

Aesthetics and politics in contemporary South Africa

Thinking with a 'poetics of recycling'

Tamara Shefer

Abstract: South Africa is a context within which Rosemarie Buikema has thought deeply and conducted much of her empirical research for her book *Revolts in Critique*. This contribution pursues some of the ways in which Buikema's scholarship resonates with contemporary South African currents of thinking towards justice goals, within the academy and in the larger post-apartheid South Africa. Buikema's work provides a valuable philosophical framework for thinking with art for change, particularly through her feminist postcolonial conceptualisation of the 'poetics of recycling' which underlines the assertion that the articulation and/or the memory of trauma is not a linear process but a cycle that has to be reiterated, time and again in order to open up alternative imaginaries. I explore in particular the productive possibilities of this framework in thinking with current South African feminist decolonial and queer scholarship, art and activism that deploys imagination and creativity to disrupt the raced, classed, and gendered inequalities and violences that still characterise this local landscape.

Keywords: art, activism, politics, feminism, South Africa, 'poetics of recycling'

In *Revolts in Cultural Critique* Rosemarie Buikema (2020) poignantly argues that

Politics must employ different registers, use the power of the imagination and inventiveness and should thus look towards the possible worlds that are opened by art. (3)

Contemporary South Africa is a context within which Buikema (2020) has thought deeply, indeed conducted much of her empirical research for her recently published,

rigorously researched book. It is particularly notable then that South African political activists, and especially young decolonial feminist and queer activists and artists are indeed responding to such a call – deploying imagination and creativity to shift the raced, classed, and gendered inequalities and violences that still characterise this local landscape and the majority of lived experiences. Efforts to employ different registers, with emphasis on imagining alternative worlds, also characterise contemporary efforts in the post-apartheid era to transform the university and to reconceptualise scholarship disentangled from colonial and patriarchal logics. And in this respect too, there has been a long and increased emphasis on dialogues and collaborations across disciplines and modalities with particular attention to thinking with artistic and activist knowledges.

In this brief piece, I pursue some of the ways in which Buikema's thinking resonates with and the value it adds to contemporary South African currents of thinking towards justice goals, within the academy and in the larger framework of post-apartheid South Africa.

South African contexts of change

South Africa is a nation-state that is haunted by centuries of colonial and decades of apartheid oppression and violences. Almost three decades after democracy and the dismantling of legalised racism, the necropolitics of racial patriarchal capitalism and entrenched slow violences of poverty (Mbembe, 2019) continue, while intersecting inequalities of race, class, gender, and other vectors of inequality consolidate rather than abate. Within the university, the imperative to transform pedagogies, curricula, and research has been a long project during and post apartheid. In spite of nearly three decades of social justice goals in higher education, many contradictions, silences, gaps and failures remain present and global neoliberal emphases have further undermined more radical efforts to reconceptualise the university (Tabensky and Matthews, 2015; Pattman and Carolissen, 2018). South African universities continue to reproduce exclusionary and unequal practices both in and outside the academy (see e.g. Albert, 2023; Badat and Yusuf, 2014; Bozalek and Boughey, 2012; Msibi, 2013; Soudien, 2010).

Student activism, erupting in 2015 with #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall brought to the fore the way in which a lack of attention to the symbolic terrain of universities repeats colonial violences and further mobilised scholars to rethink 'transformation' efforts (Mbembe, 2015; Badat, 2016). Current Fallist¹ activism of

¹ The Fallist movement, a collective term for decolonial activism which began in 2015, included a strong grouping of queer and feminist activists who were particularly vocal in foregrounding the

young South Africans has particularly engaged a politics of affect and embodiment, frequently through art and performance, in challenging continued intersectional inequalities in higher education and more broadly in South African contexts (see e.g. Albert, 2023; Pather and Boule, 2019; Gouws, 2017; Shefer, 2018, 2019; Xaba, 2017). There has been widespread activism against racism, poverty, sexual violence, and exclusions of queer people, amongst other intersectional foci at many of the universities over the last few years. The activism of queer, decolonial, feminist students in particular acted to disrupt heteronormative, racist, and classist imaginaries, foregrounding intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other marginalities and subalternities (Xaba, 2017; Gouws, 2017; Hussien, 2018; Shefer, 2019).

The turn to alternative scholarly praxis, and with it the attention to diverse knowledges and fruitful collaborations, echoes many global calls to refuse the patriarchal, neoliberal capitalist university. Feminist decolonial scholars in particular have shaken up the normative logics of research and pedagogical practice to ask pressing questions about the way in which mainstream scholarship is framed in a set of logics that are epistemologically violent. Critiques from postcolonial, indigenous, and Black feminists regarding the extractivist representation of subalternity by privileged researchers and disempowering relations of patronage and epistemological violence (Mahmood, 2001; Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) are still salient today.

One emergent productive way of refusing extractivist logics is through an active collaboration with aesthetic knowledges, increasingly termed 'research-creation' (Manning, 2016; Truman and Springgay, 2015, 2016; Truman, 2021) as defined by Sarah Truman:

'Research creation' is used by: artists and designers who incorporate a hybrid form of artistic practice that draws from both the arts and science or social science research; scholars attuned to the role of the arts and creativity in their own areas of expertise; and educators interested in developing curriculum and pedagogy grounded in cultural productions, the arts, and attuned to process. (Truman 2021, xv)

A wide range of research-creation projects, located in feminist new materialist and post-humanist thinking, are currently flourishing in global contexts (e.g. *SenseLab*, *WalkingLab*, *Oblique Curiosities*) (Truman, 2021). While many of these are emergent

intersectionality of sexual and gender justice goals. Notable in the context of higher education is the work of the #transfeministcollective, including their performative activism at an exhibition at the University of Cape Town commemorating a year after the #RhodesMustFall movement, which succeeded in disrupting the exhibition and foregrounding queer activism as part of the decolonial movement.

in global Northern spaces, they are also in virtual spaces (e.g. *Feral Atlas* created by Tsing, Deger, Saxena & Zhou, 2021²) that open up global resources of possibility. Such forms of research-creation are more than evident in South African critical scholarship and activist work.

In a similar vein, a key terrain for rethinking South African scholarship and for larger justice efforts has been the overt conversation between scholarship and art, including artistic activism and aesthetic knowledge in general. Premesh Lalu (2003) has recently argued in his book *Undoing Apartheid* that only an aesthetic education can open up a future beyond apartheid. He speaks of the way in which apartheid regulated quotidian life that has resulted in increasingly mechanised forms of life that silence desire and creativity which persist in the post-apartheid:

The blockage was revealed at the very point where attempts were made to undo apartheid's oppressive grip on everyday life. Apartheid as a project that tilted sentience towards ever-more mechanical forms of life, appeared to heave wedged itself in the circuits of sense and perception, leaving little room for manoeuvre or escape, and even less for desire. (Lalu, 2023, 1)

Lalu (2023) argues the imperative of an aesthetic education to disrupt this vicious cycle: “[O]nly an aesthetic education attuned to a desire for post-apartheid freedom can properly prepare for a future beyond apartheid, especially with regard to an apartheid of the everyday...” (4). Such an argument dovetails with the work of scholars like Buikema, and further bolsters arguments for the possibilities of art and its role in projects of change and justice. As elaborated below, in *Revolts in Cultural Critique* (2020) Buikema unpacks in great detail, on the basis of rich South African and other material, how this unlocking of creativity is underpinned by and made possible through the way in which such art recycles the past and opens up alternative imaginaries for the future.

In this respect, it is notable that many scholars and artists in contemporary South Africa are increasingly working across and deconstructing boundaries of discipline, nation-state, and mobilities to collaborate across modalities of art, activism and academic scholarship. South Africa has seen the proliferation of creative and experimental intersectional gender justice artistic productions through art and performance both in public spaces of museums and galleries, but also through larger publics and virtual artistic and performative work and activist-artistic work, such as the example of Msezane's work (elaborated below) and many others (e.g. Pather and Boulle, 2019). There are many examples in contemporary South Africa of aesthetic disruptions of the entanglements of racism, classism, homophobic and

2 <https://feralatlans.org/>

heteronormative dominant culture. The work of queer art-activists FAKA and Nigel Patel³, for example, whose work is available on social media and in other public spaces, transgresses heteronormativity and othering narratives that proclaim queer as un-African, performing proud, pleasurable, and joyful gender non-binary Black living and loving (Malcomess, 2019; Disemelo, 2019; Shefer, 2018, 2019). Also emerging in the local South African as in global contexts are public activist-artistic projects, such as the *Walk* in the city of Delhi in protest of gender-based violence led by Maya Krishna Rao's performance company following the sexual violation and murder of Jyoti Pandey (Arora, 2020). The *Walk* was re-enacted in the South African context by *The Mothertongue Project*⁴ shortly after the brutal rape and murder of a young woman, Anene Booysen, in a rural area (Matchett, 2021). Such embodied public performance activism serves to open up productive possibilities for shifting the public towards imagining a safety, freedom, and justice for all.

Poetics of recycling: thinking with art for change

Rosemarie Buikema's work, brought together so beautifully and accessibly through multiple registers in her book *Revolts in Cultural Critique* (2020), provides a valuable philosophical framework for thinking with art in the above elaborated mobilising sense. Embedded in sophisticated and wide-ranging critical thinking, as well as in detailed understanding of relevant global and local contexts, *Revolts* is itself a work of art, for we are engaged as readers, inspired and moved at affective, embodied, and intellectual levels. Buikema reads the chosen artworks through her theoretical lenses, embedded in postcolonial feminist thinking and drawing on psychoanalytic feminist scholars like Julia Kristeva, with a dazzling fluidity, reading also these artworks through each other to movingly weave her arguments. To cite one example, in Chapter 5 we are taken through a powerful reading of the artwork of Judith Mason which speaks to the devastating murder of Phila Ndwandwe, an MK operative⁵, read through the works of poet and author Antjie Krog writing about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and read further through artist Wim Botha's recycled iron works and with Nandipa Ndwandwe's cowhide installations, which all speak with and through each other. Buikema (2020) reads these South African-based works of art through "the poetics of recycling [which] underlines the fact that the

3 Find FAKA at <http://www.siyakaka.com>; <https://www.facebook.com/faka0000/> and 'I Rise' by Nigel Patel, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ojr8wEdAt6o>. Accessed 20 March 2023.

4 www.mothertongue.co.za

5 uMkhonto we Sizwe, meaning "Spear of the Nation", abbreviated MK, was the armed wing of the African National Congress, founded in the wake of the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 to fight against the apartheid South African government.

articulation and/or the memory of trauma is not a linear process but a cycle that has to be reiterated, time and again” (107). Reading such artworks through each other with the particular conceptual lenses applied we are able, as Buikema so inspiringly argues to

visualise a new collective skin that has to encompass a myriad different, albeit sometimes conflicting, histories. Transition and reconciliation thus become a rhythm that, however slowly, both consciously and unconsciously inscribes itself ever more securely into the cultural memory of postcolonial, post-apartheid society. (102)

Such a ‘new collective skin’ is an imperative in reimagining alternative futures, since, as Buikema reminds us:

Every past is a heritage without a testament. A testament has to be compiled collectively in order to deal with this heritage, to make something new, to move on. (3)

South African young activists and artists are indeed reminding us of the need for attending to past trauma and for collective healing, remembering, and disrupting of past racist, classed, and gendered injustices towards a rearticulation of the present. One moving example which Buikema took up in her analytical work was that of Sithembile Msezane’s installation while the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, infamous colonial figure, was removed in 2015 from the University of Cape Town campus following student activist provocations. Msezane performed *Chapungu – the day Rhodes fell* (<http://www.sethembile-msezane.com/kwasukasukela>) on a plinth near the Rhodes statue for many hours while the statue was being removed.⁶ She was dressed to represent the soapstone statues of the African bird that were removed from the ruins of Great Zimbabwe during the colonial period, and sold to wealthy settlers like Rhodes. Msezane’s performative activism is not only an artwork but also a moment of artistic-activist interruption that presents “a powerful material-discursive disruptive moment in reminding the viewers of the multiple layers of colonial theft and violences” (Shefer, 2018, 174). Buikema (2020, 129) was quick to theorise the possibilities that such an artwork opened up:

In a symbolic gesture, the black female body is connected to this history of abuse whilst simultaneously turning her back on that past (...). As such a new generation of artists and activists claim the freedom to speak back to the normalising regimes

⁶ See <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/15/sethembile-msezane-cecil-rhodes-stature-cape-town-south-africa> for more detailed description and <http://www.sethembile-msezane.com/projects/> for more of Msezane’s work.

of academic knowledge production that disconnect intellectual projects from lived realities. (Matebeni, 2017, 37)

Constituting an activist-artistic performance and pedagogical intervention, this installation served as a poetics of recycling, in Buikema's terms, that surfaced the entanglements of patriarchal and colonial plunder and violence, repeating differently to remake an alternative symbolic. The moment may be read as an ascendancy of an agentic African femininity, with the descent of male, Northern white settler, both a symbolic reclaiming of that which was stolen, gesturing to a larger public 'correction', together with a call to the imperative to disrupt colonial and patriarchal logics in the university and further.

Important also is the public acknowledgement of intersectionality in conceptualising inequality and exclusion so evident in Msezane's performance of the entanglements of patriarchy and colonial power. Again, Buikema (2017, 147)⁷ succinctly summed up that Msezane's performance "thus inserts both academy and art into an activist performance, creating an image which forever links the de-colonization movement's critique of imperialism and patriarchy in an innovative and thought provoking way" (Buikema, 2017, 147).

This is but one example of the richness of 'thinking' with art which Buikema recognised immediately and which through her analysis foregrounds a valuable theoretical framing of the possibilities of aesthetic work in justice projects.

An invitation

Rosemarie Buikema (2020, x) offers this provocation to readers of her work:

It is my hope that exactly this – the desire to discuss what aesthetics and politics, when enacted jointly, can set into motion – is a challenge that readers of *Revolts in Cultural Critique* also feel invited to take up.

Undoubtedly many scholars around the world, as myself, appreciate and have taken up this invitation, both in how we write, and in the aesthetic projects that we may build into the scholarly work that we engage and promote in our teaching and research. Buikema's scholarly works are always refreshingly engaging and thought-provoking, and the theoretical arguments are folded into and unfolded through rich material, opening up an accessible and inspiring appreciation of the complex

⁷ This quote appears in Buikema's (2017) book in Dutch, translated in 2020, and cited from a paper presented in English at a conference in 2016 (Buikema, 2016).

work that art can do in justice efforts – not only by facilitating shared testimonies of the past, but also in reshaping an imaginary of the future, thus paving the way for discursive and structural change. Work of this strength and depth, which also offers activist and pedagogical possibilities such as Buikema’s own collaborative work on museum exhibitions like the MOED (Museum of Equality and Difference) projects (see Buikema et al., 2019), including *What is Left Unseen* and *Decolonial Dialogues with the Golden Coach*, disrupt hegemonic histories of representation which repeat colonial, racist, and patriarchal pasts and contribute towards decolonising museums (and larger social worlds). Such scholarly and activist engagements, which Rosemarie Buikema promotes so well in her incisive and affecting scholarship and aesthetic projects, reaffirm how productive and necessary it is for critical feminist, queer, and decolonial scholars to think and collaborate with artistic knowledges in the project of reimagining and remaking a just world.

Bibliography

- Arora, Swati. 2020. “Walk in India and South Africa: Notes towards a decolonial and transnational feminist politics”. *South African Theatre Journal* 33(1): 14-33.
- Albert, Wanelisa. 2023. “An encounter with the structural and spiritual violence of coloniality: Intersectional understanding of Black students’ experiences of exclusion in higher education”. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of the Western Cape.
- Badat, Salim. 2016. “Deciphering the meanings, and explaining the South African Higher Education student protests of 2015-2016”. Accessed 30 June 2016. <https://mellon.org/resources/shared-experiences-blog/south-africa-protests/>
- Badat, Salim and Sayed, Yusuf. 2014. “Post-1994 South African Education: the Challenge of Social Justice”. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 652. Accessed 12 March 2023. <http://ann.sagepub.com/content/652/1/127>
- Bozalek, Vivienne and Boughey, Chrissie. 2012. “(Mis)framing Higher Education in South Africa”. *Social Policy and Administration* 46(6): 688-703.
- Buikema, Rosemarie. 2016. *Academy, Art and Activism*. Paper presented at RINGS (International Research Association of Institutions of Advanced Gender Studies) Conference 2016: The geopolitics of gender studies, Cornerstone Institute, Cape Town, 16-18 November 2016.
- Buikema, Rosemarie. 2017. *Revoltes in de Cultuurkritiek*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Buikema, Rosemarie. 2020. *Revolts in Cultural Critique*. London: Rowman and Littlefield International.
- Buikema, Rosemarie, Ftouni, L., Jouwe, N., Rutten, B., Vázquez, R. & Wevers, R. (eds.) 2019. *What is Left Unseen: Catalogue of the Exhibition of What is Left Unseen, Museum*

- of Equality and Difference (MOED) in collaboration with Centraal Museum*. Utrecht: Centraal Museum.
- Disemelo, Katlego. 2019. "Performing the Queer Archive: Strategies of Self-styling on Instagram". In *Acts of Transgression: Contemporary Live Art in South Africa*, Jay Pather and Catherine Boule (eds.), 219-242. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- Gouws, Amanda. 2017. "Feminist Intersectionality and the Matrix of Domination in South Africa". *Agenda* 3(1): 19-27.
- Hussen, Tigist Shewarega. 2018. "ICTs, Social Media and Feminist Activism: #RapeMustFall, #NakedProtest, and #RUReferenceList movement in South Africa". In *Engaging Youth in Activism, Research and Pedagogical Praxis: Transnational and Intersectional Perspectives on Gender, Sex, and Race*, Tamara Shefer, Jeff Hearn, Kopano Ratele, and Floretta Boonzaier (eds.), 199-214. New York: Routledge.
- Lalu, Premesh. 2023. *Undoing Apartheid*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Malcomess, Bettina. 2019. "Don't Get it Twisted: Queer Performativity and the Emptying out of Gesture". In *Acts of Transgression: Contemporary Live Art in South Africa*. In Jay Pather and Catherine Boule (eds.), 193-218. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- Manning, Erin. 2016. *The Minor Gesture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Matchett, Sara. 2021. "Walking and Stumbling: The Aesthetic as Agitator for Activism". In *African Somoaesthetics: Cultures, Feminisms, Politics*, edited by C.F. Botha, 165-184. Leiden: Brill.
- Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Matebeni, Zethu. 2017. "Southern Perspectives on Gender Relations and Sexualities: A Queer Intervention". *Revista de Antropologia*, 60(3): 26-44.
- Mbembe, Achille. 2015. Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive. WiSER Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (website), Accessed 1 May 2016, <http://wiser.wits.ac.za/system/files/Achille%20Mbembe%20-%20Decolonizing%20Knowledge%20and%20the%20Question%20of%20the%20Archive.pdf>
- Mbembe, Achille. 2019. *Necropolitics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 1988. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses". *Feminist Review* 12(30): 61-88.
- Msibi, Thabo 2013. "Queering the Transformation of Higher Education in South Africa". *Perspectives in Education* 31(2): 65-73.
- Pather, Jay and Boule, Catherine (eds.). 2019. *Acts of Transgression: Contemporary Live Art in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- Pattman, Rob and Carolissen, Ronelle (eds.). 2018. *Transforming Transformation in Research and Teaching at South African Universities*. Stellenbosch: AfricanSun Media.
- Romano, Nike. 2019. "Just(ice) Do It! Re-memembering the Past Through Co-affective Aesthetic Encounters with Art/history". *Alternation* 26(2): 62-88.

- Shefer, Tamara. 2018. "Embodied Pedagogies: Performative Activism and Transgressive Pedagogies in the Sexual and Gender Justice Project in Higher Education in Contemporary South Africa". In *Socially Just Pedagogies in Higher Education: Critical Posthumanist and New Feminist Materialist Perspectives*, Vivienne Bozalek, Rosi Braidotti, Tamara Shefer and Michalinos Zembylas (eds.), 171-188. London: Bloomsbury.
- Shefer, Tamara. 2019. "Activist Performance and Performative Activism Towards Intersectional Gender and Sexual Justice in Contemporary South Africa". *International Sociology* 34(4): 418-434.
- Soudien, Crain. 2010. "Who Takes Responsibility for the 'Reitz Four'? Puzzling Our Way through Higher Education Transformation in South Africa". *South African Journal of Science* 106(9/10): 1-4. <http://archive.sajs.co.za/index.php/SAJS/article/view/429>. Accessed 22 January 2019.
- Spivak, Gayatri. 1988. "Can the Subaltern Speak?". In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), 71-313. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Tabensky, Pedro and Matthews, Sally (eds.). 2015. *Being At Home: Race, Institutional Culture and Transformation at South African Higher Education Institutions*. Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press.
- Truman, Sarah E. 2022. *Feminist Speculations and the Practice of Research-Creation: Writing Pedagogies and Intertextual Affects*. London: Routledge.
- Truman, Sarah E. and Springgay, Stephanie. 2016. "Propositions for walking research". *The Routledge International Handbook for Intercultural Arts Research*, Pamela Burnard, Elizabeth Mackinlay and Kimberly Powell (eds.), 259-267. New York: Routledge.
- Tuhiwai Smith, Linda. 1999. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed.
- Xaba, Wanelisa. 2017. "Challenging Fanon: A Black Radical Feminist Perspective on Violence and the Fees Must Fall Movement". *Agenda* 31(3/4): 96-104.

About the author

Tamara Shefer: Professor of Women's and Gender Studies, University of the Western Cape.