creator.

The most well-known embodiment of Nehanda was Nyasikana Charwe. She was a vaChiHera (a term used to address womxn within her ancestral clan) of the Hwata dynasty that ruled from 1760 until the emergence of the first colonialists and the first Chimurenga of 1896-97 (Beach 1998). She was a medium to Nehanda – a powerful, respected and revered feminine Mhondoro spirit of rain, land, fertility and struggle.

Muchato weMheni[5] *2019*
hosho seeds, tulle and pinewood
320cm x 88cmx 140cm

5 A wedding for lightning/a marriage of lightnings.

In *Muchato weMheni* 2020, tulle drapes down like a veil, obscuring the hosho beads[6], which are silent and still, waiting to be activated, as they are at every rain-making ceremony. The veil falls as droplets of brown rain. This alludes to the marrying of rituals, particularly rainmaking rites. Rain making was reserved for the priestesses and priests of Mwari. Rain is life. And lightening is death, but it's also power. It is a marriage of lightnings, a fulfilment of a thunderous prophecy and a promise of life. It is a meeting of powerful forces that are equally beautiful and devastating. It is a 'becoming', a union of selves. A union of the past and the shifting landscape of the present. The spirit of Nehanda is the child of this union. *Muchato weMheni* 2020 is when equally powerful forces unite to shift the landscape and even time itself. First you hear the thunder rumble and then you see the streaks of lightning strike down from the sky in their humble silence. We are the daughters of our mothers; we are the lightning that follows the thunder: our silence is not an absence of power because the thunder has already announced our intentions. Nehanda's existence inspires my parable of the lightning. The spirit rumbled for generations and when the time came, they struck down on the plains of colonization.

In oral historical recollections, it is said that in about 1430 the first Nehanda was Nyamhita, who was the daughter of the first Monomotapa Mutota. According to the oral histories of Zimbabwe, Mutota ordered his son Matope (Nehanda's half-brother) to perform an incestuous ritual so as to attain overall power and control (Beach, 1998:27). After the ritual was performed Matope became so powerful that he decided to give a portion of his land to Nyamhita. It is not known how she came to be a Mhondoro. There is speculation that the incestuous ritual could have been what made her a Mhondoro, some say it was Mwari (God) who elevated her to the status of Mhondoro.

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6 An instrument that resembles shakers, worn on the feet or handheld when dancing. The beads inside the shakers are made from tree seeds

The spirit Nehanda gained the title of Mbuya – which translates to grand or great mother after the strength it showed during the first Chimurenga (Beach, 1998).[7] Nyamhita became a Mhondoro – a powerful royal ancestral spirit and lived through her human hosts for a period of 500 years after the time of her physical death. As hosts she only chose womxn of great strength connected to her ancestral line. One of Nyatsimba Mutota's daughters was also mentioned to have hosted the spirit of Nehanda.

> This legend runs as follows: the historical "Nehanda" was supposed to have been the daughter of the founding ancestor of the Mutapa dynasty, who lived in the fifteenth century. Her ritual incest with her brother Matope gave supernatural sanction to the power of the Mutapa state. After her death, she became a Mhondoro spirit, and this spirit possessed a number of mediums (Beach, 1998: 27).

Nyasikana Charwe is said to have been born between 1840 and 1865, with some specifying 1862 (Beach, 1998), but it is difficult to tell, since age counting in pre-colonial and colonial Zimbabwe was often associated with a great event.[8] Nyasikana Charwe was supposedly married and had two daughters and a son, but I could find no information that could confirm those details. The legend says that Nyasikana Charwe wasn't born as Nehanda but became her vessel between 1880 and 1890. As Nehanda, she rose above the hierarchy of men and commanded the respect and reverence

7 My use of Beach's text in this instance does not imply support of his interpretations and views.

8 My grandmother's age is still a mystery to us, her identification document says she is 70 years old, which of course is just a guess based on how old she looked at the time she was given her identification document.

of the Shona clans and it is rumoured that even King Lobengula, monarch of the southern African Ndebele (1870–94), held her in high regard. Nehanda Nyasikana Charwe had a village of her own and often performed rituals of land fertility to appease the Shona omnipotent being, Mwari. As a Mhondoro, Nehanda's voice echoed the very will of Mwari/God as it was believed that the Mhondoro had direct access to Mwari. This gave her power beyond all others due to the spirit of Nehanda being considered one of the highest and most powerful of the Mhondoro (Beach, 1998).

It is unclear if Nehanda Nyasikana Charwe was initially opposed to the European settlers. However, they started enforcing hut taxes, forced land removals, and forced labour amongst several atrocities and unfair practices that where not the way of the Shona clans. This is generally stated as the reason behind the Shona people's resistance and ultimately the first Chimurenga (Beach, 1998).

At the end of the Chimurenga, Nehanda was arrested and put on trial for the murder of a "Native commissioner" called Henry Hawkins Pollard whom, according to a witness, Nehanda had beheaded at some time in the duration of the Chimurenga. Beach (1998: 27) states:

> In the last part of the nineteenth century one medium, Charwe, was responsible for the organization of resistance to the government of the British South Africa Company and the settlers in the Mazowe valley, and in particular for the killing of H.H. Pollard, Kunyaira, the extremely oppressive Native Commissioner....

Oral history and legend say that Mwari spoke to Nehanda and told her to drive out "the people with no knees", referring to the British. Since Nehanda was a Mhondoro, when she spoke against the people with no

knees, the Shona clans listened. The first Chimurenga was an uneven struggle. The Shona people fought with spears, knives and sticks, the people with no knees had guns. Nehanda encouraged her people to fight, with some accounts saying she told them not to fear the bullets, for the bullets would turn into water by the time they hit their pelts. Some accounts say Nehanda told her people that their pelts would become bullet proof because Mwari was on their side.

According to legend, the British had a hard time killing Nehanda during her execution. Little is known about what happened to her remains; her head is said to have been taken to England while the rest of her body was buried in secret, fearing her own prophecy of resurrection (Beach, 1998). But it was Nyasikana Charwe that died, while Nehanda's spirit continued to manifest through other womxn for 500 years.[9] Beach paints Nehanda-Charwe as a victim of the whims and wills of the patriarchy of her time. I see this as a way to diminish her significance in the events that transpired between 1896 and 1897. I do not deny that there was political misuse of Nehanda's story, and I also do not deny the significance of Nehanda in the liberation of Zimbabwe in all Chimurengas. What I argue is that denying the importance of this significant figure could be an act of delegitimizing their impact as well as an act of erasure. Rumbidzai Charumbira (2008: 104) offers a more convincing alternative in her paper "Nehanda and Gender Victimhood in the Central Mashonaland 1896-97 Rebellions: Revisiting the evidence." Charumbira negates Beach's claims that Nehanda was a victim, stating:

> In my assessment of the evidence, I find that the biggest hole in Beach's argument about Nehanda-Charwe being a victim of gender bias lies in the fact that he did not consider the larger canvas of women and gender history before and

9 Nehanda's spirit was elevated to Mbuya (great/grandmother) and continued to inspire strength throughout the second Chimurenga as well as the unofficial third Chimurenga.

during the uprisings… (Charumbira, 2008:104).

Charumbira argues that Nehanda orchestrated and planned the first Chimurenga because the society of that time was built on a particular worldview rather than on the western world's social misconceptions.

Throughout the paper Charumbira asserts that the "crime" for which Nehanda was charged and convicted (killing Pollard/Kunyaira) was bogus; she sees the arrest, trial and conviction as an attempt by the colonial power to end the rebellion. The more serious charge of treason levelled against Nehanda was harder to prove as no evidence could be found that would allow them to convict her of that crime (Charumbira, 2008). Charumbira also alludes to historical evidence of womxn holding their own space within the collective Shona communities, and she hints at the emergence of "new traditions" during this time, which she views as a way to devalue the position of womxn in response to Nehanda- Charwe's ability to, for a time, successfully rebel against colonial rule.

> The statement "by the court" suggests that Nehanda-Charwe was probably the last visible female who held a position of real power within the dying Shona political power structures in central Mashonaland. That "*Nianda*[10] had the power" is quite provocative (Charumbira, 2008:125).

These "new traditions", I imagine, resulted from the convergence of colonial and pre-colonial patriarchal constructs and notions of power, which, through erasure, coloniality and western religiosity, suppressed Black womxn's voices and access to power after the death of the particular incarnation of Nehanda in the form of Nehanda-Charwe.

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10 An earlier westernized spelling of Nehanda.

Though Charumbira does not see Nehanda as either a feminist or heroine, I believe that in some ways the spirit of Nehanda, though not actively choosing to be seen as such, was and is still both these things, due to the significance of their story and their voice within the collective Shona popular cultures. Nehanda stands as a bridge between understanding what was before and what is now. Their story becomes a point of access for what is known and what is unknown, as it is suggestive of a space and time when the voices of Zimbabwean womxn were revered and maybe also undisputed in the structures of society, politics and power.

Mbuya Nehanda's influence surpassed the constructs of patriarchy and helped instigate the first Chimurenga against the first settler colonialists. Within Zimbabwe, Mbuya Nehanda's influence has endured: it inspired a nation to rise up against the oppressive Southern Rhodesian regime (second Chimurenga) as well as the more recent unofficial Chimurenga (the economic struggle) which is still on-going in Zimbabwe.

Their tenacity to resist in a time when defiance meant certain death taught me what courage meant. As a child I would imagine, as one would Superman, Nehanda as an eternal superbeing fighting patriarchal and racial injustices. I would then imagine myself as Nehanda, pretending to make rain clouds so I could send lightning to anyone who would dare to hurt my friends and family. In death Nehanda became a Mhondoro of land, fertility and struggle. Her spirit rose above the ranks of men and continues to inspire a nation to resist and remember where they come from. Nehanda embodies African feminism by existing as a form of resistance, at a time of dominant patriarchy and colonialism. Nehanda is a reminder of the power womxn held in a space where their struggle was not only a resistance but an insistence to be seen and regarded.

Femininity, Narrativity and Herstory

In this section, I discuss the seven works: *Ancestral Portrait*, *Taibva KwaNyajena*, *Doreen*, , *Kuchitubu Mvura Haidenwi*, *Sheila wekwaSantos*, *Mbuya vaFambe* and *Muranda Kumwe*. I refer to a 2005 paper by joint authors Josephine Beoku-Betts and Wairimu Ngaruiya Njambi, who discuss dislocation and the experience of African feminists in academia. Although in their paper these authors outline experiences within the American academic system, there is a commonality in their critique of the misconceptions about African feminism and its historical genealogy before, during and after colonialism. As Beoku-Betts and Njambi (2005:116) explain, their (Beouku-Betts and Njambi) "Intellectual and political backgrounds are both rooted in colonial, post-colonial experiences and perspectives which set the context for locating [their] engagement in third world feminist scholarship."

Gwendolyn Mikell makes a necessary distinction of feminism in Africa from feminism in general. Mikell (1997:4) points out that African feminism "owes its origins to different dynamics than those that generated Western feminism. African women's resistance to Western hegemony and its legacy with African culture have largely shaped it". "Clearly", she argues, "it does not grow out of bourgeois individualism and the patriarchal control over women within capitalist industrializing societies", rather "is concerned with many bread, butter, culture and power issues [since it] grows out of a history of female integration within largely corporate and agrarian based societies with strong cultural heritages that have experienced traumatic colonization by the West" (Mikell 1997: 4). In many ways, it has a broader political outlook and has contributed to what I prefer to call 'herstories' as opposed to history.

Unlike Christina Hoff Sommers (1995), who considers the term "herstory" as gender feminism, arguing that it is historical negationism, I use the term herstory as a means to excavate lost histories while challenging dominant male-centred perspectives. As I explore these stories, I find familiarity in how womxn's lives, though different, seem to embody recurrent themes. My current body of work imagines what a decolonial afro-feminist identity could be or is, through the stories of womxnhood within my matrilineal family. I am not making a distinction between afro-feminism and African feminisms, I am referring to the existance of feminism that speaks to the struggle of black womxn within an African context and the Western Eurocentric arena as the two are intertwined through colonial trauma.

Decolonial afro-feminism as a " project must construct new forms of becoming which are not focused on Man as a positions from which black women would know the world or be known by the world" (Tate.2018.4). Black womxn's herstory, needs, experiences and positionalities differ from those of white womxn. Shirley Anne Tate (2018) notes how Black feminist theory and theorists struggle to be acknowledged within the academic sphere since Western feminism generally focusses on the impact of male privilege. This in relation to black feminist theory not only looks at the gender violence of men but the "very coloniality of Man in its raced, gendered, heteropatriachal, ableist and classist modalities in academic life" (Tate 2018: 2)".

This is a critique on how the only feminism that seems to be prevalent is that of white women (Tate. 2018) hence as Black Womxn we need our own strategies of attaining gender equity as such freedoms are also tethered to racial, social and political equity. Black womxn are not only faced with the struggle for gender equality but also racial, social, cultural and historical prejudice. The theories of Patricia Hill Collins (2002) and Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) on intersectionality and critical race theory are

therefore crucial in understanding the intertwined experiences of being black and being a womxn, necessitating a feminist and racial struggle.

Sylvia Tamale (2005: 40) raises the importance of theorising our work as well as enhancing our research capacities and engagement with 'home grown feminist theory. She states "It is important for us to understand that our sexuality has a whole lot to do with women's oppression. We can see it in ideologies such as 'heteronormativity', 'marriagenormativity' and 'mothernormativity'. This means that attempts to liberate womxn must address the crucial issue of sexuality" (Tamale.2005.40).

Tamale (2005) iterates the importance of understanding our struggles and the radical strategies we need to implement in order for such changes to occur. For black womxn, radical change in society has to include a decolonial feminist theorisation. Our problems with society exceed the bounds of sexuality but also occupies, race, culture and history. We have to be radical in our deconstruction of who we are and our many positionalities in the quest for true gender equity.

In my work I redefine this African feminist identity, as I have known it to exist, beyond nationalism and patriarchal colonial constructs. The men in my family are but distant memories. It is the womxn who have kept me, their herstories and the knowledge they have given me. It is important to acknowledge African livelihood before colonisation. As Diana Auret (1990:pg 98) shows "prior to the advent of colonialism, Shona women exercised considerable power and authority in the domestic or private sphere" Womxn's power was "regarded as being of equal importance [and] this flexibility and balance was evident in the sex roles in all aspects of the society, but particularly in the economic system". She points out that "as a result, women did not feel subordinate to men, nor did they feel that they occupied positions of lesser importance in their society [and] the domestic sphere was therefore of central importance in the social and economic aspects of the society" (Auret.1990: pg 98).

There is evidence of matrifocal societies, some clearly apparent, but others still hidden, as Beoku-Betts and Njambi (2005) show. In their 2005 text they reference how Amina Mama lists examples of womxn exemplifying precolonial African feminism. Beoku-Betts and Njambi (2005:116) discuss how they both:

> …later learned (in part through our engagement with feminist practices), the nationalism in which we granted so much faith had very little interest in promoting gender equality. As Geraldine Heng attests, 'historically, almost without exception, feminism has arisen in the Third World in tandem with nationalist movements – whether in the form of anti-colonial/anti-imperialist struggles, national modernization and reform movements, or religious-nationalist/cultural-nationalist revivalism' (1997, 31). Yet in the case of Africa, Amina Mama (1996) points out that there were examples of African feminist consciousness prior to colonialism (Amina of Zazzau and Queen Zinga of Angola are famous instances).

Adding to this, I consider the narrative of the Mhondoro, Mbuya Nehanda (embodied by Nyasikana Charwe) as part of this African feminist consciousness that Amina Mama refers to. It is necessary to reclaim these histories/herstories because, in order to dismantle an oppressive system, one has to find the foundations of previous systems as they offer platforms for new and remodelled identities.

Powerful womxn in Shona history have been hosts of the spirit of Nehanda. In my work I consider the corporeal and spiritual space, the body and the home as the site where transgenerational knowledges intersect in the narratives of the Black womxn in my family[11].

11 I am deliberately thinking of the body differently from the

ways in which Western feminism centres the body "as integral to racial and sexual oppression. I will focus more on what is exemplified through Nehanda: relationality or feminist ties in ancestral bonds.

Ancestral portrait 2020
velvet, wood glue, pinewood and batting
104cm x 68cm x 75cm

In *Ancestral Portrait* 2020, velvet cloth folds into the depth of the frame. When making this work, I was thinking of what my matrilineal ancestors looked like and their stories. It draws from the memory of my home where we had photographs of family members on the wall. The portrait is both surface and depth. In a portrait, generally, one sees the face of a person and yet the portrait, because it elicits memory, can be considered to capture the depth of its subject matter. In this work, the portrait is about depth: it is about what one can and can't see. In it is a politic of visibility. It is as if the frame is pulling the fabric in as it unveils itself. It is as if it is taking a deep breath. It is a remembrance of the forgotten and the hidden. The work also reveals to me the impact of colonisation on my ancestral archive.

Taibva KwaNyajena 2020 is based on the narrative of my great grandparents. My great great-grandfather was a chief in a village called Nyajena within the Masvingo province. They came from the Shumba clan which is associated with royalty and rulership. Due to a succession rivalry, he and his sons violently lost their lives leaving my great great-grandmother, great grandfather and great grand aunt to flee for their lives in forced exile. The disruption of the frame alludes to the expanse of the lost histories, as they are unable to fit or form into the boundaries that defines it as a picture. It is an escape from its framing, almost seeping out or falling out like thick blood in a wound. It will not be reframed or structured, it exists as fluid, no control as to how one can capture it, conform it or contain it. The faux velvet now exists outside of the frame, almost enveloping it with in its drapes and bulges. A history that will not be tamed, silenced or ignored as the colour evokes life and death.

They were still children when they were forcibly exiled from their ancestral homespace. As I reflect on this ancestral memory, I am reminded of my own feelings of dislocation. I also imagine the story of my great great-grandmother's ability to survive a massacre, save two children and mourn the death of her husband and sons while fleeing for her life at the dawn of colonisation, as a Black womxn alone and at night.

Taibva KwaNyajen[12] *2020* faux velvet and pinewood

210cm x 120cm

12 Translation: We came from Nyajena.

I imagine that this occurred simultaneously with the first Chimurenga in 1896 or some time before, due to the approximate age of my grandmother.[13] My great grandfather was a N'anga[14] who dedicated his life to healing through spirituality and indigenous medicines. At some point in his life, he married my great grandmother who came from a place called Matsokidze. She was a village nyora[15] artist and potter. Through the fond recollections of my grandmother, my great grandmother was well known for creating incredible belly tattoos.

My grandmother's father died of old age and on his death bed, he recalled the trauma of his childhood. My mother remembers how he made my grandmother promise, on behalf of his descendants, to never return to their ancestral home, for fear of an ill-fate befalling them as did his father and brothers.

In 1960, four years before the rise of the second Chimurenga, at the height of tensions between the colonialists and the indigenous Zimbabwean clans, my mother, Sheila Vengesa,[16] was born. Her father was Joaquim Santos, a Portuguese labourer working on the construction of the Kariba and the Mutirikwi dam walls.

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13 We imagine she was born in the early 1930s and we know our great grandfather died of old age sometime in the late 1960s so he must have been born sometime in the late 1880s.

14 A sangoma , a Mwari priest/priestess - traditional/spiritual healer.

15 Nyora- (tattoos/scarification) are for body aesthetics, to administer medicine, cultural symbolism and spiritual protection from ancestral attacks through witchcraft (from the recollections of my grandmother, a person can only bewitch you if they know you by your ancestral clan name).

16 My mother was adopted by my step grandfather so that she could be documented.

My grandmother spoke very little English as she had been opposed to western modes of learning. I believe she still views it as a language of oppression and adamantly refuses to converse in it. The love between my mother's parents was an act of defiance, as the Rhodesian government based its power on white supremacist views through forced segregation among other atrocities. I imagine there was a language barrier; nonetheless they had two daughters together, my mother and Doreen. The latter tragically died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome though my grandmother believed it to be witchcraft. She died a few months after her birth in 1963. My great grandmother buried Doreen next to a river that later became Lake Mutirikwi.

Doreen 2020
fabric, plywood, batting, galvanized wire, hosho beads and soapstone.
166cm x 193cm x 30cm

The sculpture *Doreen 2020* is an ode to the aunt I never knew. There are no photographs of Doreen. Using the oral recollections of my grandmother, the work imagines Doreen descending into the realm of the Njuzu, or water sprite as she transforms into a sacred feminine water spirit. The work imagines the river that never became the lake. This work is an offering of love. The soapstone calabash rests in the heart of Doreen; she is the giver, the protector and the avenger.

In the oral recollections of my grandmother, if a baby dies before the age of one, they are buried in a secret place close to a river by a close relative, preferably their grandmother or aunt. This is for three reasons:

1. To protect the baby's body from sorcery.
2. The river represents eternity and is symbolic of giving the child another life and when the mother sees the body of water, she is meant to find a sense of peace knowing her baby is living another life elsewhere.
3. Some believe the infant is resurrected as a Njuzu.[17]

17 From oral traditions and the recollections of my grandmother, Njuzu is a mermaid/water sprite. They hold great magical power and have the ability to transfer those powers to humans who then become great healers. They are said to be powerful feminine spirits andoccupy rivers, lakes and springs. They are said to be beautiful and giving but can also be terrifying and devastating when offended.

Kuchitumbu Mvura Haidenwi[18] *2020*
found paint buckets, batting, fabric hardened with cold glue and sequins
i) *106cm x 90cm x70cm*
ii) *87cm x 110cm x 70cm*

18 Translation: Don't offend the water at the sacred spring.

The Njuzu dwell in natural springs, rivers, lakes and dams. They are generously giving towards communities, but when offended they are known to wreak great vengeance. I grew up with stories of offended Njuzu. My grandmother claimed to have seen one, and she recalled it as being a beautiful womxn with a very tiny nose. She recalled observing it from afar while it was busy washing her clothes. In other recollections of my grandmother, the Njuzu appear as womxn on land but have fish characteristics in water. They also live in caves close to the body of water they occupy and protect.

This work is a memory of a *chitubu* - a sacred well that we used to get water from. I remember being given a tutorial by my cousin about how to behave and how one takes the water. We used to use old, clean 20-litre paint buckets to carry the water. I would use a hata or dendere[19] to protect my head as my cousins taught me and helped me to carry the water up and over the hills of Nemamwa. It was my first school holiday without my mother. I did not spill or offend the water. This chitubu was close to my grandmother's matrimonial homestead. As I look back, I imagine that the Njuzu who protects it is my Aunt Doreen, watching out for us from the water.

Both children didn't have identity documents because my grandmother feared the Southern Rhodesian government would abduct them and place them with "Coloured families". Most children who the government removed from their parents never saw their mothers again, and while some families found their children, they had become strangers to one another. My grandmother spoke with pride about how she took the pain and strongly insisted on keeping her surviving child. She recalled how they tortured her until she lied, claiming that her mixed race daughter was the product of rape. The officials insisted that she give them the

19 A rolled piece of fabric/scarf or wrapping fabric that protects the top of the head when one carries heavy objects.

child so that she could be raised by people who looked like her. They promised my grandmother that her child would have a good life. She said she thought about it, but when she asked them if she could visit her child regularly, they told her not until she was a woman. She resisted stating that she would rather struggle with her child than have her child forget her. These were stories we grew up with and they affected people we knew.

> "Coloured identities" in the colonial era of Zimbabwe are mired in societal and cultural complexity. James Muzondidya (2013: 158-175) discusses the position of first-generation Coloured people Who were the children of White colonialists and Black mothers as well as the space of the immigrant Coloured people who had ventured north in search of work. Muzondidya (2013) discusses the history of Coloured identities in relation to some Zimbabwean societal constructs and the colonial hierarchy in the early 1900s. He shows a shift in racial affiliation where those considered "Coloured" initially leaned towards whiteness and later tended to identify as Black in response to the influences of Black liberation struggles and African nationalism in the 1960s. He looks at the cultural and social space of "Coloured identities", which were seen as inferior by both the White and Black communities, having to navigate the space of unbelonging in a time when their identities created both social complexities and privilege.

Sheila wekwa Santos[20] *2020*
faux suede, embellished sequined velvet, batting and pinewood
200cm x 82cm x 15cm

20 Translation: Sheila of the Santos clan.

This sense of in-between-ness is akin to my mother's experiences and sense of belonging. This can also be seen in the naming of the artwork as it seeks to give my mother, a clan name and home in the ancestral realm. In the collective Shona cultures, people attain their ancestral clan name from the father. My mother has no ancestral clan name, and she would often express her feelings of unbelonging. This work seeks to give her that which she does not have. *Sheila wekwa Santos 2020*, is an imaginary excavation into her lineage and identity. It seeks to give her a place in the ancestral realm. I can only imagine how it must have been for my mother. Even now she feels pain from her experiences as a mixed- race child. Because of her skin tone, she was continually questioned about who her father was, and she did not know who he was because my grandmother kept that secret for the safety of her child. I imagine how one constantly tries to reconcile oneself with the trauma of unbelonging, which is brought up every time one leaves the home. Unfortunately, the questioning has never stopped, people still ask my mother who her father was, but at least now she knows.


Left: *Chiedza Machivenyika Muzenda Vengesa Muzoroza and Shiela (Santos) Vengesa* photograph by unknown 1974). Right: *Joaquim Santos* (photograph by unknown 1958 or 1959)

While my mother existed in this state of racial uncertainty, throughout her childhood she would often insist on her Blackness, having to defend her identity to all the "racialised" communities of the time. This was the case with most first-generation mixed-race people (particularly those born of Black mothers and White men). Muzondidya speaks about how immigrant Coloured and Black people would often insist on not being the same as the "native" communities as well as the "mixed race" first generation Coloured children, highlighting cultural differences and history as evidence of their superiority (Adhikari, 2013). This denial and rejection of sameness can be seen as a way for such people to constantly reposition themselves in a more advantageous racial category within the highly oppressive colonial society.

Due to the torture my grandmother received at the hands of the Southern Rhodesian government, she decided to join the liberation struggle in the hopes of creating a society that would allow her to be seen in proximity with her child. She became a *chimbwido*,[21] aiding struggle fighters during the second liberation war. My mother lived her entire childhood in hiding. Between the war and the threat of being taken away, she spent most of her young life fearing abduction and bullets.

My grandmother, in an alternate world, would have been the daughter of a chief and this could have changed her lived experiences. Despite her displacement and loss, my grandmother carried herself with the strength of her foremothers and is the grand matriarch and traditional healer of my family. Whenever we would get sick, she would dream of her father showing her what was ailing us and where to get the medicine. She was our protector as children and is still a force to be reckoned with in her old age.

21 An errand person or someone who helped in the liberation struggle of the 2nd Chimurenga.

Mbuya vaFambe[22] *2020*

faux velvet, velvet, batting, my mother's doily, pinewood, acrylic wool

i) *84cm x 104 cm x 15cm*

ii) *223cm x 105 x10 cm*

iii) *136cm x 148cm x 80cm*

22 Fambe's grandmother/ grandmother must journey on.

In collective Shona cultures, when one becomes a mother or grandmother, a woman is referred to by the name of her first born child or first grandchild. Fambe was my mother's first doll. From the day she was given the doll, my grandmother was known as Mbuya vaFambe (Mother of Fambe). Concurrently the name also suggests the process of journeying, moving, walking etc. This work remembers my grandmother, sees her and loves her. Mbuya vaFambe used to tell me stories, bring us their first and last harvest, and look after orphans and chickens. Mbuya vaFambe was a *chimbwido* (errand carrier/runner). The multiplicity of her existence boiled down to a memory of home, of Fambe. The name is telling of her sacrifices. I honour her and her story.

Mbuya vaFambe 2020

Muranda Kumwe[23] *2020*

velvet, batting, brass door handles, masonite board

i) *120cm x 50 cm x 34cm*
ii) *83cm x 62cm x 14cm*
iii) *130cm x 65cm x 20cm*

The work, *Muranda Kumwe*, looks at how power is negotiated in the homespace. It speaks to the silencing of herstories in conversations of power and leadership. The green is a colour often seen in the Zimbabwean parliament building. It draws from the aesthetic of an office of power and plays into the home, referencing the single-seater couch/chair often covered in silk/satin/velvet that would only be offered to the oldest male relative, while my grandmother and all the younger womxn including myself would sit on the floor. It is imagining what that power would look like had we not been exiled from Nyajena, and it considers whether we would still have to sit on the floor. My grandmother once told me that within the Karanga culture, one's mother is considered a stranger and not a relative, because she does not share the same clan name as her children thus harming her is a greater offence to the ancestors than harming your father. The title is part of a Shona proverb "*Mwanawashe muranda kumwe*" (the child of a chief/king/lord is just a stranger elsewhere), in other words their status in society has no value outside of their intimate community. My grandmother may have been of a royal line, but outside of Nyajena, she was just the child of a n'anga.

As a child, I never understood why my grandmother was the way she was, but even in my confusion I listened. She told many stories, but never her own, I suspect that there is pain, I know that there is pain. I believe she would have taken our history to the grave had I not pressed her that it was time to tell our story. When looking at her life, I see myself, I feel present in all these events, and yet I was not born. I think it is because I share her face. My matrilineal story is that of loss and healing.

The work, *Ayive madhende ave magamba 2020*, plays with the multiplicity of language and meaning. Initial interpretation of the work is associated with the repurposing of old fabrics into something new, or as something that you mend with. We used to have doormats made of our oldest clothes, those that had seen much life, but which could not be passed on, given away or sold. The word *gamba* [from the plural *magamba*] has a dual use, as it can mean a patch as well as a hero. When I made this work, I imagined the restructuring of history through the tearing and weaving of the cloth. The patch is the hero, as it gives the garment /object an extra life beyond what it was intended to for. The fabric is no longer what it was; it is more, it has lived beyond its original purpose because it is still useful, and even in its tattered state, it is still considered precious.

Ayive madhende ave magamba,[24] 2020 faux suede, satin and raw denim

124cm x 122cm

24 Translation: What once were rags are now patches.

The narrative is integral to understanding how trauma moves across generations and why therefore it is necessary to know one's past. My investigation of the past has offered answers to existential questions I have long had about myself and family. In knowing all that I now know about my matriliny, I understand a lot more about my own story, and how I have become the bearer of burdens, as the narrative seems to transcend time, space and the body. I don't want to be a burden bearer. I want to heal as my ancestors did before the dawn of colonization. I want more than the pain; I want the resilience, strength and the will that allowed me to exist. I want the matriliny to move from the shadows of the home and for its members to hold themselves up to the light.

The matriliny is still alive

Due to the colonial process of erasing the pre-histories of womxn in power and/or politics within southern Africa, gender roles within the African perspective are particular to the structures of its societies and the contexts and functions of feminism within that perspective. Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997) critiques the idea of trying to study gender in Africa through a western lens because one has to understand that Africa had its own constructs and gender wasn't always binary. She also talks about the familial space being that of feminism. She discusses the idea of feminism as being family based, where the "woman at the heart of feminism is the wife..." (Oyewumi 2000: 1094). What is radical in Oyewumi's book is that it dispels the misperception that gender is dichotomous everywhere in the world. She locates gender within imperial regimes of control and the division of labour, demonstrating how the biological determinism that underpins Western knowledge constructs gender. Oyewumi argues that there were no pre-determined 'roles' for womxn and 'men' in African (Yoruba) societies. In this way, the power structure favouring men over womxn did not exist as it did in European heteropatriarchal societies. This is in reference to African feminisms, which often differ

from the prescribed definition found within Eurocentric western perspectives. Oyewumi discusses feminism in Africa as being rooted in the domesticity of home-life, family and community, since these are the spaces in which the "wife" may operate in relation to the issues affecting womxn within the global south. This in turn reflects upon ideas of the homeplace as a subversive space and a domain of power, although restricted by the ever- gazing patriarchal eye.

Thus, the colonial erasure of the pre-histories of womxn in power and/or politics of southern Africa, becomes an act of violence, as the erasure obscures the existence of spaces that existed either outside of or in balance with the patriarchal structures of the time. This, in time, shows how positionality affects feminine bodies with social and communal structures.

In *Male daughters, female husbands* (2015) the author, Ifi Amadiume, explores the idea of gender within the pre-colonial setting as a way to decolonise the knowledge surrounding gender roles in African societies. The fluidity of gender roles in pre-colonial settings was not based on western structures or birth-assigned gender roles/identities. Maria Lugones (2010) further amplifies this notion by arguing that the process of decoloniality exists in conjunction with feminism due to the history of Eurocentric gender roles being forced on bodies of colour through colonisation; further emphasising the importance of decolonisation to feminist movements and visa-versa (Lugones, 2010:774). In a similar vein, Jimi Adesina (2010) advocates for the idea of re-appropriating matrifocality in a way that corresponds to ideas of gender and positionality within the context of Africa.

Adesina (2010: 2) explores the work of Ifi Amadiume and Oyeronke Oyewumi as being central to ideas of endogeneity and the problems that these ideas create when information is taken in its own terms "without

status anxiety"/context. By this, Adesina addresses issues associated with trying to fit the construct of African gender and positionality into a western notion of how those "rules" apply, considering that the systems by which African cultures have survived may differ from those of a Euro-American context. Adesina quotes Oyewumi, who argues that "The study of Africa, must start with Africa" (Adesina, 2010: 2). This is in reference to ideas around gender and positionality in the context of womxn and power, whether it be national, communal or familial power. It is a critique of how the discourse of African cultures, identities and gender roles seems to only find substantiation through the sponsorship of an ideology or perception influenced by unfamiliar and out-of-context theoretical discourses based on Euro-American narratives and societal concepts.

Gogogoyi[25] *2020*

crushed velvet, batting and pinewood

200cm x 50cm x 30cm

25 Instead of literally knocking, sometimes people in Zimbabwe make the sound of aknock to announce their arrival. It's an announcement of one's arrival.

Gogogoyi is about the matriliny. This work is an announcement or a foretelling of an arrival. The arrival represents change. How do we announce our arrival to the ancestors, since they already know of our arrival? Announcing Gogogoyi, instead of knocking, shows familiarity, good tidings, joy and love. One announces, but one still needs to ask for permission to proceed. The power is negotiated, collaborated upon and consented to. The crushed velvet works as a doorway into the intimate spaces womxn hold, where they can speak freely and be as they choose. The light lingers and flickers to allude to a dark space where they feel safe but also remain anonymous to the expectations of the patriarchal states that they exist in. The door symbolises comfort, safety, warmth and secrecy. A door either holds you captive or keeps you safe. In my work, I envisioned it as something that makes one feel safe and not threatened. It is a promise of comfort, space, and a yearning of something better, perhaps a world without doors.

One has to acknowledge how the nuclear family works in order to understand the position of power in both pre-colonial and post-colonial times. Adesina considers the ideas of matrifocality to be the basis for theorising about matriarchy within the context of Africa. Quoting Parkin (1997), Adesina defines a "matrifocal family" as "a female led household, often with absent fathers or male spouses" (2010: 4). This would be the typical situation of a matrifocal household within a post- independence context. However, with regard to a pre-colonial context, the dynamics would have differed. One can look at the Akan in Ghana, who have a pre-colonial history of matricentric communities (Adesina, 2010). This is explored in the film *Sankofa* (1993) which depicts the lives of enslaved African bodies on a plantation as they find guidance through an enslaved Akan matriarch. One can understand the position womxn held within the Akan even when forced into slavery and displaced from their home. Mbuya Nehanda (Nyasikana Charwe) and the way she was treated is evidence of the attempted erasure of such communities, through colonisation, Euro-American colonial narratives, religion and displacement.

Matricentric households within the Euro-American perspective "are often a product of illegitimacy, absence or an unstable family structure" and in a post-independence spectrum, this may be arguably true to an extent (Adesina, 2010:5). However, it is not to say that most matri- led households are the product of an absence of patriarchy or of the presence of some kind of social or economic trauma.

Hence it is necessary to view gender in Africa separately from the notions, ideas and culturally constructed identities of a Eurocentric perspective, as this constructed western ideology does not exist in the same manner in the perspectives of other cultures. As Anne McClintock puts it:

> Race, gender and class are not distinct realms of experience, existing in splendid isolation from each other; nor can they be simply yoked together retrospectively like armatures of Lego. Rather they come into existence *in and through* relation to each other (1995: 5).

Afro-centric feminisms exist in conjunction with the African domestic space, which, at a time before, may have existed outside the gaze of patriarchy or patriarchy as we know it. The homeplace therefore becomes a place of transgenerational intersection where remnants of these feminisms and precolonial afro-centric gendering exist as pieces of the past, daring to transcend their colonial boxed structures.

Home – Gender and Domestic Spaces

Homeplace, as defined by hooks and as explored in my work, is a space of resistance and struggle. The homeplace of *Mambokadzi* is the intimate setting of the home, in which objects, form, identity, imagination, history and language exist. The spatial curation of the project is drawn from my experiences of home and its stories. The existence of the homespace

is not determined by ancestral land or a place of physical permanence like a family house or homestead that exists through generations, but is something less tangible. In my own case, the homespace has been acted out or lived out as a space of assurance; it has allowed me to remain grounded as I have moved from place to place, giving me the feeling of belonging, imparting to me an identity and a societal, historical and cultural position.

hooks (1990: 41) notes the absence of Black womxn from their own familial domestic space due to social and economic problems that forced them to work outside of their homeplace serving pervasive patriarchal white supremacist spaces. Similarly, African womxn in the colonial and post-independence era spent most of their lives working in a gendered and racialized white space often at the expense of their children.

Colonialism, alienation and gender

hooks critiques how the homeplace's subversive nature is threatened by the sexist violence of patriarchy, which has shifted the homeplace from being a sight of political resistance to a site of patriarchal domination (hooks, 1990: 47). As part of the diasporic collective of Black bodies that have existed within a Euro-American arena, the perspective of hooks becomes integral in recognizing the Black homeplace and by extension the African homeplace as sites where this archive of womxnhood exists. This remains the case even after a considerable amount of time in oppressive patriarchal, white supremacist and colonial structures. In Africa, patriarchal domination is a symptom of precolonial patriarchy gaining affirmation from colonial and religious patriarchy.

> This task of making a homeplace was not simply a matter of Black women providing service: it was about the construction of a safe place where Black people could affirm one another, and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination… (hooks, 1990: 43).

hooks speaks of the home as a space where black bodies found safety and affirmation in a context and time when the world outside was violent and restrictive. The home as a space, can be anywhere, an archive of the experiences of home that lives within the body and the mind. The intangible interactions with one's society, upbringing, elders etc as opposed to the homeplace which is tangible and accessible in materiality, space, location, land etc. The home is seen as a space that black bodies can find freedom from the injustices of the Euro-American world.

Doreen 2020

Unseen 2020
found suede curtains, plywood, batting, crushed velvet and galvanized wire
282cm x250cm x 120cm

In *Unseen 2020*, the curtains take on the role of a witness. The suede drapery offers a frail sense of security as it seeks to conceal the inhabitants of the space it occupies. The curtaining hangs in silence, listening to the stories of its makers and keepers as they speak candidly about their lives. I remember being a child and hiding behind the curtains in the living room, as the adults spoke of their lives in honesty. I remember their stories through the folds of the curtains.

My home was a place of safety where Black womxn, both familial and communal relatives, would come, commune and re-affirm each other while gossiping about how "idiotic men were". I would sit under the table or lie on my mother's lap as I pretended to sleep while listening to them talk about their victories and their dignity within the constraints of an oppressive, discriminatory society. They spoke of how they were able to brave particular situations because they were the daughters of their mothers. While they never spoke of their situation with reference to patriarchy, supremacy or abuse, everyone knew that it was that very unnamed thing that lay beneath their social and familial context. They would affirm and instruct one another using examples of how they handled other similar patriarchal injustices in a way that didn't endanger the little they had to themselves.

As hooks points out, remembrance (in my work, through narratives and memories embodied in objects), is a political gesture. She states:

> I want to remember these Black women today. The act of remembrance is a conscious gesture of honoring their struggle, their effort to keep something for their own. I want us to respect and understand that this effort has been and continues to be a radically subversive political gesture (1990:43).

hooks (1990) shows how suffering differs from struggle. To suffer contextualizes victimhood and defeat, but to struggle is an act of resistance and an insistence to persevere. In this way, home can be seen in multiple ways: as a body, as abstract and relational, and as space.

My grandmother's home

> When I was a young girl the journey across town to my grandmother's house was one of the most intriguing experiences (hooks, 1990:42).

Like hooks, visiting my matrilineal grandmother's *kumusha*[26] was always an intriguing experience. It was a space where I encountered glimpses of the familial stories and history through how the space was aesthetically arranged/activated, and through play, storytelling and daily chores, like sweeping the dust off a ground that was made of dust (*ruvazhe*[27]). This clearing and sweeping was done to make sure that no supernatural creatures or witches had passed through the home at night.

It showed me things about my ancestral past. These stories transcended words and inhabited the intimate spaces in which my grandmother had spent most of her time and most of her life.

For me, and maybe others in the collective of Black feminine identities, the home-space is more than just a site of oppression, subordination and domesticity. The intention of hooks' essay is to revalue the importance of Black womxn within Black American history and spaces by acknowledging

26 Translation: Ancestral homestead

27 The yard in the ancestral homes. It is normally cleared of topsoil and plants, resembling a wide dirt/gravel road.

how the Black homeplace, as a site of struggle, has created a space that also allows for freedom, resistance, safety and affirmation. It is a place where we learn about ourselves if we look closely enough at our mothers and how they subconsciously and consciously try to instill a sense of identity within us. This is so even when it is done through fighting the oppressive and suppressive nature of a post-independence western-centric society, the domestic space and the erased histories of Black bodies in Africa and the diaspora. The way in which we as a group of womxn see, associate, move and construct the domestic space is determined by our experiences which are echoes of the experiences of our foremothers.

Komborerai Chikumbiro chaChiedza[28] *2020*
velvet, batting, masonite board, pinewood
184cm x 179 cm x 62cm

28 Translation: Bless Chiedza's desires/requests. Bless the sunrise's request. Chiedzaalso means light/sun (I command you to) rise.

Every morning my grandmother wakes up at dawn as her name requires her to do - Chiedza, means light and it also translates to "sun (I command you to) rise". She prays to the creator, her altar is the lone single-seater couch that she only sits on when men are not present. She is not allowed to sit on a chair in the presence of a man, except if is it those of her flesh, or her sisters' and mother's flesh. *Komborerai Chikumbiro chaChiedza* (2020) reflects the politics of seating or patriarchal hierarchism. I remember being told to sit on the floor in a room full of chairs because there was a high ranking male elder in the room. So I created a throne/ altar, which references the height and length of a standing and sleeping body evocative of a feminine body. In this work, the throne /altar subverts the idea of sitting. It is a body, a being. An imaginary throne for the one who makes the sunrise. It is one of the blessings that my grandmother continuously meditates upon and prays for.

I learned so much about myself by observing how my mother and grandmother navigated our homeplaces. This included the moments of affirmation and advice, which came with every situation that questioned my position; even their critique of my outward defiance, which was never meant to offend me, was intended to teach me to survive men and the patriarchal nature of the expectations within the homeplace. As a young girl, I never understood why they would be so submissive in situations where I would expect them to stand their ground. They made sure we all survived patriarchy. The messaging that generally came from my womxn elders may well have been imparted to me without their being fully conscious of what they were passing on. I imagine they were just repeating things that they had been told, but which they had never been afforded the opportunity to become. My mother and grandmother have existed as unknowing *Mambokadzies* and the evidence is in their lives and how I exist.

Conclusion

As we navigate the post-colonial arena, it is necessary to critique and dismantle the more recent traditions on gender that have come forth with the trauma of colonisation so as to better navigate space, power and identity in a way that allows for us to imagine an existence beyond the Euro-American perspectives that have tabled, boxed and oppressed Black bodies, even in spaces that are meant to create calm, acceptance and affirmation.

The duality and hybridity of the African homeplace is the evidence of a pre-existing space where womxn held their own. More of this evidence is found in the remains of matricentric societies that exist outside of the structures of patriarchy as it is known. The nuclear space of the home I grew up in was and does still belong to my grandmother and mother, persevering through the expectations of patriarchy. And in understanding this I can imagine how to navigate my own position as a Black womxn.

Before *Mambokadzi*, Mbuya Nehanda always lingered as a question about the space and position of womxn within the post-independence arena of southern Africa (Zimbabwe). I struggled to understand how society considered "me" inferior and yet respected Nehanda as the grand/great mother of Zimbabwe. In understanding who she was, or they were, I gained more understanding about who we were and who I was and am. Nehanda stands as a reminder of what womxnhood was and possibly could be.

The colonial erasure of the pre-histories of womxn in power and/or politics within southern Africa has made womxn invisible in regard to power, society and space. And in time the building of a narrative of positionality that affects feminine bodies within the structures of society and community, may shift the paradigm of expectation within which womxn tend to be bound. *Mambokadzi* draws attention to the position of womxn within the conversations of power.

It is important to view African femininity and feminisms without the polarising gaze of Eurocentricity and to define it for what it is, using the body as a site and a means through which to become familiar with the ancestral knowledges that have been passed down through matriliny, the home and feminine familial and communal bodies/ spaces.

Mambokadzi is an imagined decolonial afro-feminist identity that confronts and informs the dual space in which womxn from my matriliny exist, in an attempt to decolonise the space that I hold as a Black womxn in a post-independence arena. It both confronts and informs the dual space in which womxn exist. The erasure and manipulation of histories/ herstories about womxn with power and in power is a suppressive tactic that is meant to keep womxn in a position and place defined by the structures of patriarchy. *Mambokadzi* is a story of inheritance within an understanding that the individual maintains existence as part of the collective. It seeks to uncover aspects of what has been erased in the powerful spaces which Black womxn have held to safeguard the future. "*Ziva kwaunobva, kwaunoenda*" doesn't just speak to history and the future, but to the essence of self. This phrase is reflective of the collective. The now is informed by the past and that informs the future.

I am *Mambokadzi* because we are *Mambokadzi*.

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