# Sexual and Spiritual R-Evolution through Animism:
# The Feminine Semiotics of Puppetry

## Aja Marneweck

*University of Cape Town, South Africa*

## Abstract

The following article interprets resistant representational strategies of the feminine through animism based creative practices such as puppetry. Acknowledging critical issues at the heart of identity, representation and embodiment in South Africa today, the Feminine Semiotics of animism seek new pathways to imagining feminine form, theory and being. Liminality, multigeneity, leakage and permeability are key to understanding the embodied surfaces of the Feminine Semiotic as it arises in animist puppetry practices. Puppetry reveals itself as a sentient tool that simultaneously exposes the constructs of being whilst engaging in what could be described as a performative alchemy of imagination and form. The Feminine Semiotics of puppetry offer a representational strategy for syncretic identities in a complex marriage between content and form, intersections of metaphor and critique, surface and innovation represented through the thresholds of animist practices. In the 21$^{st}$ century, women's puppetry is emerging as a means to push the margins of complex political and sexual discourse as the language of the feminine body expressed in her multiplicitous identities and sexualities of resistance. The article interprets the syncretic, threshold spaces of creative practice through the theories of filmmaker and cultural theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha (1987) and what she terms the "inappropriate other" that characterizes the emergent third in feminine representation. Through the expression of the inappropriate other, identities of difference recreate, deconstruct and refract each other, rather than simply replicating or resisting traditional conventions (Minh-ha, 1987). Puppetry, as the emergent third in this light, may lead to alchemy in practice, expressed between the surfaces of women's identity in critique and creativity. The practices of two significant female artists, Nandipha Mntambo and Jill Joubert, explore the sexual and political intersectionality of animism in sculptural and puppetry practices. Contemporary animism-based creative practices are shown to proffer strategies for

*expansive creative distillations that provide new trajectories for feminine resistance and empowerment.*

# The Feminine Semiotics of Puppetry: Towards an Emergent Third

We are interstitial creatures and border citizens by nature – insiders/outsiders at the same time – and we rejoice in this paradoxical condition. In the act of crossing a border, we find temporary emancipation. (Gómez-Peña, 2001)

In the 21st century, women's puppetry practices are emerging to push the margins of political, cultural and sexual identities. Pre-figurative and pro-creative artistic practices such as puppetry can provide women with tools for both complex expression and creative plurality, which this article unpacks specifically in light of their significance as a feminizing, de-colonizing form of artistic resistance. I explore how animism-based creative practices such as puppetry can evoke critical and contentious languages of a co-constructive femininity in strategies of resistance today. Writing on critical creative and political approaches to the re-invention of resistance, Sara Motta (2014: 11) insists that it is not only a necessity but our responsibility to re-imagine emancipatory politics within feminizing, decolonizing approaches that foster the creation of ourselves and our world differently.

Animism and puppetry offer multiple pathways into re-imagining epistemology through embodied, pre-figurative knowledge systems that, as I will explore, engage multiple levels of meaning, sentience and aesthetics simultaneously. In light of the feminization of resistance set forth by Motta (2013), I articulate this complex approach to exploring multiplex identity through emancipatory artistic practices such as puppetry as a Feminine Semiotic. The Feminine Semiotic is a critical as well as embodied approach to interpreting the potential of animist practices as resistant feminine creativity. It is a proposal for creative, critical strategy that addresses the spaces of the sacred feminine, liminality, flux, excess and transformation held within puppetry practices.

Puppetry is one of the oldest forms of multidisciplinary creative practice. As an artistic and cultural phenomenon, puppetry has found its way through antiquity to the present day in many countries across the world. Taking its roots from animism, puppetry is performance that seeks the life within *things*. As a creative and discursive discipline in its own right, puppetry posits the performative object and performing *things* at the forefront of artistic practices as well as critical discourses. Puppets combine anthropomorphic imagination and magical thinking with the plastic arts, materials, objects and the form of things which

> serve both as important metaphors and tangible expressions of our continually changing understanding of what it means to be human. They emerge as vital artistic elements at times when we question and reconceive longstanding paradigms about human beings and our re-lationship to the inanimate world, offering concrete means of play-ing with new embodiments of humanity. (Posner, Orenstein and Bell, 2014: 2)

Masks and figurines have been used throughout the African conti-nent in myriad diverse contexts (Joubert, 2006). Indeed, there are many masking, doll and figurine traditions that have evolved to meet the par-ticular needs of various societies and transformed into contemporary modes of expression. A key to the revitalization of puppetry and its import in contemporary performance practices is its potential for inter-disciplinarity. Puppetry exists through combinations of the performing and plastic arts and cannot be clearly confined into any one category. At its core, it combines the kinesthetic and the constructed object/form with multiple layers of meaning-making, metaphor and symbolism.

Puppetry's status as an underdog to the acknowledged separatist practices of performance and fine art posits itself on the thresholds of categorization and legitimization. It exists in a state of collaboration, hy-bridity and liminality. This multiplicity also places it in a shared position of marginality to dominant discourse, as an inappropriate other of the performance and art worlds. Today in South Africa, the term Puppetry is often loosely incorporated into the interstructural category of *Visual Per-formance*. The genre offers an entry point to contemporary performance

and it arises in many different modes such as performance art, movement, theatre, multimedia and storytelling, amongst others.

Puppetry is a threshold, border practice concerned with creative multidisciplinarity that could provide a potentially resistant representation of the subaltern feminine. The Feminine Semiotics of puppetry offer a representational strategy for syncretic identities in a complex marriage between content and form, metaphor and critique, surface and innovation, as represented through the emergent "third" spaces of animist practices. The trajectories of embodied, original, and imaginative practices offer theoretical excess that I believe is crucial to exploring South African women's creativity. They invoke the liminal and inappropriate other in narratives of complex feminine experience.

The Feminine Semiotic arises as a term that embraces postcolonial and feminist cultural theory in order to re-imagine where materialist and radical divisions might meet with puppetry and animism, and to imagine embodied knowledge strategies for feminine performance in South Africa today. I develop the terminology of the Feminine Semiotic from the transgressive body of the *female imaginary* proposed by radical feminist theorists Hélène Cixous (1976) and Luce Irigaray (1985), integrating Julia Kristeva's notion of the semiotic as that which disrupts the order of the masculine symbolic (1982). I align it to the converging materialist/radical underpinnings of Sue Ellen Case's *new poetics* (1998) as well as Geraldine Harris and Elaine Aston's search for "embodied knowledge" as a paradigm for knowing (2008). I also most importantly interpret this re-designation of the libidinal feminine body of desire within the "third" space of the inappropriate other as set forth by Trinh T. Minh-ha within a postcolonial feminist framework. It is my aligning of these concepts which has guided my understanding of the creative research at play in women's puppetry practices and the complex interplays of meaning and subversion in these art forms.

French theorist Julia Kristeva has advanced a feminist position on feminine sexual signification by re-interpreting the word "semiotic" into a Post-Lacanian theoretical approach to analyzing the construction of sexuality and division. This re-reading of the term provides a feminist distinction between what Kristeva interprets as the *semiotic* and the *symbolic*, and the resultant signification composed of these two binary elements.

Kelly Oliver describes the semiotic element of Kristeva's theory as the interpretation of libidinal bodily drives associated with the rhythms, tones and kinetics of signifying practices. It is a "discharge of drives" (Oliver, 1998: 2) linked to the maternal body which creates her semiotics as a destabilizing, feminized element of representation. The symbolic aspect of signification for Kristeva is linked to the grammar, rigidity and structure of reference and language. For Kristeva, the imaginary/semiotic can never be clearly separated from the symbolic/thetic, but always operates to destabilize the process of subjectification. The stasis of structuralist approaches to cultural production poses a problem for Kristeva whose theories of subjectivity look towards the potential heterogeneity of subjective experience, rather than the fixity of homogeneity in language and consciousness (Moi, 1985: 166).

South African cultural theorist Sarah Nuttall asks, how do we desegregate critical thinking and artistic practice in order to explore the interwoven aspects of South African women's identity at play today (2010)? The complex trajectories and constant entwinements of subaltern feminine identity require more in-depth exploration in creative practice, what Nuttall calls a "thinking across from the inside" (Nuttall, 2010). In order to avoid the pitfalls of reductionism, we cannot assume a feminine biologism or category of the feminine, outside of the complex intersectionalities of gender, race, class, ability, sexual orientation, religion, caste, age, nationality and other complex components of identity. The fundamentalism of a concept of "woman" is one that has haunted the western feminist movement with exclusionism on multiple levels. Postcolonial, transnational and subaltern feminism since the early 1980's has confronted western feminist theory's failure to adequately account for racial and cultural difference in its critical approaches. Criticism of the universalizing essentialism and biological determinism of the concept of "woman" and "feminine" is inherent in any assertion of a universal femininity and language. The concern is centered in the racial dynamics and "habits" of privilege, which have perpetuated and established many dominant social ideologies and prejudices across feminized movements that privilege white subjectivities (Garrett, 2002: 40). Positions of otherness in the dynamics of separation are always reinforced in reference to the non-other, the insider, the privileged subject of discourse (Spivak, 1988).

The theories of film-maker and postcolonial cultural theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha inspire my research through what she terms the *inappropriate other* that characterizes an emergent third space in women's creative practices (Minh-ha, 1987). Minh-ha posits the theory of an "inappropriate other" as a cultural and artistic strategy for transformative approaches to feminine representation (Minh-ha, 1987). The moment the (artist) woman changes her position from insider to out, she stands in an ambiguous and complex space as neither subject nor other (Minh-ha, 1987). This position as an "inappropriate other" both inhabits and confounds liminality. It illuminates difference while subversively straddling both the inside and the outside of coherent identities.

> The moment the insider steps out from the inside, she is no longer just an insider. She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking from the inside out. Not quite the same, not quite the other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out. (Minh-ha, 1987: 3)

In this dynamic, the artist always has "two gestures… that of affirming 'I am like you' while persisting in her difference…" (Minh-ha, 1987: 3). In the body of the inappropriate other, definitions of clear-cut difference are destabilized and reinvented. The body expresses both separation and multiplicity. It is both defined and ill-defined, where boundaries become unstable and in the telling of her (the individual woman's) experience "she knows she cannot speak of 'them' without speaking of herself, of history without involving her story" (Minh-ha, 1987: 3).

The inappropriate other offers a feminine vehicle to meet Homi K. Bhabha's exploration of hybridity and third space in postcolonial discourse. Hybridity has been a highly problematic term in postcolonial theory, but it has also occupied a central place within it (Meredith, 1998). Hybridity, according to Bhabha, is the process by which colonialism attempts to homogenize difference by translating it into a singular translation model, "but then fails producing something familiar but new" (Papastergiadis, 1997). This new, unexpected and resistant element is what Bhabha termed "third space", emerging from the interweaving of elements of the colonizer and colonized, self and other, challenging the validity and authenticity of any essentialist cultural identity (Mer-

edith, 1998). The hybrid third space complicates racial stereotyping and negativity by subverting essentialist and oppressive discourses within and without their own failing languages. The failure of essentialism to contain the third space throws all attempts to essentialize subject-position and identity into disrepute.

Minh-ha calls for a renegotiation of difference, difference "that is not opposed to sameness, nor synonymous with separateness" (Minh-ha, 1987: 2). Perception of difference, in this paradigm, can operate as a mode of complex signifiers and contexts, in which it does not give rise to conflict merely through separatism, where difference is "beyond and alongside conflict" (Minh-ha, 1987: 2).

> Many of us still hold on to the concept of difference, not as a tool of creativity to question multiple forms of repression and dominance, but as a tool of segregation, to exert power on the basis of racial and sexual essences. The apartheid type of difference. (Minh-ha, 1987: 2)

Minh-ha insists that we refuse the presumption that an insider can only speak with authority about their own culture (Minh-ha, 1987). Such presumptions of exclusive and legitimized knowledge imply that the outsider posits himself or herself as the all-knowing subject of the outside environment, from which the insider is essentially excluded (Minh-ha, 1987). In this dynamic, the oppressive hierarchies between "us" and "them", subject and object, self and other, remain. Minh-ha declares this process as a paradoxical twist of the colonial mind (Minh-ha, 1987: 3). The insider may be granted the power of legitimacy, as long as it informs the standardizing of difference between insider/out, as long as it informs the all-knowing subject of colonial discourse (Minh-ha, 1987). The other in this dynamic is always the "shadow of the self" and thus is never concrete, never stable, never subject, never really "all knowing" (Minh-ha, 1987: 3). This positioning denies the intersections of binary recourse to facilitate suture, rupturem or new surfaces for meaning. Authorship in this dynamic is concerned with the power of validation and legitimacy that essentialist divisions such as stereotyping seem to insist upon (Minh-ha, 1987).

A proposal for a truly resistant Feminine Semiotics then, it would seem, requires a reading of cultural signification that embraces the plu-

rality of "subject", destabilizing the inherent homogeneity of the symbolic. Representation through an inappropriate other in this light may lead to an alchemy of practice that is able to birth the new surfaces of women's performance, new surfaces of the female body and psyche in representation. Representation becomes a process of alchemy that requires that artists create "a ground that belongs to no one... Otherness becomes empowerment, critical difference when it is not given, but recreated" (Minh-ha, 1987: 3).

Puppetry derived from animist thinking and practice, in its own right, facilitates meeting points of diverse elements, the purpose of which may or may not be to intentionally render sutures in dominant discourse, but which through their very intersections express the complexity of identity today. The gesture of multiplicity inherent to the form and meaning of puppetry holds great significance for expressing the difficult, multiplicitous and entangled pathways of South African women's experiences and identities at play in the social, economic and political landscapes of the country. With the global resurgence of scholarly interest in puppetry, there has been a proliferation of writing that considers *why* the art form holds such power and potential within the contemporary creative arts and material performance. William Kentridge speaks of the artifice of puppetry, and asks:

> What is it in us that can watch a carved piece of wood, see its manipulation, be aware of this the whole time and still be unable to stop seeing a transformation of the object (Kentridge, 2001: 2).

This statement highlights the complex ambiguity of intimacy and alienation that puppetry brings to performance. It begins to elucidate the mechanisms of complex performance wherein the audience is simultaneously aware that what they are watching is a construct of the manipulator, but that the puppet exists for them in and because of its materiality and capacity for sentience (Kentridge, 2001). The subversive potential that puppetry offers strategies of representation of the feminine is its ability to transgress boundaries of subjectivity through the construct of the puppet itself in relation to the body and imagination. It is also the ability of puppetry to involve the audience in subtle ways, to contribute to its creation through their own suspension of disbelief, that makes the medium so effective.

141

Theorist Jane Taylor says:

> Puppets can provide an extraordinary dimension to a theatrical project… because every gesture is, as it were, metaphorized. The puppet draws attention to its own artifice, and we as the audience willingly submit ourselves to the ambiguous processes that at once deny and assert the reality of what we watch. (Taylor, 1998: vii)

The puppet always exists through multiple levels of meaning and signification. The puppet exists through plurality, through the interplay of multiple bodies as a co-constructed reality between objects, performers and community. These occur in the structure, form and symbolism of the object itself. They also manifest in the multiple bodies held in the puppeteer/puppet relationship and then the puppet/puppeteer/ audience relationship. In many instances, more than one performer is required to operate a puppet, so the bodies speak to multiple points of reference operating in the singular subject. Through the body of the performed puppet, deliberate attention is brought to the inherent multiplicity of being that facilitates life.

The approach to puppetry in this instance displays how multiple levels of difference and experience can shift between the bodies of the individual, the object and the community in the artistic process. In the multiplicity of representation, complex identities recreate, deconstruct and refract each other, rather than simply replicating or resisting traditional conventions. The use of puppetry allows the possibilities of artifice to co-exist with transformational sentient kinesiologies in performance and improvisation. Puppetry has the potential to simultaneously present and disrupt the body just as it disrupts static audience identification with the object/subject of performance. It troubles character as well as notions of the gaze of the audience, complicating their identifications through patriarchal notions of sexuality and gender.

Puppetry, as the melding and meeting point of various surfaces and bodies of meaning and construct, may be seen as representative of an emergent third in this light. It is these multiple performing differences that converge in the puppet that render it an inappropriate other, as that which both expresses and confounds construct and being, visually and critically bridging inside and outside, critique and aesthetic, binary and

liminality. Puppetry reveals itself as a sentient tool that simultaneously exposes the constructs of being in the sculpted, created form (morph) and the performing feminine body, whilst engaging in what I can only express as a performative alchemy of presence and embodiment (forces, power, abjection, creation and decay, sentience, emotion).

## Puppetry, Animism and Resistant Femininities

There is an inaccurate assumption that puppetry as it arises in South Arica today is derived from European art forms and that there are no indigenous puppetry traditions in South Africa (Joubert, 2010; Kruger, 2014). This is, I believe, largely due to issues around classification, genre and epistemological categories in western puppet-theatre. What makes an object a puppet and what makes it a figurine, a fetish or a doll? Similarly, in light of this article on the Feminine Semiotic, we may ask, what constitutes the feminine and how are the categories of femininity created? What limits and homogenization do these categories bring to bear on radical identity and creative practices? Can we clearly state what a puppet is and is not, and is this classification relevant to explorations of resistant, subaltern feminine identity playing out in radical contemporary animist practices?

Leading puppet theorists such as Penny Francis would argue that what clearly distinguishes puppetry tradition as a category is that puppets are primarily theatrical in function and are fabricated specifically to serve in puppet theatre (Kruger, 2014). Marie Kruger writes at length about the classification of contemporary puppetry and the difficulties of genre. The complex strands and contemporary occurrences of puppet theatre become entangled with other categories such object theatre, multimedia and visual performance to name a few. Yet these categories themselves are lightly held in the multi-textual field of performance studies, a highly contentious and much-debated area of scholarship in which the parameters of classification and genre are unstable and volatile at best (Kershaw, 2009).

Kruger explores Jurkowski's description that puppet theatre differentiates itself from live theatre, as the main and basic features of puppetry are the speaking and performing objects "which make use of the physical sources of the vocal and driving powers that are present beyond

the object (Jurkowski, 1988, p. 31)" (Kruger, 2014: 4). The concept of the puppet as a performing figure driven by "powers beyond the object" is significant in light of an exploration of the animist origins of puppetry. Jurkwoski writes ardently of the incorporation of puppetry and its different social, religious and political functions in societies throughout history. Objects, things and the matter of early man have been linked to magic, the religious and the mimetic (Jurkowski, 1988).

Professor of history and anthropology of religion, Tord Olsson, writes about animist ritual performance practices in Mali, Northern Africa, specifically those of the Bambara, who are considered to incorporate their own indigenous puppetry traditions in specifically fetish-based practices. Here the fetish-object is used to ritually "conjure" the presence of persons who are now ancestors. Olsson writes about how this creation of *presence*, central to fetishism and also central to puppetry, as Jurkowski insists, is a complicated theoretical part of understanding performance (be it in the form of entertainment, ritual or personal practice). It is this invisible *presence*, which allows the fetish to affect and "alter moods, social relations, bodily dispositions and states of mind" (Schieffelin, 1998 quoted in Olsson, 2013: 194). Olsson writes of a ritual presence in Malian fetish practices and puppetry in which there is no discernment between ritual object and person, living or dead, or other-than human, nor is there a distinction between the performer in the mask and the mask itself. "In meta ritual discourses one sometimes says that the fetish–person arrives at his object, at other times one says that the fetish person issues from his object" (Olsson, 2013: 323).

Kruger has explored the links between ritual performance and African puppetry tradition in her writing on the use of puppetry in the *Gelede* masquerades of Yoruba communities in Nigeria and Benin. The traditions offer entry points to multidisciplinary ritual performance, which challenges the boundaries of traditional western puppetry practices. Kruger's scholarship explores how puppets serve as "agents for the transmission and preservation of social concepts", which is done through customary public rituals that serve both to entertain and to express social criticism and control. The puppets are used in magic-religious ceremonies and healing rituals, such as the annual Gelede festival during the dry season. Here the boundaries between ritual and theatre

begin to blur, and as Kruger asserts, public puppet ritual takes the form of theatre. This theatre serves as entertainment but also to impart and define social roles, structures and belief systems specifically around feminine procreative power.

It is significant to note that the Gelede puppetry traditions evident in masquerade ritual performances represent what Kruger calls a highly visible, artistic expression of the Yoruba's belief in the power of women. These puppets, which are in fact figures built on to the top of masks used primarily in dancing, are used in service and honor of the feminine. They are "staged on every imaginable occasion, from a simple act of housewarming to elaborate funeral ceremonies" (Kruger, 2016: 3). The Gelede performances are offered as sacrifices to honor the female elders of the community and are also highly linked to women's procreative importance. Kruger says that in this belief system, it is held that women, particularly the elderly, "possess certain extraordinary powers equal to or greater than those of the gods and ancestors – a view that is reflected in praises acknowledging them as 'our mothers', 'the gods of society', and 'the owners of the world'" (Kruger, 2016: 4). She explores the origins of the word *Gelede* as offered by Drewal, which refers to the placation, adoration and respect of women's sexual power and sexual bodies. Thus the Gelede ritual puppetry performances form part of an elaborate worship of the feminine and the benefit of her powers for the whole community (Drewal, 1990 cited in Kruger, 2016: 5).

If contemporary puppets are only considered puppets if used in occidental theatrical contexts, we begin to homogenize and limit much more complex and politically challenging renderings of the practice. Feminism has tackled issues of visibility and invisibility in theory and politics, particularly by reclaiming the political spaces of the personal by women of multiple races. Critical race and gender practitioners working with theories and processes of intersectionality such as Audre Lorde (1997) have acknowledged the connections between personal experience and the larger social and political structures of gender and race. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw has written of the necessity to recognize "the social and systemic in what was formerly perceived as isolated and individual" in the identity politics of women, people of color, gays and lesbians, or anybody considered "other" (Crenshaw, 1991: 1241). Thus

by looking only toward the public theatrical occurrences of puppetry practice, we negate inappropriate other spaces, third spaces, where feminine forms of puppetry might arise.

Women's figurine traditions arising from Southern Africa are mostly ignored, prescribed in general to tourist craft, women's and girl's material traditions, and loosely delegated to the personal, domestic space of "dolls". Elizabeth Dell explains the ceremonial use of fertility figures specifically associated with feminine identity and sexual maturation in representation across Southern Africa (1998). There seems to be a dualistic function of these objects. The first function serves as a socializing play tool for young girls, allowing them to mimic their mother's breastfeeding and nurturing (Dell, 1998). Yet dolls and children's dolls "provoke difficulties in their classification because the child's fantasy gives them special psychological functions, thus placing them on the ritualistic and especially animistic level… the endowment of life to a dead thing" (Jurkowski, 1988: 144).

Dell explores the different instances in which the figurines, often bisexual in form (combining female and male symbolism) function across the life spans of women. They do not just represent wished for babies, but also represent women when they reach child bearing age and menstruation, serve as tools of sexual instruction to initiates, and are used for social education and the processes of feminine maturation. They are also very specific tools for adult ritual performance dealing with "imagination and projection". "The latter can function as intermediaries between living and dead, between women and their powers to reproduce… a system of metaphorical thought centering around fertility" (Dell, 1998: 13). Figurine and "doll" practices, such as those of the Venda in South Africa, sit deeply and resonantly within multisexual, gender political symbolism, feminine rites of passage and sexual knowledges that are very hidden from masculine, western epistemologies and discourses. My hunch is that many more politically resonant domestic "puppetry" rituals stemming from feminine empowerment traditions survive in deeply resilient and resistant personal practices by women in the subaltern.

South African puppetry's origins in animist creative practices provide fertile entry points into this primarily embodied art form. As I have established, puppetry has a unique ability to facilitate an interdisciplinary

meeting place of construct and sentience. Animism brings to the fore the resistant and interstitial potential of play, ritual and imagination that feeds puppetry practices. It offers invisible entry points to play and ritual deeply concerned with a new way of being in the world. It is the symbiotic potential of everything and everyone around, within, above and below, everything with which humanity shares this universe, of form and sentience that is the heart of animism. Animism holds open the doors of not just an alternative resistance to the destructive segregations of hegemonic discourse and systems, but of living awareness of the fluidity of boundaries so crucial to revisioning identity, sexuality, self, environment and being in the 21st century. Radical feminine modes of knowing through embodied (pro)creativity as well as dissolution, align to animist impulses where "materials of all sorts, with various and variable properties, and enlivened by the forces of the cosmos, mix and meld with one another in the generation of things" (Ingold, 2014: 294).

> Secularisation has resulted in the brutal damming up of puppetry's mainsprings of dramaturgy, which arose from the medium's natural affinity to things spiritual, to ritual, religious ceremony, fear of the otherworldly and the inexplicable… Animism has been stifled, and animism…is the stuff of puppetry… (Francis, 2007: 7)

This statement draws us back to the non-secular, unseen and categorically ambivalent aspects of puppetry. The classification of puppetry, when we consider its origins in magical thinking, always veers towards a natural crossing of boundaries, an intermingling of forms, functions and imagination.

Recently there has been a resurgence of scholarly interest in the philosophy, concept and theories of animism and its specific occurrence and influence across the world today (Harvey, 2014). Anthony Kubiak describes the animistic worldview as one that is inherently performative at its core, expressing and embodying what he calls "the relational personness" of all manner of entities in the world (2012). This relationality is highly significant to the emergent third of the Feminine Semiotic in that it expresses an interstitial place, both defined by the surfaces of form and permeable to the forces of imagination, memory, myth, spirit, emotion and being. Anthony Kubiak writes about a world that:

> … Is always-becoming, a world actualized and realized as process through the performance of *life*. To live in such a world demands that one be constantly alive to the place of others and otherness, that one continually express one's respect and gratitude to Otherness itself, simply because this is what opens us out into the Other and empties the self… (Kubiak, 2012: 58)

Perhaps the problem is that the very real potential of animism is actually something more than what we perceive with our eyes, but which we can feel *is* there. This makes it critically and epistemologically volatile and resistant to empirical discourse. Kubiak states that what is at stake in animism is a turn away from categorical closures, subjectivities and systematizations, favoring an awareness of "becomings, of processes, of interdependencies at the level of thought, but also at the level of experience" (Kubiak, 2012: 57). Animism has been stigmatized in language and thought as a religious belief system, but anthropologists today write about new animism, that is animism understood in phenomenological terms as an integrative and interrelational understanding of life, which Tord Olsson says is inhabited by a number of persons, only some of which are human and living (Olsson, 2013: 317).

It is this exciting potential of animism as a continuous, ever-porous and mutable process, that expresses the inherent relationality and permeability of nature and life itself. It also speaks to the flux and porousness of categories that the Feminine Semiotics of puppetry seeks to render present. Infused with what Kubiak calls an attitude, a stance of openness, of awareness and appreciation, animism can be a conscious enactment and performance. In this performance, all things can be perceived to co-create one another in an ever-arising, "unending reciprocity between entities", that allows each the space of their own unfolding, their freedom to be (Kubiak, 2012: 58).

## The Feminine Semiotic in the Living Sculpture of Nandipha Mntambo

South African sculptor Nandipha Mntambo, in her solo exhibition *The Encounter* (2009), uses her own body as a catalyst for radical animist expression, which I would consider to be a particularly Feminine Semiotic.

148

Mntambo herself has declared that the biggest misconception about her work is that it has a feminist agenda at its core. She speaks of her interest in pushing the boundaries of attraction and repulsion, body and materiality in an interview with Natasha Madzika. She says, "I've always been interested in challenging our understanding of boundaries, pushing that thin line that exists between attraction/repulsion, animal/human, and male/female. It's wonderful that my intentions are clear within how my work is read" (2012). Mntambo's sculpture and imagery blurs the visual and material boundaries of the seen and unseen, self and other, masculine and feminine, western and African, through what I would like to term living animist sculpture.

Mntambo would not classify her work as "puppetry", especially as puppetry is stigmatized as a Western "craft" practice. This refers back to the stigma of "puppetry" as popular, rather than high art. In many respects, female artists fight constantly to be recognized as significant contributors to contemporary artistic practice and discourse (Aston and Harris, 2008). In identifying a Feminine Semiotics within animist practices, I feel that it is significant to locate and identify where animism is practiced by female artists specifically concerned with the permeability of sexual boundaries and the multiple presences of desire, as Mntambo herself has attested to. I do feel that there is value in recognizing and exploring the complex feminine interplay of highly visible animist elements within Mntambo's work. As a scholar and puppetry artist myself concerned with uncovering the potential Feminine Semiotics at play in puppetry, I offer a co-creative reading of how animism may potentially be interpreted within Mntambo's artwork.

The invocation of multiple, multi-sexual presences and persons in Mntambo's sculptures, through my own creative gaze, correlates to the visible and invisible "presences" conjured in other African fetish and puppetry traditions such as those of the Bambara and the Venda. These presences are the foodstuffs of puppetry's non-secular and counter-epistemological powers. Mntambo's living sculptures, in my reading of their visceral impact, play intimately with the seen and unseen of the object-fetish-form, invoking highly present personalities in their morphology. It is also what I perceive as the movement of permeability, melding and transmutation that elicits for me, as a puppetry practitioner, an awareness

of the living aspects evident in Mntambo's sculpture. This living, artistic gesture of permeability, in which the boundaries of self and other mutate, invites the viewer as well as the artist into a creative process deeply concerned with a new way of being in the world, a way of being where "in favour of dissolution, …I enter into the other as the other enters into me in a symbiosis" (Kubiak, 2012: 57).

The boundaries of coherent masculine identity, as well as the subversion of the masculine, is made highly visible through Mntambo's reclamation and re-working of cowhide – a traditional product of cattle agriculture and patriarchal economic power. Thembisa Waetjen writes of rural patriarchal agrarian economies implemented by the Nguni people of South Africa where "the raising, herding, and exchange of cattle in particular, were exclusively male concerns… accompanied by an elaborate system of gendered taboos and rituals" (2004: 37). Mntambo radically shifts and re-appropriates the symbol of the bull by intimately re-shaping cowhide with her own naked body. In her sculptural animism, she provides new ways of seeing multi-layered processes of being and experience through the feminine. She invokes a cross-cultural symbolism of the bull through a series of sculptures, videos and photographs wherein her body becomes the vehicle for the revision of desire and presence. In these sculptures, not only does Mntambo subvert traditional patriarchal cross-cultural images, but she also reclaims the role of South African women as the producers of living sculpture traditions. Through her multimedia performance and sculptural works, she immerses her own embodied, sexual presences in highly specific cross-gender, intercultural images and interspecies iconographies. Mfundi Vundla (2012: 2) writes of his encounter with the work:

> One walks through the exhibition hearing multiple polyrhythmic narratives from a cowhide drum. The artist's percussive voice takes us through a range of emotions: aggression, anger, submission, self-love, self-hate, ecstasy, the need for sanctuary… in a society such as ours in which women are too often regarded as second class citizens… Mntambo's feminist concerns are, in my view, tangents from the spine of her aesthetics which possess an undercurrent of the spiritual.

In this exhibition, Mntambo hangs and positions moulds of her

own female body, cast in cowhide in various tableaux in the exhibition room. These cowhide body casts are set in various actions of movement, suspended in the moment of kinesis, which in my own reading of their suspension is anything but static or dead. The living sculptures call presence into the body casts, inhabited by the unseen persons and other than persons evoked in their mimetic forms. In the one tableau of sculptures called *emabutfo* (the name for traditional Swazi male warriors), multiple cowhide bodies are suspended from the ceiling in military lines. Here Mntambo confronts the "demarcation of war as male territory" by revisioning cultural icons of aggression and fighting through the feminized, animist body (Vundla, 2012: 2). She does this in another sculpture, a single cowhide cast in the shape of her body, which opens into a voluminous skirt surrounded by cow hooves. Entitled *Nandikeshvara,* the title evokes Hindu mythology in the Sanskrit Nandi, the name of the holy bull, which serves as the mount of the god Shiva and as the gatekeeper of the god and goddess Shiva and Parvati. The aligning of the bull to masculine spiritual power is reimagined in the feminine sensuality of the image, which is cast from Mntambo's naked torso, highlighting her bare breasts. This is further articulated by the proximity of three truncated cowhide bodies kneeling in prayer, in the presence of a huge cowhide *uMcedo,* a Swazi women's fertility/pregnancy hut (Vundla, 2009: 2).

Animism, according to writer Tim Ingold, is an invitation, not to a way of thought or discourse, but one of being alive to the world. It requires sensitivity and responsiveness in our perceptions to the permeability and change of everything around humanity (Ingold, 2013: 294). It is also a re-membering of our inextricable interrelationship to the world in all of her myriad occurrences, human and other-than-human. Thus, the relationality of animism is not limited to the human being as a separate form of existence. Mntambo's imagery in my experience and understanding of the animist elements, walks these thresholds by creating potent interspecies images and mythological personalities, which render the unitary form of the masculine body and reality within the flux of the Feminine Semiotic.

In a series of photographs and sculptures, Mntambo defiantly confronts us as a hybrid human-animal called *Europa*, who then also transforms into the narcissist and rapist *Zeus,* immortalized in a confronta-

tional bronze bust. These interspecies, multisexual representations are a reworking of the ancient Greek myth of the abduction and rape of Europa by Zeus. Mntambo merges her bare torso and head with the horns of a bull, creating herself as a female minotaur, literally sculpting her living flesh into a powerful interspecies expression of ferocious feminine presence. The trauma of sexual violence enacted on Europa by Zeus is inverted into a highly reflexive shift in their respective roles in this event.



*Europa*, from *The Encounter* Exhibition by Nandipha Mntambo, Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town 2008.

Mntambo creates an image of complex ambiguity, a third space in which Mntambo holds both the gaze of desire and sexual aggression, as well as the receptive body of victim and participant. In this semiotic gesture, I interpret both the victim and the attacker within the image, inviting the third space of the audience into a complex and intriguing subversion of feminine vulnerability, weakness and sexual desire. In Mntambo's sculpture and multimedia work, I read a confrontation between the visual and mythic borders of hegemony, of social order as well as the body (as a microcosm of those ideologies). I also witness the ability of sculptural form, traditionally perceived as a stationary creative process, to

visually and metaphorically reveal new statuses of being in the artworks where traditional representation is exceeded by living presence. Through this, I interpret what animism offers explorations of sexual identity, in a powerful evocation of the third, of the unspecified and unknown within creative practice. My writing and reception of Mntambo's creations in this light seeks out the Feminine Semiotics held within the latent animism and exploration of presence in her work.

## Jill Joubert's Apple Girl
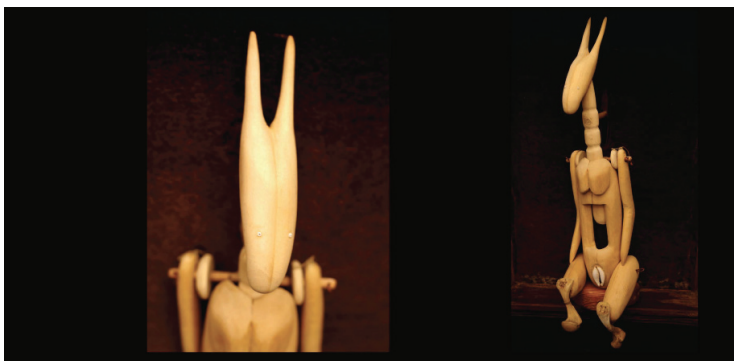


Seated Therianthrope, from Jill Joubert's *Apple Girl*, Cape Town 2012



The Triptych, from Jill Joubert's *Apple Girl*, Cape Town 2012.

Jill Joubert is a contemporary South African puppeteer who has been creating, exploring and performing with puppets since the 1980's. She was a founding member of the world-renowned Handspring Puppet Company in the 1980's and her solo contemporary puppetry work over the past twenty years has been showcased on prestigious platforms such as the Institute for Creative Arts live art platform *Infecting the City*. I would like to offer my own creative interpretations of the Feminine Semiotics at play in one of her most recent productions, *Apple Girl (*2012), created for Joubert's Master's degree which was co-supervised between the separate departments of sculpture (Fine Art) and theatre (Drama) at the University of Cape Town South Arica. Joubert writes in her Master's Thesis that *an Italian fairy-tale of the same name inspired Apple Girl.* The fairytale, she describes, was taken specifically from a feminine folk tradition, in which oral tradition and storytelling was held not by men but by the grandmothers of the community (Joubert, 2012). Joubert describes *Apple Girl* as a ritualized performance that enacts metamorphosis and transformation. The piece was created as a series of performed sculptural tableaux that took the form of various mobile shrines, which she says functioned as "mini puppet theatres" (Joubert, 2012: 6). These mobile shrine/puppet theatres are moved by Joubert through the performance, shaping the space until at the end of the performance they become a "constellation of tableaux as an art work, fixed as an arrangement of sculptures to which the performance has given a framework for presentation and interpretation" (2012: 6).

In informal discussions about the performance, Joubert described to me how her own presence in *Apple Girl* is a performative interaction with each shrine as a moment of ritual. I interpret Joubert's performed rituals as a series of specified, meaningful gestures that echo the fairytale narrative and resonate within the imaginative and critical spaces of the Feminine Semiotic. These spaces arise for me through Joubert's use of presence and symbolism. The ritual shrines in Joubert's performance do this by presenting what I interpret as spatial and metaphoric moments, framed by multicultural symbolic forms in the narrative of the reworked fairytale.

As described in her thesis, Joubert works very closely with African mythologies (from which a vast amount of African ritual figurines

are derived), feminine archetype and mythological iconographies in her sculptural forms in *Apple Girl*. The threshold space that characterizes the Feminine Semiotic emerges in my interpretation through the personal and political, sexual and spiritual landscapes that Joubert's puppetry invokes in *Apple Girl*. I read the Feminine Semiotics of her work, not only in the transformative symbolism of the story itself but in the presence of the living sculptures that express what Joubert describes as her "numinous appreciation of the material world, the objects of which resonate with their many lives once lived" (Joubert, 2010: 8). The found things, built from "scavenged" objects, combine and recombine to form the bodies of the living sculpture. Joubert only uses found materials to carve and create her puppets.  As in many African puppetry, mask and figurine traditions (Joubert, 2010) she carves and combines natural, impermanent materials such as bones, wood and shells. The cast-off fragments gathered from various places, express for Joubert the nomadic trajectories of time, place and memory in the historical residue of the things themselves. Importantly, Joubert writes that the objects speak as well to the passage of time in women's sexual identity, most notably her own rite of passage into menopause. In an interview, Joubert described to me how she combines natural found objects such as wood and bone with highly personal materials, such as her mother's wedding dress, her daughter's childhood clothing, items associated with the trajectory of her own sexual and feminine cycles of life, to create transculturally metaphoric puppet forms.

In one of Joubert's tableau shrines, entitled *The Boudoir of the Queen*, the central puppet on the altar is the figure of the infertile Queen, yearning for a child. The wooden Queen figure stands on an adapted bedside table on wheels, with rolling pin handles (echoing cults of western feminine domesticity). Deep red curtains, cut from the clothing of Joubert's own daughter's childhood, surround the table. Joubert describes the Queen as derived from women's fertility and power icons of the snake goddess of ancient Crete "with hair carved to resemble fiery snakes, youthful bare-breasts, small waist and flared skirt, evokes the snake-goddess of Crete… When static, the queen's arms are outstretched in the gesture of grace synonymous with the Virgin Mary" (Joubert, 2010: 52). Thus, Joubert herself situates the puppet of the Queen within non-

secular traditions that used religious icons (catholic) and fertility figurines (prepatriarchal) in ritual and empowerment practices.

According to Vicki Noble, a women's spirituality scholar, states that "much of the earliest art appears to have been created by women in ritual context" (Noble, 1991: 155). Noble's research is highly influenced by the seminal work of Maria Gimbutas who wrote prolifically on ancient feminine art and figurine traditions. Noble aligns women's creative and spiritual practices, which she relates to the sexual significance of the feminine biological fertility cycle. More than this, Noble connects women's figurine practices to sexual and creative empowerment (1991). Joubert's reflection on fertility iconography through the carved figurine can also be contextualized within South African fertility figurine traditions. In South Africa, fertility figures were designed to be moved, carried, performed and used, rather than simply standing still on display. The fertility doll also contained both male and female sexual forms in its representation, in which

> Embedded in its design… was a narrative of denial of masculinity. The Doll offered women the opportunity to express, celebrate or teach an autonomous concept of female identity and fertility… There is ample evidence for women's ideological opposition to the patriarchy. (Dederen, 2010: 34)

The fertility figurine brings resistant and subversive practices into women's rites of passage and matrilineal inheritance. Dederen says that many of the fertility "dolls" of these traditions may be seen to express an autonomous feminine perspective of procreation, a feminized rendering of sexuality that served as "an alternative to the masculine vision of sexual complementarity" (2010: 36).

Dederen writes a significant feature is often the dual sexual nature of the icons, which contain references to the sexual identity of both men and women. Dederen looks at the latent feminine empowerment oft-ignored in the Tsonga marriage figurine traditions in the Limpopo province of South Africa. Many researchers simply dismiss their importance by attributing their purposes as reminders of the sanctity of marriage to newlyweds and, by implication, the male privileging patriarchal

systems surrounding them. But rather than the doll being referred to as a child (*n'wana*) by women, it is also called *xanga* and *tshutshu*, words that hold great significance in women-led lineage traditions. The *xanga* figurine arises in complex ways through the *tshutshu* practices, which situate women as keepers of matrilineal descent and feminine ancestral meaning. Held only by the female line, this living figurine offers significance for the maintenance of feminine power, education and representation within Venda society.

As Dederen points out, the doll provides women with a powerful tool to symbolically weaken the patriarchy of their society (2010). The fertility figurine can be seen to hold a deeply resistant feminine presence, subversive of patriarchal power, specifically as it arises in personal practices and spaces. While this subversive potential may not have been explicitly revealed in public, in the secret and sacred traditions of feminine initiations their use and perception was linked specifically to the sexuality and pride of the women.

In *Apple Girl*, the queen laments her inability to conceive in a public way, but the presence of her own fertility and feminine power is held in the symbols on her body as well as symbols present yet hidden from the view of the audience. Joubert (2010: 51) describes the tableaux world, as well as the figure of the Queen puppet, as filled with symbols of fertility, expressing her yearning desire to bear a child:

> As the boudoir of the queen is wheeled into the performance, Crawford sings the queen's lament, with words taken directly from Calvino, punctuated by the puppet raising her arms in varied gestures of supplication, epiphany and despair.
>
> *Oh! Oh! Oh!*
>
> *Oh! Oh! Oh!*
>
> *Oh! Oh! Oh!*
>
> *Oh why can't I bear children the same as the apple tree bears apples?*

*Oh why can't I bear children the same as the apple tree bears apples?*

*Oh! Oh! Oh!*

Yet, Joubert describes how inside the closed drawer of the table on which the queen stands, there are fertility symbols (spiral snakes, cosmic eggs, and a labyrinth with a vulva), which she describes as "attached to the little cupboard like a silent prayer" (Joubert, 2010: 51). The hidden prayers within the shrine express a symbolism of feminine procreativity in a secretive way, which echoes the ways in which fertility figures have been and are used by women in their personal experiences of desire and fertility as described by Dederen above. In my own creative reading of the symbolism in Joubert's piece, these hidden fertility symbols express the sexual power and creative force of the queen, as she does in fact manage to conceive a daughter, called Apple Girl. My interpretation links the queen in Joubert's performance to South African fertility doll practices, specifically through the intimate ways that the symbolism of fertility and the fertility figures hold presence (visible and invisible) for individuals. The personal intimacy of the fertility figure, which gathers meaning and power in women's secret spaces is a potential locus of its resistance as a Feminine Semiotic.

In the ritual performance of *Apple Girl*, Joubert enters multiple feminine imaginative and animist bodies and spaces. The evocations of personal myth in the ritual objects she creates express transformative rites of passage into and through womanhood, sexuality, and personal metamorphosis that the story's archetypes express. One of the most significant of the ritual tableaux in Apple Girl is what Joubert calls *The Altar*, a large constructed wooden box that houses three sculpted figures. The figures combine and revise specifically pre-patriarchal and pre-western fertility and power icons such as the bisexual ancestral Khoi San therianthrope from South African rock art. The second sculpture references the Venus of Willendorf (a fertility icon from prehistoric European art) built out of tortoise bones. The third is based on the Senufo (Ivory Coast) sculpture of *Kono*, the ancestral bird-woman made from pig's scapulas. These figures are present throughout the performance, overseeing the unfolding events and witnessing them within the multisexual presence of the sacred feminine.

Joubert speaks of the therianthrope, a gender-ambiguous figure derived from San rock paintings found in South Africa, which she says suggests

An ancestral inter-connectedness between humans and animals… This numinous figure is intended to be sexually ambiguous, representing the enviable state of balance in which gender is no longer relevant: the breasts and horns could be either male or female and the cowrie shell suggests a navel or a vagina. (Joubert, 2012: 44)

This sexual ambiguity and bisexuality is seen in many other traditional South African fertility figurines, for example the Sotho *Ngoana Modula* (child of grass) or the Ntwane fertility dolls called *Gimwane*, where the figure has a phallic shape but is covered in the feminine traditions and symbolism of beadwork. These gender-ambiguous figurines, far from making gender irrelevant, potentially derive from bilineal, pre-patriarchal heritage in which shared power between sexes was expressed through the sexual potency of these figures (2010: 27). Dederen goes so far as to suggest that "the feminized phallic image would have redefined manhood as a mere tool for the realization of female identity", the ultimate power of woman to hold the mysteries of life and procreation, menstruation and death that is the complex process of feminine fertility and lineage (2010: 36).

These meanings would also have taken their full significance in the actual performance of ritual, extending beyond the figure itself and highlighting the acutely permeable surfaces of separation between self and other. In the liminal states of women's sacred performance, the figurine is integral to flux, power, protection, embodiment, and spirit of the rite of passage. As Dederen points out, the figurine would also have innovated and changed over the centuries, but always serving as reminder and representation of the womb where "in the sphere of human procreation, female sexual potency rules supreme" (2010: 37).

The triptych altar in *Apple Girl* is situated not only as a centerpiece for reclamation of feminine power, but also operates as limen, a permeable symbolic entranceway between the shifting forces of sexuality, power, spirit and material. Minh-ha declares that the artist's job is to

bring forward and open the realms of the visible and invisible (1987). It is both the visibility and invisibility of what she terms the inappropriate other that could pose a transformative strategy for representation. Here, "one would have to break with such a system of dualities and show… what constitutes invisibility itself as well as what exceeds mere visibility" (Grzinic, 1998: 3). On Joubert's performance altar, the therianthrope, the ancestral bird woman, and the Venus inhabit a liminal space, that is they are both *in* the world and *between* worlds, here and elsewhere simultaneously. Minh-ha uses the terms "elsewhere" and "within here", aligning identity representation with the destabilization of time and space (Grzinic, 1998: 3). The destabilization of time and space by the gender-ambiguous figure of the therianthrope and the interspecies form of the bird woman operate to question, to celebrate, and to corrode the fixedness of the subject in the here and now.

I read the Feminine Semiotics of animism in Joubert's living sculptures, as expressed in the melding points of form and construct, ritual and performance, myth and metaphor, personal and political in her creative meaning making. It is these multiple layers that converge in the "puppet" as what Joubert calls "performed sculpture" (2010: 27), that render it an inappropriate other in my understanding. This permeable and threshold place of the puppet, in my reading of it, both expresses and confounds construct and being, visually and critically bridging the inside and the outside, seen and unseen, the critical and the embodied.

## Conclusion

The Feminine Semiotics of the inappropriate other arises in artistic practice in ways that, as Minh-ha declares, exceed the limits while working within them (Grzinic, 1998). The emergent third space of animist presence at the heart of women's puppetry works in complex ways, which, as I have explored, to quote Minh-ha, are "simultaneous and always inexhaustive" (Grzinic, 1998). This borderline, in-between space of animism is what Sara Motta describes as the state of potential and possibility that is alive in the feminizing of resistance through creative practice (2014). Motta locates this in the figure of the storyteller. She writes,

> The storyteller dwells out of choice in the margins when as a self that is oppressed, she makes a choice at the crossroads of these two states and ethically commits to politicize this in-betweenness… The storyteller thus does not seek aesthetic, epistemological, and cultural separation from, or control over, the popular. The storyteller imbues the embodied experiences of oppressions with epistemic power… She commits to practices that decenter dominant literacies by reclaiming, recovering, and reinventing the knowledges of the body, heart, and land. (Motta, 2014: 12)

The interstitial space of the storyteller/artist that Motta describes exists specifically in her co-creative, communal re-imagining of being and that is deeply imbricated in, rather than separated from, the embodied personal and collective experience of "history, spatiality, cosmology, culture, and social relations" (Motta, 2014: 12). The storyteller co-constructs meaning through collective re-weaving that breaks down the boundaries of her own narrow identifications with self as well as the monolithic, self/other epistemologies of hegemony. In women's contemporary resistance practices, puppetry proffers an entry point to a co-constructive strategy of creativity that is located in a deeply feminine multigeneity of being.

Animism expresses the syncretic, multidisciplinary and energetic potential of radical cultural and representational practice. Confluences of ritualized liminality, syncretism and experiential slippage through embodiment, exist at the heart of women's puppetry performance concerned with animism. These expressions are key to the feminized resistance of this inappropriate other of creative practice in South Africa as well as elsewhere in the world. What this ever-evolving art form offers the landscape of radical as well as materialist subaltern feminist enquiry is an artistic strategy of spiritual and sexual resistance to western patriarchal oppression. What I hope this exploration of the feminine semiotics of animism has begun to reveal, is how the intimately feminine creative impulse expressed through puppetry may be linked to the feminization of resistance and emergent processes of being in the threshold spaces of the subaltern.

I am aware, as a South African artist, of the stigmatization and invisibility of women's puppetry, not only in our own country, but in how this perception is echoed in global performance practices (Obraztsov, 1967). This particular stigma has, to a large extent, excluded puppetry by shaming it as women's practice directed at the immature and excluding it from high art discourses. Part of this is due to the occidental assumption that the roots of modern puppetry practice aimed at adults and a critical audience, stem from masculine modernist and postmodern traditions. Focus is primarily afforded to the intersecting patriarchal traditions of European, Mediterranean and Asian intercultural exchanges. There is little or no critical awareness of how these traditions arose historically in colonial and patriarchal imperatives that marginalized the feminine. Much of European puppet-object theorizing has sought critical substantiation, integrating the modus operandi of the puppet within the agency of the object in a specifically modernist discourse. This fearful de-feminizing and de-sexualizing of the energetic and sentient roots of puppetry in critical discourse, has done much to limit critical expression of the subversive, phenomenological heart of the practice and what this means for sexual and spiritual resistance. Yet it is the radical feminine at the heart of puppetry that offers so many of the discursive strategies for resistance that emerge in its contemporary performance applications.

The radical syncretism of the feminine resides in its liminality, at the threshold of form and sprit, sentience and construction, being and desire. The Feminine Semiotics of contemporary animism express sexual and spiritual emergence (as a process of ecstatic becoming, rising up) and emergency (as a call to address the ravages of patriarchal cultural and political domination) through complex representation of the permeability of being. This threshold space of flux and intersection heralds the imminent challenge of the inappropriate third to multiple sites of oppression and containment that operate to denounce the truly resistant practices of feminine creativity. Yet, in the intimate, often personal spaces of dolls, ritual, living sculpture, presence, symbol, slippage and embodiment that form aspects of women's puppetry practices today, we may find expression that provides a feminized strategy for r-evolutionary creative practices.

# References

Aston, Elaine and Geraldine Harris (2008) *Performance Practice and Process: Contemporary (Women) Practitioners*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Bhabha, Homi K. (1992) "The Other in Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse". In: M. Merck (ed.) *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality.* London: Routledge.

Case, Sue Ellen (1998) "Towards a New Poetics". In: J. Gay and L. Goodman (eds.) *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance.* London: Routledge.

Cixous, Hélène (1976) "The Laugh of the Medusa". Translated by Keith and Paula Cohen. *Signs,* 1(4): 875–893.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé (1991) "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color". *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6): 1241–1299.

Dederen, Jean-Marie (2010) "Women's Power, 1000 A.D.: Figurine Art and Gender Politics in Prehistoric Southern Africa". *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 19(1): 23–42.

Dell, Elizabeth (1998) "Introduction". In: E. Dell (ed.) *Evocations of the Child. Fertility Figures of the Southern African Region.* Cape Town: Human and Rousseau.

Francis, P. Dinneen (2006) "Figure vs. Object Power: A European Perspective". Paper presented at the *Out The Box Festival Conference*, Cape Town, 15 September 2006.

Francis, P. Dinneen (2007) "The Evolution of a Language". *Animated Encounters: A Review of Puppetry and Related Arts*, 1: 5–7.

Garrett, Shawn Marie (2002) "The Return of the Repressed". *Theater*, 32(1): 27–43.

Gómez-Peña, Guillermo (2011) "In Defence of Performance Art". *La Pocha Nostra Blog*. Available at http://www.pochanostra.com/antes/jazz_pocha2/mainpages/in_defense.htm, accessed 5 August 2011.

Grzinic, Marina (1998) "Shifting the Border of the Other: An interview with Trinh T. Minh-ha". *Telepolis*. Available at https://www.heise.de/tp/features/Shifting-The-Borders-of-The-Other-3441351.html, accessed 7 June 2009.

Ingold, Tim (2013) "Being Alive to a World Without Objects". In: G. Harvey (ed.) *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*. London and New York: Routledge.

Joubert, Jill (2010) "Shedding Assumptions: Some Perspectives on Puppetry in Cape Town from 1930 to the Present". Unpublished MA paper. Cape Town: University of Cape Town.

Joubert, Jill (2012) "Apple Girl: Ingesting and Transforming APPLE GIRL from Fairy Tale into Sculpture and Performance". Master's Thesis. Cape Town: University of Cape Town.

Jurkowski, Henryk (1967) "The Eternal Conflict". In: Union Internationale Des Marionnettes (ed.) *The Puppet Theatre of the Modern World*. London: George G. Harrap and Co. Ltd.

Jurkowski, Henryk (1988) *Aspects of Puppet Theatre*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kentridge, William (2001) "An Unwilling Suspension of Disbelief". In: *Episodes: An Installation of Puppets from Seven Productions over Sixteen Years by The Handspring Puppet Company*. Kohler, A. Exhibition Catalogue, Goodman Gallery.

Kershaw, Baz (2009) "Practice as research: An Introduction". In: J. S. Allegue, B. Kershaw and A. Piccini (eds). *Practice-as-Research: In Performance and Screen*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kristeva, Julia (1982) *Desire in Language*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Kristeva, Julia (1982) *Powers of Horror*. Translated by L. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

Kruger, Marie (2014) "What's in a Name? The Sense or Non-Sense of Labelling Puppets in Contemporary Western Theatre". *Cogent Arts & Humanities* (2014), 1: 990866.

Kruger, Marie (2016) "Puppets for and against social customs in Africa: a correspondence in aspirations". Available at https://www.google.fi/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwi5q7DZifbQAhUCDiwKHdWADkAQFggeMAA&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.researchgate.net%2Fprofile%2FMarie_Kruger2

%2Fpublication%2F233130557_Social_Dynamics_in_African_Puppetr
y%2Flinks%2F550468fc0cf24cee3a001184&usg=AFQjCNGkJtxL8hz7
XBsji4R84rNSKFYDQQ, accessed 15 December 2016.

Kubiak, Anthony (2009) "Cyber-ecstasy and the Visionary in American Politics". *Performing Arts Journal*, 91: 113–119.

Kubiak, Anthony (2012) "Animism Becoming-performance, or Does this text speak to you?". *Performance Research*, 17(4): 52–60.

Lorde, Audre (1997) "Age, race, class, and sex: women redefining difference". In: A. McClintock, A. Mufti and E. Shohat (eds.) *Dangerous liaisons: gender, nation, and postcolonial perspectives*, pp. 374–380. Minnesota, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Maradzika, Natasha (2012) "Nandipha Mntambo | Hide & Seek". *Another Africa*. Art & Culture, Interviews. Available at http://www.anotherafrica. net/art-culture/nandipha-mntambo-hide-seek, accessed 25 July 2016.

Meredith, Paul (1998) "Hybridity in the Third Space: Rethinking Bi-cultural Politics in Aotearoa/New Zealand". Paper Presented to Te Oru Rangahau Maori Research and Development Conference, Massey University, 7–9 July 1998.

Minh-ha, Trinh T. (1987) "Not You/Like You: Post-Colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference". *Inscriptions* 3/4.

Moi, Toril (1985) *Sexual/Textual Politics*. London: Routledge.

Motta, Sara C. (2013) "'We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For'": The Feminization of Resistance in Venezuela". *Latin American Perspectives*, 40(4): 35–54.

Motta, Sara C. (2014) "Latin America: Reinventing Revolutions, an 'Other' Politics in Practice and Theory". In: R. Stahler-Sholk, H. E. Vanden and M. Becker (eds.) *Rethinking Latin American Social Movements: Radical Action from Below*. New York and London: Rowman and Littlefield.

Noble, Vicki (1991) *Shakti Woman: Feeling our Fire, Healing our World. The New Female Shamanism.* San Francisco: Harper.

Nuttall, Sarah (2010) "Address on Interdisciplinary Research". Paper presented at the *Pre-Post-Per-Form Colloquium*, GIPCA Institute, Cape Town, 22 February 2010.

Nuttall, Sarah (2011) "The Way We Read Now". *Stellenbosch Literary Project*. Available at http://slipnet.co.za/view/blog/sarah-nuttall/the-way-we-read-now/, accessed 14 March 2011.

Obraztsov, Sergei (1967) "Some considerations on the Puppet Theatre". In: Union Internationale Des Marionnettes (ed.) *The Puppet Theatre of the Modern World*. London: George G. Harrap and Co. Ltd.

Oliver, Kelly (1998) "Julia Kristeva". Available at http://www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/kristeva.html, accessed 6 March 2009.

Olsson, Tord (2013) "Animate Objects: Ritual Perception and Practice among the Bambara in Mali". In: G. Harvey (ed.) *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*. London and New York: Routledge.

Papastergiadis, Nikos (1997) "Tracing Hybridity in Theory". In: P. Werbner and T. Modood (eds.) *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-Cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, pp. 257–281. London: Zed Books.

Posner, Dassia, Claudia Orenstein and John Bell (2014) "Introduction". In: D. Posner, C. Orenstein and J. Bell (eds.) *The Routledge Companion To Puppetry and Material Performance*. London and New York: Routledge.

Spivak, Gayatri (1988) "Can the Subaltern Speak". In: C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds.) *Marxism and the interpretation of Culture*, pp. 271–313. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Taylor, Jane and William Kentridge (1998) *Ubu and the Truth Commission*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press.

Vundla, Mfundi (2009) "A Compendium of Desires". In: S. Perryer (ed.) *Nandipha Mntambo: The Encounter*. Catalogue no 41/April 2009. Cape Town: Michael Stevenson.

Waetjen, Thembisa (2004) *Workers and Warriors: Masculinity and the Struggle for Nation in South Africa*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.