



# Agenda

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# “Butoh gives back the feeling to the people”

Sara Matchett  and Phoebe Kisubi Mbasalaki

## abstract

Our title is a quote from one of the sex workers. She is a member of the Sex Workers’ Theatre Group (SWTG) who made this statement after intense sessions on butoh that lasted three hours each over a period of four days. The SWTG is part of a project that investigates gender and cultures of (in)equality, working with theatre and performance as the main methodological approach. Noting the health of sex workers, physical and emotional – in a legally and structurally constrained environment – is of particular concern, this research considers gendered inequalities through a holistic approach to wellbeing that recognises the specific demands of the contexts in which sex workers work. Working with butoh principals, a form of Japanese dance theatre whose techniques offer an embodied praxis, it draws on embodied cognition and how this manifest through emotion. Butoh techniques, which call for the body to move in non-conventional ways, speak to how the state of the body modifies the state of the mind and by extension, emotions, hence, our title. In this article, we ask two central questions: within the framework of wellbeing, in what ways does embodied cognition manifest when butoh techniques are applied with a group of sex workers, whose daily lived experiences are in the midst of violence – physical, emotional, judicial and structural? And secondly, in this specific context, could butoh offer strategies that work within the framework of wellbeing? With this framing, we would like to offer some insight into embodied cognitions that challenge gendered inequality and injustices with a group of sex workers in Cape Town.

## keywords

butoh, social justice, sex work, *ubuntu*, embodied cognition

### Situating sex work in South Africa/ Cape Town within the framework of social injustice

Neoliberal rights in South Africa have failed to offer social justice for sex workers in South Africa. Gouws and van Zyl articulate this neoliberal failure so well when they posit that:

currently, we are facing the moral failure of neoliberalism to deliver justice to the world’s people, and increasingly, essential services are being privatised, with

care labour needing to be accessed through the markets (2015:165).

We see this failure on two fronts, firstly, in the fact that South Africa is said to have one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, yet sex work is still criminalised. This is a major failure in the delivery of rights. The neoliberal order in which South Africa’s constitution and laws are embedded should be recognising sex work as labour and not a criminal offence. According to Asijiki<sup>1</sup> (2019:n.p.), “sex workers all

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over the world have fought to use the term 'sex work' instead of 'prostitution' to show clearly that selling sex is a job and should be treated as one, rather than an abstract political or moral issue." And in this way, Asijiki adds, selling sexual services is similar to other services like offering entertainment, massages or counselling. A context like South Africa whose democratic governance is firmly embedded in neoliberal rights, should be able to recognise the civil liberties of sex workers, yet despite activism from sex workers and allies, refuses to.

Secondly, this moral<sup>2</sup> and judicial criminalisation exacerbates gendered and structural inequality for sex workers, which has major implications for their wellbeing. Statistics shows that sex workers in South Africa bear the brunt of physical and structural violence. The rather dated South Africa's Sexual Offences Act (Act 23, 1957) makes it illegal to exchange sex for financial reward. According to Gould and Fick (2008), this Act criminalises any activities related to the sale of sex, including living off the earnings of selling sex, persuading someone to become a sex worker, or keeping a brothel. The Institute for Security Studies commissioned this research, which sheds some light on the lives of street-based sex workers in Cape Town. This study found out that street-based sex workers experience various forms of physical abuse, violence and corruption at the hands of police. The statistics are alarming, "47% of street-based sex workers had been threatened with violence by police, 12% had been raped by police officers and 28% had been asked for sex by policemen in exchange for release from custody" (Gould and Fick, 2008:6). The experiences of sex workers are of marginal and dehumanised lives in South Africa.

Structural inequality along the grammar of race, class, gender, sexuality and ableism, creates conditions of precarity for sex workers entangled within the judicial and morality economy that drives sex work in South Africa. It causes a lot of uncertainty and ambiguity, which manifest in psychosomatic forms. This inequality surfaces in sex workers' lives through emotional and psychological aspects but is also stored through the body. Inequality is stored in the body cells, in the memory of these cells - it is embodied. This is what we are calling embodied cognition, which we derive from

the body being a repository, a site of and encrypted with disciplines and unmentionable pain and trauma. But it can also be the site of remembrance, hope, love and belonging. We locate embodied cognition within the field of Somaesthetics, a term coined by Richard Shusterman. Somaesthetics is, "[c]oncerned with the critical study and meliorative cultivation of how we experience and use the living body (or soma) as a site of sensory appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning" (Shusterman, 2008:1). Shusterman insists on viewing the body as an effective interpreter of what is occurring on a cognitive level (Shusterman, 2008:10) and by extension, on a structural level through cognition. Somaesthetics, as an interdisciplinary field of enquiry, provides a useful frame for understanding embodied cognition from the position of integrating theory and practice. We consider this necessary when participatory theatre and performance, as a research practice, is engaged as a means to explore gendered, sexed, racialised and classed inequalities amongst sex workers. Embodied cognition also conceivably correlates with Lisa Blackman's notion of corporeal consciousness. Blackman understands corporeal consciousness to present itself "through a 'thinking' body, which is seen to have particular kinds of intelligences and competencies" (2008:83-4).

Additionally, corporeal consciousness associates with Shusterman's Somaesthetics theory in that it positions the body as the key agent in making sense of and understanding the world. Both Shusterman and Blackman speak to the idea of accessing the internal world of the body through felt perception and how this, in turn, assists in making sense of and understanding the external world. This dance between the world of the body and the external world we inhabit is at the heart of performance practice. The notion of 'listening and responding' (and here we refer to listening with the entire body and not only the ears) and 'giving and receiving' is central to the training of all performers. The live sensorial presence of the performer is what facilitates an exchange between performers and audience. It is, therefore, necessary, in any performance training, to cultivate the live sensorial presence of the performer and this begins with the developing corporeal consciousness. These are key tenets that

inform the training modules that have been designed for the training of performers in the project that is being discussed here.

It is within embodied cognition – of a ‘thinking body’ – that we note that conditions of structural inequality and precarity impact caring, which we connect to wellbeing in a number of ways. According to Gouws and van Zyl, on the one hand, precariousness may,

initiate caring that arises from shared oppression, but on the other hand... undermine not only people’s abilities to care for one another, but also their ability to look after themselves. Caring relationships become destabilized, thereby exacerbating inequality and impairing people’s dignity (2015:169).

The non-governmental organisation (NGO) Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Task Force (SWEAT), brings together sex workers and allies who come together over a common oppression which manifests through various forms of creative activism around decriminalisation and de-stigmatisation of sex work. But also, in the same context, the fact that sex workers are structurally side-lined along the grammars of race, gender, class and sexuality, there are elements of interpersonal care that are neglected, exacerbated by a neoliberal order that fosters competition around positions. Therefore, the lack of social justice on many fronts, has a profound impact on wellbeing. We locate social justice as connected to equality – equality of resources, opportunities and subjective welfare (Austin, 2016) and by extension to wellbeing. According to Austin (2016) wellbeing can be measured using indicators of happiness, life satisfaction and positive state of consciousness such as feelings of self-worth. She adds that the “subjective wellbeing approach goes beyond equality of resources and opportunities and places ultimate value on the final end of feeling happy” (2016:5). Those who advocate for subjective wellbeing point out that it is “anti-paternalistic and democratic, since it takes into account people’s own evaluations of their own lives” (2016:5). This is the framework of wellbeing in which we are working, one that incorporates

aspects of social justice along the lines of equality but also considers and connects to subjective construction of wellness and happiness in an embodied nature as well as a communal level.

We argue that embodied cognition opens up possibilities to our framing of wellbeing. We situate these possibilities within *ubuntu*. We argue that physical theatre techniques that *butoh*<sup>3</sup> offers, open up possibilities for structurally side-lined communities, like sex workers, a form of embodied social justice channelled through *ubuntu* as wellbeing. These moments humanise sex workers in a context rife with dehumanisation where neoliberal rights dismally fail. *Ubuntu*, both as a philosophy and praxis evokes justice through the principles of equality, equity and fairness as well as human dignity in a relational context. By this, we centre the body, mostly because the,

African understanding of the body as holistic is the antithesis to Greek and the later Cartesian view with its dualistic split between body and soul... In contrast to this dualistic view, experience within the African world view is not disembodied, but rather bodily experienced. If you break down the body, the mind or the community, you break down the person and vice versa (Ras, 2017:1).

What this quote brings out for us is the fact that there is an entanglement between structural inequality and how these manifests in the body, through embodied cognition and how this affects social cohesion or communal interactions. We draw the line between structural inequality, ill health and community dis-cohesion as adverse to wellbeing. In other words, structural inequality that is perverse in society and marginalises sex workers manifests through the body as well as the severing of communal relationships. However, when healing begins to occur in the body, that is when the ethics of care are applied and experienced by the individual person as well as those around the community. It humanises the lives of those who have been historically dehumanised, such as sex workers in South Africa. It offers wholeness or re-members (wa Thiongo, 2009) the body and by extension the community in the *ubuntu* sense. As we will elaborate, *butoh* as a physical theatre

technique calls for connecting with the body in unconventional ways, which ‘brings back the feeling’ – emotions and offers aspects of healing, and therefore restores a form of embodied justice and dignity. Noting justice and dignity are also central to the *ubuntu* way of life, this way, caring for oneself emerges in conjunction with caring for and with the community. And therefore, works within the paradigm of what it feels like to ‘be moved’ and in turn to ‘move’ others.

In this article, we unpack the entanglement of structural inequality and how it manifests through embodied cognitions as well as connects wellbeing with sex workers in South Africa. We specifically explore the role of theatre and performance through the deployment of butoh techniques in fostering wellbeing as an embodied awareness of self and by extension others. In so doing, we investigate the understanding of theatre and performance as an embodied relational practice by drawing from Judith Jordan’s (2004) views on relational awareness and its role in transforming disconnection. Theatre and performance, because of its focus on embodied practices, offers practical tools to realise and fully understand what it means to be a somatically present self in a relational context. Therefore, butoh techniques and methodologies drawn on are integrative and incorporate emotional, spiritual, mental and embodied intelligences.

We start off by elaborating on the formation of the Sex Work Theatre Group (SWTG) as part of the GlobalGRACE project. This section explicates how the SWTG operates and functions. We then home in on butoh techniques and how these connect to embodied cognition and somaesthetics. This section highlights why the second training module for the SWTG engaged with physical theatre and why we chose to start with butoh. Following on, we unpack butoh techniques as well as principles and tie these techniques to aspects of healing within the self as well as within a group, connected to the African philosophy of *ubuntu*. We then present how the SWTG participants attest to the outcomes and impact of butoh based on reflection sessions with members of the SWTG during the butoh physical theatre module. Lastly, we

conclude by connecting butoh to the cultivation of somatic presence with the SWTG.

## Sex Work Theatre Group: The project, resources and participants

The SWTG was formed in March of 2019 as part of a collaborative research project with the African Gender Institute, the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies at the University of Cape Town as well as the NGO SWEAT in Cape Town. This research project is part of the global gender and cultures of in/equality project – the GlobalGRACE project.<sup>4</sup> GlobalGRACE employs arts-based practices and curatorial research to investigate the production of cultures of equality and enable gender positive approaches to wellbeing internationally (GlobalGRACE, 2018). In South Africa, our chosen methodology is participatory theatre and performance as a means of exploring gendered, sexed, racialised and classed inequalities amongst sex workers in Cape Town, in order to contribute to existing discussions within the public and policy arena on making gender equality a central issue in the democratic debate. As articulated in the previous section, this project works towards decriminalisation and destigmatisation of sex work. In the current criminalised and stigmatised environment, the health of sex workers, physical and emotional, is of particular concern. UNAIDS, which monitors the global epidemic on HIV, notes that in low and middle-income countries, women sex workers are 13.5 times more likely to be living with HIV as compared to the general population of women in comparative reproductive age groups. This increased exposure to HIV infection, illness and disability is exacerbated by moral and judicial frameworks that criminalise sex work (UNAIDS, 2016). The project therefore works with gendered inequalities through a holistic approach to wellbeing that recognises the specific demands of the structural environments in which sex workers work.

Our use of multi-sensory research methods with a group of sex workers helps to build trust and facilitate the sharing of sensitive stories and experiences of everyday life. This work includes paying attention to how spaces of labour, the devaluing of sexworker’s work, violence, health and

illness, the taboos surrounding sex work and the effects of discriminatory laws, produce inequality and injustice in sex workers' lives and affect their wellbeing, including social and economic opportunities. This multi-sensory exploration is implemented through workshops and creative interventions using narrative, participatory theatre and audio-visual methods to understand the interrelations of different inequalities and their effects, for example, access to justice and health and psycho-social care but also more hidden experiences such as how sex work can affect women's close relationships, sense of self, social networks and sources of support.

The SWTG was formulated through a selection process by judges based at the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies after a call for audition was put out in February 2019. A call for auditions was circulated through SWEAT's safe spaces and outreach programmes that see a number of sex workers gathering together. The auditions took place over a period of two days, and were workshopped based on three elements, namely: improvised scenarios, voice and movement. The judges based their selection criteria on assemblance, commitment, presence and team-work. Initially, 13 members were recruited and had to go through a probation period that lasted three months during the first module. The funding structures and programme could only allow for 10 members, and therefore an assessment process was implemented at the end of the first module, with the end result being 9 members. The SWTG, during the second module of training, constituted a diverse group that included two trans women, two women who identify as queer, one gay man as well as three heterosexual women. The group is comprised of participants mostly from South Africa and two Zimbabweans.

The training of the SWTG is meant to take place over a two-year period between April 2019 and April 2021. The workshops are set up in different modules centred around four theatre techniques, namely: forum theatre, physical theatre, voice, and spoken word as well as live art. Each module lasts about three months and culminates in a public performance. Forum theatre was the very first module taught to the sex workers and culminated in a

performance in August 2019. Forum theatre mostly engaged with Boal's (1985) techniques drawing on lived realities of the SWTG. This first module comprised of the following: improvisation, image theatre, forum theatre/facilitation skills and invisible theatre. The second module of physical theatre, started off with *butoh* (more on this later), followed by contact improvisation, a form of dance improvisation that explores the principles of weight sharing, touch, and physical or movement awareness. The third part of the second module explored mime storytelling; a form of physical theatre inspired by the work of Jacques Lecoq.<sup>5</sup> Our discussion in this article focuses on the first component we started the physical theatre module with – *butoh*. This took place over four sessions of three hours each with a *butoh* practitioner, jacki job. It is also important to note that we mostly focus on *butoh*, not the whole physical theatre module, mostly because of the rich material we witnessed with the application of *butoh* techniques and principles.

The decision to start the physical theatre training with the *butoh* module initially felt like we were taking a gamble. *Butoh*, because of its experimental nature, is not regularly chosen as a form to share with non-professional performers or performers who are not in professional training programmes. Previous experiences with job and how she taught *butoh*, however, inspired the decision to incorporate the form into the training module. job's emphasis on accessing the internal world of the body and how this affects one's engagement with the external world is what inspired the decision. Initially, we had scheduled the *butoh* training to come at the end of the module. However, due to facilitators' schedule alterations, this had to change. We deliberated whether we should take it out of the module entirely. After some consideration, we reached a decision to embrace the risk and start the module with it. After the first session, we realised we had made the right decision. The impact of the work on the participants was immediately evident. This discovery, in turn, played a role in inspiring the writing of this article. Each *butoh* session ended with a verbal reflection. The reflections were audio recorded on a smart phone. Members of the SWTG offered formal consent to the use of this

material for research purposes. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of the participants. As we interrogate in the sections that follow, from the material, there was a strong correlation between butoh techniques and wellbeing, as our title suggests. But before we get to the material, we interrogate what butoh is in the section that follows.

### **Butoh and wellbeing**

The butoh component involved training in the principles of the Japanese dance form, as taught and danced by South African performer and academic, jacki job. job lived in Japan for eight years where she studied butoh. job who grew up in Apartheid South Africa, and was racially marked as 'coloured', applied butoh's principles in one of her main choreographed dances – *Daazi lady* – as a refusal “to allow an embedded singular self-image composed by racist regime from occupying a central position” in her frame of reference as a racially marked 'coloured' woman (job, 2019:28). But rather, by applying butoh's principles, she was “cultivating an imagination that unbuilds inherited cultural epistemologies ... [putting] the body in search of hidden sources of knowledge” (2019:28). This way, job was “yearning for the new language which manifests itself in translation” in these hidden sources of knowledge. She adds that in performance, the body is able to “access multiple sources of knowledge and an awareness of spiritual and inanimate realms beyond the physical and psychological worlds generate new epistemologies” (2019:28). As our work will show in the section that follows on, this we witnessed with members of the SWTG where we connect these new generated epistemologies from 'unbuilding' epistemologies of structural inequality and stigmatisation which we connect to embodied cognition and wellbeing. These new generated epistemologies with the SWTG, when butoh techniques were applied, broke away from the singular narrative of stereotyping and criminalisation that sex workers experience on a daily basis, and produced a new knowledge with regards to the self and healing/wellbeing. This is what we are referring to as re-membering (wa Thiongo, 2009; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018), or making whole,

what was relegated by society as un-whole/singular, built on stereotypes.

According to Sondra Fraleigh the emergence of butoh was “partly as a refraction of America's bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and more generally in protest of Western materialism” (2010:11). In a sense, this connects well to the sex work theatre, which works within the framework of countering social injustice brought on by the judicial and moral order in South Africa. Helen Smith proposes three basic principles that butoh encompasses. These are “transformation, being moved and the empty body” (Smith, 2013:4). The first two principles affirm our choice to commence the physical theatre module with butoh. We felt the need to afford the theatre group members an experience that would connect them to the felt perception/sensations in their bodies as a way of experiencing what it feels like to 'be moved' and in turn to 'move' others. The idea of transformation, admittedly a very broad term that has been widely used and misused in various contexts, speaks to the concept of wellbeing that the GlobalGrace project espouses.

There are several research projects and programmes that have been implemented over the years in South Africa that focus on the intersection between theatre and performance, transformation and wellbeing. Two examples come to mind. The first being Zakheni Transformative Arts Centre<sup>6</sup> in Cape Town and the second, Drama for Life<sup>7</sup>, a research institute that is situated in the University of Witwatersrand School of Arts in Johannesburg. Both examples focus on the experiential and embodied aspect of theatre and performance as a way of catalysing transformation and wellbeing. The embodied aspect of this kind of work, over time, arguably cultivates and activates somatic presence in the participants. This encompasses a presence to self, to fellow performers/participants and an audience and calls for an understanding of felt perceptions in the body. This, we understand, is what ultimately assists in cultivating somatic presence. Accordingly, somatic presence implies an experience of connection with self and others and conceivably associates with one of the objectives of the GlobalGrace work package in South Africa, which is to inspire wellbeing amongst sex workers. The concept of somatic presence

has raised questions for us around the link between embodied cognition and wellbeing.

Principally, *butoh* techniques emphasise the relational interdependence of all participants, who, as caring beings, operate from the premise of needing to give and receive care. An ethics of care is premised by the *ubuntu* way of life. Here, we are specifically concerned with how effective and affective encounters can aid actualising spaces of care and wellbeing. This speaks to the idea of somatic presence, which encompasses an embodied relationship with self and others. It encompasses practical, embodied ways of understanding what it means to be somatically present and how these associate with affective encounters, and by extension, care. We understand somatic presence to be a principle that is fundamental to the training of a performer in theatre.

*Butoh*, in our view, lends itself to this. Through cultivating an awareness of felt perception/sensation in the body, it serves to connect the individual participants to the interior of their bodies. Once this connection is experienced, it conceivably “flows toward others, toward joining with others in an expansive sense of interconnectedness” (Jordan, 2004:47). The idea that energy flows from self to others speaks to Daniel Wahl’s thoughts around interbeing. Wahl (2017:313) notes that:

The narrative of interbeing informs a sense of belonging that celebrates ‘other’ as a valued expression of a larger ‘self’ and unites us in the community of life. When we shift to experiencing the world from within this cultural narrative, we begin to heal the Cartesian split between mind and body. We reconnect with all our capacities to know the world as embodied subjects and participants.

Wahl’s insights connect with concepts associated with *ubuntu*, particularly those ascribed to wellbeing and the cultivation of an ethics of care. *Ubuntu* as a guiding principle in the work with the SWTG reflects Wahl’s ideas around collective meaning-making. He notes that “the process of collective meaning-making in the face of uncertainty can itself become our guide and inform our appropriate participation” (Wahl, 2017:96). The process of collective meaning-making is aligned to how *ubuntu*

embraces the notion of care being greater or outside of us and how one starts to notice oneself in relation to others and how this speaks to collective processes of understanding and meaning-making. Job’s observations tangibly relate the practice of *butoh* to the principles of *ubuntu*. She notes that “*butoh* principles offer an understanding of myself, others, as well as the surrounding environment from lateral perspectives that can realize new embodied scripts and ways of being” (Job, 2019:29).

Somatic presence associates with ideas around collective meaning-making and co-sensing (Scharma and Kaufer, 2013; Scharma, 2018). In our view, the act of co-creating, co-sensing and collective meaning-making (with the self, fellow performers and audience) through performance is initiated by the performer. To activate this the performer is required to be somatically present. This requirement calls for an embodied relationship with self and others. The word presence is a combination of presence and sensing (at the level of felt perception/feeling in the body). It embraces practical, embodied ways of understanding what it means to be somatically present and how it connects with affective encounters. This notion correlates with Shusterman’s argument for the cultivation of Somaesthetics as a “way of life”, which supports his reasoning to cultivate the body as a “primordial instrument in grasping the world [so that] ... we can learn more of the world by improving the conditions and use[s] of [the body]” (2008:19). Shusterman recommends engagement with practices that “integrate somatic postures” as a way of developing a balanced soma, that functions as an energetic unit (2008:24). In support of this, Blackman notes that “[b]odies do not remain fixed or static but are mediated by processes and practices that produce dynamic points of intersection and connection” (2008:107). Blackman claims that “the materiality of the body is presented as a potentiality that is dynamic and open to being affected and affecting ... [and that] the body’s materiality ... has a generative force that is not static or fixed” (2008:103). Additionally, Shusterman emphasises the potential that a heightened somatic awareness can have for ‘reading’ other sentient beings with whom we engage. In essence what he is proposing, is that through a heightened sense of



awareness of the somatic self through the cultivation of somatic practices, our awareness of how others are feeling in their somata, is made possible (2008:43). As mentioned earlier, a significant part of the theatre and performance work that the SWTG undertakes focuses on practically employing what it means to be somatically present to enhance the live sensorial presence of the performer with themselves and ultimately with an audience.

### SWTG participants attest to the outcomes and impact of butoh

In this section, we bring together the entanglements of embodied cognition or a thinking body, and how this connects to wellbeing, from the individual to the communal through dominant themes that emerged from the reflection time at the end of each butoh session. We elaborate on how butoh's principles of transformation and being moved were reflected during the four sessions with jacki job. At the heart of this is structural inequality and injustice, where butoh offers moments of social justice at an embodied level. One of the key themes that arose in the reflection session was how butoh opened up possibilities for a connection to the self, which Milly articulates well.

"Sometimes the world is a harsh place and you put up this tough exterior and then you might just involuntarily act out tough or portray tough. However, ... [butoh] brought me to myself, to the being that I am, the gentle creature that I am. It helped me to be gentle with myself, to be soft and kind, to get in touch with myself" (Milly, personal communication, September 21, 2019).

Milly's reflections above speak to the potential of butoh to transform the self; to experience what it feels like to 'be moved' from inside the body. A 'thinking' body that 'now', through butoh becomes aware of every aspect of it, within space and time. Gouws and van Zyl (2015) emphasise the notion of the ethics of care, and how this begins with the self. By focusing on the self, like Milly notes, one can learn to be gentle towards the self, thus consistent with ensuring wellbeing. The significance

of this is such that, Milly, who is a trans woman and a sex worker who lives on the street, material needs often take precedence hence putting up 'a tough exterior'. And yet the 'world' being 'a harsh place' means that structural injustices along the grammars of race, gender, class and sexuality are stored within the body at a psychosomatic level. All this takes place at the expense of the self and results in being disconnected from the body. So, what butoh did for Milly in those moments, attests to an awareness of the body and the self and therefore being kind to oneself, which in a sense offers a form of justice at the level of wellbeing.

In addition to connecting to the self, another dominant theme that came out of the group was presence. Butoh requires participants to connect with felt perception/sensations in the body. This is aided by an awareness of breath and how it moves into the body, in the body, and out of the body. The awareness of breath and how it connects with felt perception/sensations is tangibly what it means/feels to be present. These phenomena come out in the two quotes below.

"Most of the exercises that we do are about being present; be there, focus. It makes it easier to grasp what is going on" (Milly, personal communication, September 21, 2019).

"It's very deep and it is helping me get in touch with my inner self. I'm good at hiding what I am feeling, but with this, I went in there and brought something out" (Alice, personal communication, September 28, 2019).

We connect this notion of presence and breath to everyday lives and experiences of sex workers. Where their everyday lives and encounters are situated in a context of illegality, and the moral law that criminalises sex work. Marginality means the body is in a state of ambiguity and uncertainty and as a result, in a constant mode of alert. Not in the mode of focus/presence but in the form of defence, a reaction, rather than response. These modes of marginality and illegality are dehumanising and therefore cause a hardened exterior that means a disconnect with inner feelings, inner self, emotions. And what butoh offered was that re-connection,

tapping into emotions and hence-forth responding, rather than reacting, which in a sense is humanising. We proffer a distinction between response and react; response feels more inclusive, allowing for integration of whatever is being experienced by the soma (at the level of felt perception) in the moment, from moment to moment. Whereas react feels like a short circuiting of a process; it limits the reach of what is received. This is because the word react itself stops short in the mouth and severs the extension of feeling spreading throughout the soma. The notion of responding speaks to how feelings in the body assist in communication processes. The idea of a response, as opposed to a reaction, facilitates the cultivation of interconnectivity that is circular rather than linear. A number of the members of the SWTG mentioned how *butoh* connected them with felt sensation – feeling.

“... if you can’t see what you’re doing. You have to feel it” (Buhle, personal communication, September 20, 2019).

“I connected to something deep inside me” (Buhle, personal communication, September 21, 2019).

“This has taught me to look at things from a different perspective. Now I know ... I have to feel, ... allow myself to go deep into the feeling of what I am doing” (Milly, personal communication, September 28, 2019).

Feelings, as put succinctly by the above quotes from the SWTG members, offer a connection to the self. This offers what decolonial scholars call re-membering, which is about wholeness (wa Thiongo, 2009). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) posits how colonial ‘humanising’ was determined by the logic of whiteness and capital that continues to dehumanise into the contemporary, as we have articulated with the marginalised positions of sex workers within this economy endorsed by judicial and moral order (of stigmatisation) in South Africa. For wa Thiong’o re-humanising entailed ‘re-membering’ as a decolonial act underpinned by a ‘quest for wholeness’ (2009). This form of re-membering in a sense humanises a context rife with dehumanisation amongst sex workers in South Africa. It calls on *butoh*’s principle

of being moved at a level of feeling and response, within the self, offering a form of embodied social justice on a level of well-being, where the neoliberal framework fails sex workers in South Africa. It is a form of humanising that counteracts the daily narrative of being criminalised and stereotyped that sex workers in South Africa experience. We connect this to Nicholson’s notion of theatre and citizenship, where she posits that the:

dialectic of theatre fits well with ... citizenship because the process invites participants to give shape to the conflicts and ambiguities inherent in different dramatic situations and to explore their limitations and possibilities in the practice of everyday life (2005:37).

She adds that “such ‘sources of morally relevant knowledge’ may be both strange and familiar to participants in drama, taking them beyond the world they already know” (Nicholson, 2005:37). In our case, the morally relevant knowledge being the true ‘self’ of the sex worker as opposed to how sex workers are seen through discourses of criminalisation – as non-citizens – as well as the singular story framed within stereotypes.

But this does not only apply to the self or a singular body in relation to presence, focus and feeling but translates to the group. As articulated by another participant – Mbali.

“I found it fascinating in this group in particular, because of the amount of attention and focus. I don’t think we have ever been so focused as a group. No fighting, no talking, no nothing. It was weird. It was like an out of body experience because we were all somehow on the same page. I think we learnt about space and movement. Today it was like bringing things that are not even connected which were connecting us in a weird way. I don’t have a word for it. It was strange for me” (Mbali, personal communication, September 20, 2019).

Mbali’s observations reflect Jordan’s ideas around relational awareness and how it has the potential to “alter ... [the] capacity to transform disconnections ... [and that] there is something intrinsically satisfying about

being in connection. It feels real; it feels healing; it feels safe" (2004: 54–55). We connect this to the ethics of inter relational care – namely *ubuntu*, where the self is connected to those around you, the community. The reflection of wellness within the self is extended to the group, a shared sense of care and wellbeing, this way, emphasising the notion of *ubuntu*. Milly captures the essence of *ubuntu* when she says:

"The present consciousness and alertness simply mean being in sync and in tune with everything that is around us. We are like satellites that are tuned in to the same channel and if we can get our frequency to the level where we can feel the..." [connection, the one point, the in-synccness] (Milly, personal communication, September 28, 2019).

Moreover, we note that African anthropology views personhood and the body in a all-inclusive sense where the individual is embedded in an intricate network of relationships to family (living and dead), the community, God and nature (Maimela 1991). No individual exists alone or on their own; "each shares a horizontal connection with other members of the society and a vertical connection with ancestors and future generations" (Krüger *et al*, 2009:58). In a context like South Africa where sex work is criminalised on judicial and moral grounds, this sense of interconnectedness is broken in everyday encounters and experiences of sex workers. However, we observed this connection with other members revived not only through that connection but offered as a sense of healing. This is articulated well in Sthembiso's quote below, which comes from the last session on butoh.

"In this space, I have learnt that something like a stone (that we are scared will hurt us), can heal you. It brings something up in you that you never knew was there. All the sessions have been healing. If you are broken inside, we usually express this through crying and shouting, but here it is through action. One of the exercises I did, brought about a lot of pain in the beginning and then I found peace. I sat with the pain until I could let it go. I let it go in another session, not in the session when the pain first started" (Sthembiso,

personal communication, September 28, 2019).

Structural inequality has a massive impact on wellbeing. The kind of pain that Sthembiso is referring to manifests at emotional, physical, psychosocial, economic, gendered, classed and all other levels. Her responses point to how transformational the butoh sessions were in offering moments of healing. Here, we refer to transformation on the micro-level of the self; how one's response to an event or memory is potentially transformed at the level of feeling in the body when engaging in the practice of butoh. This allows for how one felt (at the level of felt perception/sensation) about a memory or event in the past to be experienced differently in the body. The bodily feeling response is thus transformed. We connect this experience of transformation and healing to our earlier argument of re-membering (piecing together and making sense of). Re-membering takes place in all the four transformational phases in discussion here – at the level of self, through focus and feelings/emotions, at the level of being connected to others – other members of the group and by extension society as well as at the level of healing. This way, the body is not separate, but rather connected to the inner self and others, and thus human. In this sense, the re-membering and making human, offers a form of social justice through wellbeing, mostly because in those moments, structures that oppress sex workers are countered. And a sex worker is not just that, but a person – a relational human being, who breathes, feels and is present to self and others.

### **Butoh and the cultivation of somatic presence with the SWTG**

Having presented the narratives of sex workers and their encounter with butoh above, here we take a moment to reflect and connect butoh to the somatic presence. According to job:

butoh principles resist formulaic postulations and representations as truth. Rather, butoh deepens phenomenological processes by engaging somaesthetics, physicality and imagination to will the

body into specific modes, in turn creating nuanced experiences, as well as multiple truths and worlds (2019:28).

Our discussion above brought to life these nuanced experiences and multiple truths with sex workers.

The cultivation of somatic presence necessitates a great deal of work on exploring the relationship between breath, body, emotion and imagination. In our experience somatic presence implies having an acute awareness of the interior sensation of breath in the soma. This acute awareness was attested to by Alice about getting in touch with the inner self and Milly who noted allowing one-self to feel. The interior sensation is made tangible by a connection with the breath. If one observes their breath, they become acutely aware of the felt sensations in the body. If this is the case, then breath awareness is a justifiable way of experiencing felt resonance in the soma. The breath moves beyond the body of the self to the body of others and things, in a cyclical fashion. The breath is what connects the self to others and the self to things, thus enabling what Rhonda Blair refers to as “imaginative immediacy and presence” (2009:102). Our previous discussion on how sex workers attest to butoh techniques affirms this. For instance, Mbali confirms this, where she notes how butoh techniques brought out a strong connection with the other members of the theatre group.

Lisa Blackman’s view on the concept of becoming which, “like the paradigm of embodiment, refuses the idea of separation; in this case, between the self and other ...” (2008:41) is appropriate here. She further asserts that “the mixing and interconnection between self and other does not reveal an authentic separate realm but rather the capacity we all have for being affected and affecting the other” (2008:44) and that “permeability and connectedness rather than separation and self-contained individualism are what defines our encounters with others” (2008:87). Awareness of breath, we maintain is what facilitates experiences of permeability and connectedness with self and others. This is what enables an affective encounter between audience and performers, and performers and fellow performers. This brings about an awareness of breath in the soma and how this can

effectively inspire embodied reflection that leads to action as articulated by the various narratives presented in the previous section. Moreover, this embodied reflection for the SWTG led to a crucial realisation, that of healing, as articulated by Sthembiso.

We conclude with Milly’s quote, where she metaphorically sums up her experience of butoh and how it “gives the feeling back to the people”:

“It’s like the theme of slow food, good food because when you invest time into something it matures. So, then you can actually enjoy this thing that you’re doing because you feel, you take in and you go with it, you travel with it” (Milly, personal communication, September 21, 2019)

Milly’s quote sums up the butoh session succinctly. It brings out the entanglements of butoh techniques of transformation and being moved and how this connects to healing, self-care, presence, focus and growth. It drums up connections to the self and others, those around you, the community. And we see this as a form of embodied social justice and wellbeing, for a group who live on the margins, and are constantly failed by South Africa’s neoliberal order and laws. This embodied social justice is encountered through healing within the self and as a group – the SWTG. This is realised through the ‘unbuilding’ of the discourses and experience around criminalisation and stigmatisation of sex work in South Africa. This way, producing new embodied epistemologies that re-member and humanise sex workers.

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## Notes

1. Asijiki is a coalition to decriminalise sex work in South Africa comprising a group of sex workers, activists, advocates and human rights defenders who advocate for law reform in South Africa. Becoming a supporter is open to organisations and individuals and targeted at members of civil society from all sectors including gender, women's rights, human rights, legal and public health. Currently, full criminalisation is the law – this has been in place since 1957, with clients being specifically criminalised since 2007. This has resulted in high levels of violence, a lack of access to basic services including health services and abuse of sex workers, including by police officers (Asijiki, 2019).
2. By moral law or criminalisation, we are making reference to stigma and social discourses that sanction sex workers.
3. A form of dance that emerged in Japan after World War II.
4. Global Gender and Cultures of Equality (GlobalGRACE) is a 51-month programme of research and capacity strengthening funded by the United Kingdom Research and Innovation (UKRI) Global Challenge Research Fund (GCRF) delivered through the Arts and Humanities Research Council. GlobalGRACE employs multi-sensory artistic interventions, curatorial research practice and public exhibitions to investigate and enable gender positive approaches to wellbeing internationally, addressing two key United Nations (UN) global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Gender Equality (SDG5) and Health and Wellbeing (SDG3). Led by a team of researchers at Goldsmiths, University of London, GlobalGRACE brings together academic and non-academic partners from Bangladesh, Brazil, Mexico, the Philippines, South Africa and the United Kingdom as well as consultants from Europe and the United States of America, to work collaboratively on six interlinked research work packages. South Africa forms part of Work Package 1 (See: [www.globalgrace.net](http://www.globalgrace.net)).
5. Born in Paris, Jaques Lecoq was known for his teaching methods in physical theatre, movement, and mime which he taught at the school he founded in Paris, École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq.
6. <http://zakheni.org.za/>
7. <https://www.dramaforlife.co.za/>

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