

SAGE Research Methods Cases: Diversifying and Decolonizing Research

Abstract

This article presents a case study from a research project that was a collaboration between a group of researchers at the University of Cape Town, a nongovernmental organisation (NGO), and a group of street-based sex workers in Cape Town. They represent one of the most marginalised groups in South Africa, framed within criminalisation and a post-colony in addition to their sex work. Our chosen methodology was interdisciplinary action research, engaging with a combination of performance as research (PaR), decolonial Afro-feminist methods and praxis. The hallmark of PaR is that it is layered in the way it reveals itself, that is, the research is not a predetermined map but rather a wayfarer, which makes it attractive to decolonial Afro-feminist research. For this particular case study, we centre a theatre performance that culminated from a module in physical theatre. We worked with a group of eight sex workers who were trained by professional facilitator in physical theatre, which resulted in a performance piece entitled *Yeki Hambe: Let It Go* which was publicly performed by the sex worker theatre group. This paper centres this production and performance as a collaborative framing of epistemologies rooted in action research that offers some level of dignity to those who are constantly dehumanised. In addition, this research works towards political and social change around decriminalisation and destigmatization of sex work in South Africa as a methodology of emancipation.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case study, readers should be able to ...

- Understand interdisciplinary research approaches that bring together decolonial Afro-feminist and practice-led/performance as research (PaR).
- Understand how decolonial research methods address power hierarchies and humanise the ‘othered’.
- Apply an understanding of creative research methods such as PaR.

Project Overview and Context

This was a joint research collaboration between the African Gender Institute (AGI), the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies (CTDPS) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and NGO SWEAT (the sex workers advocacy and education task force) in Cape Town. This research was part of the international global gender and cultures of in/equality project—the Globalgrace project, which employed arts-based practices and curatorial research to investigate the production of cultures of in/equality and enable gender-positive approaches to well-being (GlobalGRACE, 2018). In South Africa, our chosen methodology was participatory theatre and performance as a means of exploring gendered, sexed, racialized, and classed inequalities amongst sex workers in Cape Town in order to contribute to existing discussions within public and policy arena.

Sex workers are at the center of inequality in South Africa yet constitute a peripheral community, more so when it comes to the legal and moral economy. The 1957 Sexual Offences Act makes it illegal to exchange sex for financial gains. It makes any activities related to the sale of sex criminal, including living off the earnings of selling sex, persuading someone to become a sex worker, or keeping a brothel (SWEAT 2022). Sex workers bear the brunt of stigma, physical and structural violence as well as police brutality in South Africa. In Cape Town, ‘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 & Flick, 2008, p. 6). These various modes of structural and physical violence position sex workers as abject and dehumanized.

We were a group of queer, decolonial Afro-feminist, theatre makers, and researchers who were a mixture of South Africans by nationality, Ugandan, and Zambian, and were well aware of the nonhuman conditions in South Africa, especially as it relates to street-based sex workers. The *#RhodesMustFall* student movement that took place in 2015 started at the University of Cape Town, it reverberated both nationally and globally, calling for decolonizing the university at UCT. This research project is a result of this call, where the AGI and CTDPS at UCT were committed to transformative scholarship and research that centres the lived experiences of some of the most marginalised groups in South Africa as points of reference in engaging with society. We, the researchers, were mindful of the chasms of inequality in South Africa and the histories that have produced them. For us, it was important to work within epistemological grounding framed within

a decolonial Afro-feminist framework in combination with practice-led/performance as research (PaR). This combination of interdisciplinary methods opened up new possibilities of knowledge production, one that is embodied, and ‘unbuilds inherited cultural epistemologies in search for hidden sources of [new] knowledge’ (Job, 2019, p. 28) on and with sex workers. Embodiment here refers to the ways in which the body is engaged in processes of performance making; how bodily felt perceptions serve to inform the knowledge that is produced through performance practices. This resulted in production of knowledge that centered the lives and voices of sex workers, who are otherwise dehumanized by prevailing power structures and hierarchies. These processes worked towards decriminalization and destigmatization of sex work.

Section Summary

- Sex work is criminalized and stigmatized in South Africa, resulting in dehumanizing conditions.
- This project brought together a group of interdisciplinary scholars with a group of street-based sex workers.
- The research project was committed to the call for decolonizing the university.

Research Design and Epistemological Frames

There is no single Afro-feminist methodology or epistemology but rather multiple lenses that address layers of sexist, racist, homophobic, and colonialist points of view (Hesse-Biber, 2011). The dehumanizing conditions of street-based sex workers in a context like South Africa called for a decolonial framework as the most responsible approach for engagement. According to Tamale (2020) decolonial projects/research ‘demand an in-depth appreciation of the history of colonization and all its supporting discourses’ in the present (2020, p. 1). Within this frame, South Africa’s colonial and apartheid history of nearly 450 years is not ‘dead’ and has left a dark underbelly visible in various aspects along the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. South Africa is one of the most un-equal societies in the world; the country’s physical geography is a persistent reminder of apartheid’s continuing legacy as evidenced in impoverished Black townships versus resourced white suburbs—a physical remnant of the Apartheid Group Areas Act that aimed to segregate along racial lines. These tangible reminders and symptoms of apartheid endure, from impoverished townships, the poor condition of schools, and high levels of violence,

to the fact that 80% of the economy and two thirds of the land mass in South Africa are still in the hands of the white minority (*The Economist*, 2010). Oxfam South Africa (2020) reports that the richest 20% of people in South Africa control almost 70% of the resources. This report further points out that the economy is governed by a handful of companies that were founded in the colonial and apartheid eras, and who continue to benefit from their stronghold during those eras as well as government assistance. In other words, the biggest share of income in South Africa is still allotted to the white minority. We see this in the income/wealth gap, soaring unemployment rates especially amongst youth—30.0% disproportionately affecting Black women (Stats SA, 2020). This has grave implications on sex workers, who are on the margins of the economy. Sex work became a form of livelihood in a context of vast unemployment and economic inequalities.

Decolonial feminism therefore usefully offers us ‘a lens to understand the hidden-from-view interconnections between race and gender and the relation of each to normative heterosexuality’ (Tamale, 2020, p. 7). A decolonial feminism approach therefore aims to disentangle those assumptions and falsehoods on gender and sexuality that filter into contemporary realities. Offering a lens through which we worked with sex work to explore what is hidden-from-view in relation to enduring legacy of apartheid as it manifests through grammars, race, class, gender, and sexuality. The criminalization and stigmatization of sex work makes it a fertile ground for inaccessibility to rights while bearing the brunt of police brutality, rape, and physical abuse as well as various modes of structural violence(s) along the lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Furthermore, most street-based sex workers are Black and Colored. We see this articulation of violence through femicide of sex workers (Mbasalaki, 2023). Moreover, South Africa is at the epicenter of an HIV epidemic, which disproportionately affects young Black women aged 15 to 24 due to a host of gendered vulnerabilities. UNAIDS notes that sex workers are 13.5 times more likely to be living with HIV as compared to the general population in comparative reproductive age groups.

Knowledge production is one area where these systems of power operate in a heavy-handed manner, which is what Edward Said (1978) referred to as Orientalism. He argued that the most lasting and damaging effect of colonialism was not as a result of violence perpetuated in the colonies by Western military domination, but rather was constituted in the construction of Western Scholarship on the Orient. Such scholarship established in a ‘Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Other’ (Said, 1978, p. 3). Both slavery and colonialism

have informed many underlying assumptions in knowledge production, especially as it relates to gender and sexuality as well as sex in Africa. This is visible in the construction and representation of rigid binaries of gender that alienate diverse gender and same-sex expressions from African-ness (Mbasalaki, 2021; Livermon, 2012) Moreover, the stereotypes around misrepresentations of sex work also fall within ‘othering’. Therefore, histories of colonialism and apartheid have shaped both lived realities and knowledge production on sex work in South Africa. We had to work within epistemologies, methodologies, and methods that seek to humanize those who are constantly dehumanized, which is why a decolonial Afro-feminist approach that engages in critical reflexivity, in entanglement with PaR, was the best fit. Interdisciplinary in nature, our approach cultivated a meaningful collaboration with a group of street-based sex workers and the NGO SWEAT. Combined, these methodologies of emancipation worked towards the decriminalization and destigmatization of sex work in South Africa.

Practice-Led/Performance as Research (PaR)

Like Afro-feminist decolonial praxis, PaR calls for disruption of hierarchies. Our working definition of PaR draws on Lewis and Tulk (2016) who posit that ‘research and practice is in radical positioning: where knowledge formed through the material process of performance can be valued as equivalent and knowledge produced through speculative and analytical modes (1). Meaning that knowledge is produced through the processes of generating material for performance and during the actual performance on stage. This implies that PaR is caught between the ambiguity of method and methodology, but instead of fixating on these unhelpful binaries, one would rather dwell ‘in the ambiguous space between binaries [which] invites inventiveness’ (Kershaw & Nicholson, 2011:2). In other words, PaR troubles the boundaries between method and methodology as well as knowledge production. This troubling resembles decolonial feminism, which take note of those power differentials embedded within research that have the potential of reinforcing the status quo and enforcing the divisions between colonizer and colonized (Smith, 2005).

Kershaw and Nicholson (2011) point out that ‘intuitive messiness and aesthetic ambiguity [as] integral to researching theatre and performance where the relationship between the researcher and researched are fluid, improvised and responsive’ (2). This makes it layered in the way it reveals itself, in that the research is not a predetermined map but rather a wayfarer. And this is an important

aspect in PaR in a number of ways. Firstly, it opens up possibilities for interdisciplinarity, both within the creative arts, such as dance, drama, music, visual arts, and writing, and beyond, such as in public health, gender studies, psychology, sociology, to mention but a few. Secondly, the fluid, improvised and responsive nature of this method highlights the fact that PaR is a praxis—theory imbricated within a practice or, as others call it, ‘intelligence practice or material thinking’ (Nelsonm 2013, p. 5). And thirdly, the fact that it is responsive in nature means it embodies a collaborative aspect whereby researcher and researched are actually both coresearchers. So, we worked with PaR in entanglement with decolonial Afro-feminist epistemologies and praxis. Moreover, because of the collaborative nature of PaR and decolonial Afro-feminist methodologies, both center the research participant as an agentic subject in the way they chose how they tell their own stories or lived experiences.

Section Summary

- Decolonial approaches call for being cognizant of histories and how this manifests in the present/contemporary drawing on analysis that roots these histories of the empire and oppression in their interaction with predatory economic systems.
- Decolonial Afro-feminist approaches engage with hidden-from-view interconnections of race, class, gender, and normative heterosexuality as well as address questions of representation and knowledge production.
- Collaboration as praxis calls for a cross/trans disciplinary in approach rooted in freedom and justice and sees the world through the lens of the most marginalized/oppressed people, such as street-based sex workers.

Method in Action

The Case: Decolonial Afro-feminism in Collaboration With PaR

Starting Points

This project worked towards decriminalization and destigmatization of sex work. The focus of this research was on engaging with and learning from existing initiatives among sex workers. Our use of multisensory research methods helped to build trust and facilitate the sharing of sensitive stories

and experiences of everyday life. This work included paying attention to how spaces of labor, the devaluing of sex-worker's work, violence, health and illness, the taboos surrounding sex work, and the effects of discriminatory laws produce inequality and injustice in sex worker's lives and affect their well-being, including social and economic opportunities.

We considered the production of cultures of equality by exploring a number of research questions in our theatre workshops. Such as 'What does well-being look and feel like?' 'What might equality in their daily life look and feel like?' 'What is violence in sex workers' lives and how do they lessen their vulnerability to violence?' These research questions guided the research process.

The Sex Workers Theatre Group

The Sex Workers Theatre Group (SWTG) was formed in March of 2019 through a selection process by professional performance makers based at the CDTPS after a call for auditions. This was circulated through SWEAT's safe spaces and outreach programs. The selection committee based their selection criteria on assemblance, commitment, presence and teamwork. We ended up with a group of seven members comprising of a diverse group of trans, queer, and cis-hetero women, three of whom were homeless. The group is mostly made up of participants from South Africa and two Zimbabweans, including one asylum seeker.

The training of the SWTG took place between April 2019 and December 2021. The workshops were set up on different modules centered around four theatre techniques, namely: Forum Theatre, Physical Theatre, Voice, and Spoken Word, as well as Live Art. The training workshops were carried out by professional theatre practitioners at the CTDPS. Each module lasted about 3–4 months and culminated in a public performance. Forum Theatre drawing on Augusto Boal's methodology (1979) was the first module and culminated in a performance in August 2019. The second module of Physical Theatre started with butoh, followed by contact improvisation, a form of dance improvisation that explores the principles of weight sharing, touch, and physical or movement awareness, and concluded with mime storytelling, a form of physical theatre inspired by the work of Jacques Lecoq (2000). This module culminated in a performance at the end of November entitled *Yeki Hambe—Let It Go*, which we interrogate here in this case study. Members of the SWTG offered formal consent, which was revisited over the research period.

Yeki Hambe—Let It Go (2019) created by the SWTG was devised work aimed at exploring and translating the self and memory into performance. Using step-by-step guided free writing by the director as a means of documenting their stories, the SWTG were able to reflect on experiences and memories that have shaped who they are today. The process was incredibly sensitive and vulnerable as it gave the group the space to navigate through and confront these memories (most of which were moments of trauma) and to creatively reimagine them for stage using the style of the mime-storyteller. Working with a group of sex workers who had very little to no theatre training, it was important to create a safe working environment and a training program that empowered them with the tools to make them feel confident when creating and sharing their stories.

Locations

Because of the centrality of social change within decolonial Afro-feminist research, community engagement and interaction are crucial. This goes for PaR as well, which is why we chose a community-based theatre as the resident theatre for the SWTG. This was a space where both training of the entire period of about three years took place as well as the public performances. Our chosen residence community theatre was the Theatre Arts (TA), which is found within the same neighborhood as the NGO SWEAT.

According to their website, the TA is built on tenets of affordability, inclusivity, and accessibility for theatre practitioners from diverse backgrounds across the spectrum of cultural, social, economic, skills, and experience. It also offers other community-related programs such as after-school activities for children from peripheral communities.

Aesthetics

Yeki Hambe employed a collaborative approach to performance-making that centered the body as the main aesthetic driver—embodied work. In other words, through physical theatre, the body was explored and engaged as the primary mode of aesthetic expression. The physical theatre form deployed limited the use of spoken words/language in favor of the language of the body to convey story and meaning. It was our hope that this would open up space for audience members to participate in a process of co-meaning-making, where they had agency in and over the experience of the performance.

Yeki Hambe took place over six weeks with the production week commencing in the seventh week. The SWTG met twice a week for three hours. Each session was divided into two components. The first focused on training the body for stage performance. This module was founded on Jacque Lecoq's (2000) Physical Theatre training that involved exploring mime techniques that embodied elements, placement, force, tension, objects, matter, and the ability to evoke and become (Evans & Kemp, 2016). The training also included Anne Bogart's Viewpoints (Bogart & Landau, 2005) as a means of understanding and embodying time, space, weight, size, height, topography, and gesture. The second component was treated as a rehearsal. A space that always began with a check-in where the SWTG got to share how they were feeling that week. A check-in consisted of a *high of the week*, a *low of the week*, and *something you don't know*. This gave the ensemble the opportunity to get things off their chest, to let go of anything that was troubling them in that moment so that they could not only free the space of the outside world and focus their attention on the task at hand, but also to build connection and trust. The exercise was a fun way of getting used to sharing their experiences with one another without feeling isolated or exposed.

Transmissions

Transmissions can be delineated into two parts, namely (1) the generation/making stage and (2) the performance stage. For the generation stage, we will outline the making/generating process in detail to show how knowledge/understanding/insights were produced and how they informed the end product, i.e., *Yeki Hambe—Let it Go*. The form of Physical Theatre the project employed made no use of sets and properties. The performers' bodies were the main indicators of time, space, and landscape.

Generation/Making

The workshops began with free-writing and the facilitator/director gave each performer a journal in which they documented the process and their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. The free writing consisted of a series of open-ended sentences. From the moment the pen hit the page they were encouraged to keep writing until the facilitator/director asked them to stop. A few of these questions were: When I was young, I loved to ...; My favorite place is ... because ...; I am my

happiest when I ...; I am my saddest when ...; When I am alone, I feel ...; For my future, I dream ...; My life changed when ...; Dear my younger self ...

After sharing what they had written, the facilitator/director asked them to choose three memories: one from their childhood, a significant moment that changed the course of their life, and their imagined future. Over four weeks, every Friday session focused on devising and generating material where they used techniques learnt in the training and applied them to their stories. Every Saturday rehearsal the performers showcased their work and received feedback that highlighted areas that were either working or needed improvement.

In the last two weeks, once they had generated all the material, the facilitator/director worked one-on-one with each performer to polish their physical images, extend their gestures, clarify their words, sounds, evocations and mime technique. She honed their transitions from characters to places, objects and emotional states, ensured that their stories were clear and concise, that they were successful in making the invisible visible, and that they were using the space in a dynamic way. She worked on improving their clarity of speech, diction, color and expression, developed their timing and shifts in rhythm and encouraged their emotional connection and ability to convey the emotional journey of their stories.

Performance

One of the aims of the work was to engage the aesthetic in performance as a provocation for activism. The idea was to move away from didactic modes of theatre as activism that usually employ spoken text to convince an audience of the importance of the issues/challenges that are explored in the theatre piece. Here, the idea is to limit the use of spoken text and rely more on the body as a vehicle for transmission. The effect on the audience was thus a visceral one, where the audience experienced and made sense of the performance through their own bodies. In this way, the performers created a contagion of consciousness: The audience felt, at the level of felt sensation, what the performers were experiencing and expressing through their own bodies; they were viscerally affected by what the performers were *doing* as opposed to *saying*. This served as an invitation to the audience to cocreate meaning. Cocreating, co-meaning-making and cosensing are central to the process of transmission. It was hoped that the performance would inspire conversations/discussions/dialogues/debates that moved the audience to cogitate on their role in the situation and how they were able to shift from a point of personal reflection to personal action.

Some Thoughts on the Methodology

The PaR method that is employed in the work that we do draws from ethnographic and autobiographical approaches to research. We made use of grounded theory in that we utilized methods and practices to investigate the lived and embodied experiences of the people we engaged, using the interaction and communication between people as the basis for research material. We were drawn to Ingold's ideas around "meshworking" and "wayfaring" to inform the methodological choices. Ingold contends that what is commonly known as the 'web of life' is precisely that: not a network of connected points, but a meshwork of interwoven lines" (2011, p. 63). Ingold's ideas around meshing associate with how experiences, events, memories, and relationships mesh and weave/interweave/entangle themselves into the fabric of the body. Meshing carries with it a quality of unpredictability and fluidity. The fluid, unpredictable weaving and interweaving of lines associates with Ingold's ideas around wayfaring where "[t]he knowledge ... [people] acquire ... is integrated not *up* the levels of a classification but *along* paths of movement, and people grow into it by following trails through a meshwork" (2011, p. 143). He views this as a process of "trail-following" that he calls "*wayfaring*" (2011, p. 143, italics in original). In our experience, *PaR* as a methodology is precisely about "meshing" and "wayfaring," where the research reveals itself along "paths of movement" and, as it does so, it meshes itself into a performance. When we set out to make *Yeki Hambe*, we knew we wanted to explore Physical Theatre as a medium to understand the lived experiences of sex workers. There was no script and no end product in view. The shape of the performance, however, revealed itself to us through the practice. The process and performance raised key questions that fed directly and indirectly into the broader GlobalGrace research project. Some of these questions were picked up in other practice/performance-making processes that the group participated in over the remaining two years of the project, while others were written about in research journals and chapters. The practice is both the method and the outcome of the research; it also lends itself to critical written reflections. *PaR* is cyclical in its approach to research. The starting point is invariably an idea that, through practice, raises questions that are reflected on, spoken about, written about, and fed back into the next performance project. The research never ends. It always comes to a question that can be explored in another embodied and practice-based project/performance.

When an Afro-feminist decolonial approach is combined with *PaR*, the individual or participant is centered rather than the researcher. Of note, surfacing of subjugated knowledges is at the core

of Afro-feminist research, foregrounding the participant works towards this. Decolonial feminism works towards countering histories of marginalization and structural inequality, centering the participant works towards this. This way, the sex workers were able to tell their own stories, through embodied performance. Stories such as a young boy growing up in a South African township and desiring to play with and wearing girls' cloths. This was Anita's (pseudonym) story, a trans sex worker. Anita tells her own story of her lived experiences, which speaks to and reveals the complexity of gender. Her story foregrounds being born in a male body but desiring to be a female and how Anita navigated it in a context with a strict understanding and surveillance of gender within a rigid binary, the sanctions that go with crossing certain social boundaries such as those of gender and sexuality. Some of these sanctions led to Anita being homeless. Zena (pseudonym) also tells her own story of growing up in Zimbabwe, where the excitement of President Mugabe's liberation from colonial rule soon turned into an economic turmoil due to his political choices/moves. Being a young single mother of four with no job, she migrated to South Africa in search of a better life and ended up undocumented, with sex work being her main mode of income. Zena's narrative reveals the complexities around queerness and gender in its entanglement with socioeconomic access, such as the economic burdens of being a single mother and in relation to belonging or homing that go with migration. In turn, Norman (pseudonym) tells their own story about how they ran away from home at the age of fourteen as a result of sexual abuse. Norman ended up on the street and was taught the ways of living by those they found on the street, including how to earn their way through sex work. Norman is a gender queer sex worker who is still homeless at the age of thirty-four. Their story reveals the complexities of gender in entanglement with gender-based and sexual violence, as well as the violence (physical, structural, psychological) that goes with homelessness. These are just three of the seven stories, all of which brought out the complex intersectionalities of race, class, gender and sexuality in South Africa as a post-colony. They show how histories of dispossession along the lines of race, play out through class and gender as well as sexual orientation. Of important significance regarding the telling of one's story, however difficult that story is, is the element of humanizing. This is present through the centering of the individual, whereby the audience has no choice but to listen—a listening that is visceral, as it means the audience experiences and makes sense of the performance through their own bodies. As mentioned in the previous section, this then enables the performers to create a contagion of consciousness; the audience feels, at the level of felt sensation, what the performers

are experiencing in and expressing through their own bodies; they are viscerally affected by what the performers are *doing* as opposed to *saying*. This, again, makes it a cyclical process, the hallmark of PaR—with the overall outcome of social change, in our case, targeted towards the decriminalization and destigmatization of sex work in South Africa. In essence, this culminates in sex workers being seen as human beings deserving of rights.

Section Summary

- How to explore gender and cultures of in/equality with a group of sex workers through specific research questions.
- *Yeki Hambe—Let it Go* was the physical theatre performance that resulted from PaR, where generation making through free writing resulted in homing in on specific lived experiences where the performance employed the aesthetic as agitator for change, i.e., creative activism.
- PaR as a process of ‘meshworking’ and ‘wayfaring’ where the research reveals itself along “paths of movement,” and as it does so, it meshes itself into a performance.
- The meeting of PaR and Afro-feminist decolonial approaches to research where sex workers told their own stories based on their lived experiences, such as those that challenge gender norms, homelessness, or migration.

Practical Lessons Learned

Reflection on Lessons Learned While Working on *Yeki Hambe—Let It Go*

Due to the difficulties, for various reasons, surrounding attendance, the facilitator/director decided that it would be beneficial for each performer to create individual stories that she would then weave together towards the end of the process. The initial idea was to create one story line, drawing from all individual stories. However, because attendance was irregular with some participants at times joining in late, the director decided on each performer creating their own individual stories. These were then woven together, drawing on movements as transitions from one individual story to another. Movements involved the whole group moving to form a prop within the individual stories, such as a bus or cupboard, while the person whose individual story was being told broke away from the group to start telling their story.

One of the main issues that arose out of the process of making and performing *Yeki Hambi—Let It Go* was around dealing with autobiographical material, particularly childhood memories. This proved challenging for the participants, not only in the generation/making stage but also in the performance stage. For many, this task was not easy. Suppressed memories and feelings started to resurface; memories they had buried and chosen to forget. During the free-writing process many of the participants pushed their journals aside, immediately refusing to engage, while others could not stop writing. The facilitator/director assisted those who were struggling, and, through their tears, she slid their journals towards them and asked them to keep writing. And they did. From that moment they referred to their journals as their *bibles*, their *truth*.

In the performance stage, the act of performing in front of an audience provided the opportunity for the participants' stories being witnessed by others. The act of witnessing is an enormously healing act in that it validates one's story and experiences. However, the experience can be a traumatic one. For one participant, in particular, this was the case. After the first performance, they felt empowered by the experience of being witnessed by an audience. However, after the second performance, this appeared to overwhelm them. This resulted in excessive substance use before the third performance, which meant that they performed while 'high' or under the influence of a hard substance. This proved challenging for the rest of the cast members. They were unsure what would happen in the performance and were worried about everyone's physical safety, given that the performance was a Physical Theatre performance. In the end, everything worked out and the performance happened as rehearsed. This called for an immediate response on the part of the facilitator/director and from us as coordinators of the overall SWTG. We had a conversation with the participant before having a conversation with the whole company. In these conversations we stressed the transformative power of performance and how it affords one the opportunity to integrate previous trauma: By playing/enacting out the story/memory repeatedly, the possibility of shifting our relationship with the story/memory/event exists so that it can live in us and we with it, differently. In retrospect, this is a conversation that should have occurred earlier in the process and should be an ongoing conversation.

Overall Lessons Learned

One of the main lessons learned from the process of generation making to the performance was the need to bring in psychosocial support for sex workers, whose marginal lives were littered with

various forms of trauma. Given the autobiographical nature of the theatre processes deployed, it meant that past traumas resurfaced. Even though the director played a key role in ‘holding space’ during these moments, it was necessary not only to debrief but also seek professional help for the sex workers, jointly as a group. This was one of the blind spots we had as researchers; this was not part of the initial project plan and therefore we had to reassess the situation collectively and diligently. We managed to find financial resources (by repurposing some of the project finances, such as pulling some from teaching buy-out, etc.) and brought in a professional arts-based therapist, who worked with the group for the rest of the project. These encounters greatly helped in not only working through individual trauma but also collectively, building relationships among the group of sex workers as well as researchers. Contributing to what is argued out elsewhere (see Mbasalaki, 2023) as radical kinship amongst us all—sex workers and researchers. This was the process of all of us coming together as kin, a strong bond and relationship that has held on even after the research project ended a few years ago. We remain connected as a form of kin.

Another important lesson learned, which was mentioned by the sex workers themselves several times, was the fact that these theatre processes brought with them an embodied element of healing. Having noted that sex workers bear the brunt of stigma, physical and structural violence, as well as police brutality in South Africa, their physical, psychosocial, and emotional well-being is gravely neglected. Against this backdrop, the theatre processes deployed opened up new possibilities on knowledge production, one that is embodied, and ‘unbuilds inherited cultural epistemologies in search for hidden sources of [new] knowledge’ (job 2019, p. 28) on and with sex workers. Embodiment here refers to the ways in which the body is engaged in processes of performance making; how bodily felt perceptions serve to inform the knowledge that is produced through performance practice (see Matchett & Mbasalaki, 2020). This resulted in production of knowledge that centres the lives and voices of sex workers, who are otherwise not seen and heard by prevailing power structures and hierarchies. But most significantly, at the heart of this embodied work, was the notion of well-being for sex workers, what job refers to as ‘unbuilding inherited cultural epistemologies’ rooted in trauma, structural inequality, and violence to produce ‘new epistemologies’ based on the healing of the self, the dehumanised body.

Section Summary

- The challenges of working with autobiographical material with a group of street-based sex workers, with a history of trauma and whose well-being is gravely neglected in all spheres resurfaced traumas.
- The transformative power of restorying through performance brought with it possibilities of integrating past traumas through ‘unbuilding them’ to produce new epistemologies of healing.
- The project encountered the need to reassess blind spots, where we had to bring in a professional therapist to help intervene with resurfacing trauma.

Conclusion

PaR in collaboration with decolonial Afro-feminist research could be perceived as a ‘messy’ process in a sense that there is no predetermined map beyond the research questions that guide the research process, which also sometimes change during the process. Indeed, there are a few prompts that guide the process, however, the main path of generating the material could be said to leave a lot of room for maneuvering. And this makes for complicated and sometimes very difficult moments within the research process, especially when working with a group on the peripheries of society, such as sex workers. We had to engage with a lot of negotiation in order to make collaboration matter, in a sense that it humanizes rather than reinforce systems of power that marginalize. This therefore called for constant critical reflexivity as researchers. These negotiations were at both an institutional (University/NGO) level, as well as on an interpersonal level. The latter was constant and continuous and at times explosive, when working with sex workers who know their rights and who kept challenging us. We had to learn to sit in and with the discomfort and resist the desire to ‘fix’, to reach a quick resolve. In a way we learnt to, in Haraway’s terms, ‘stay with the trouble’ (Haraway, 2016) and adopt an emergent approach, where PaR allowed for a space for emergence, an emergent process. Therefore, within this emergence lay the actual work—collaborative work that was in service of and committed to dismantling structural inequality. This came about through a number of possibilities:

1. By working within the framework of **creative activism**, where sex workers told their own stories through a theatre and performance medium, where the messaging draws on

and connects to emotions of the audience. In this way, the project worked towards decriminalization and destigmatization of sex work in South Africa.

2. By working to **humanize** sex workers who are constantly dehumanized by society through the prevailing legal and moral order in South Africa. This was achieved by centering the sex workers in the research process as well as performing their life stories, which debunked stereotypes that are witnessed by the audience.
3. The doing of the work—which is the process of generating the material for production, however difficult it was for some, had great contributions to a **re-storying** of the traumatic past, while re-telling the story over and over again, in a safe space, resulted in some form of healing. The reflection sessions with the sex workers attested to this in many different ways.
4. Building a **sense of community** with the group, who through doing difficult embodied and emotive work over a period of time, built strong relationships, which felt like kin.

Discussion Questions

Imagine you are working on a research project with a community from the periphery, it could be a group of sex workers or any other marginalized community:

1. Can you devise a set of research questions that would guide your research project with a group of marginalized or ‘othered’ communities?
2. How would you ensure the research project is fully collaborative and engages with methodologies of emancipation and activism?
3. How would you ensure that the research participants are co-designers in the whole research process?
4. How would you ensure that your research engages with decolonial Afro-feminist methods and praxis and troubles hegemonies/hierarchies along race, class, gender and sexuality?
5. How would ensure you contribute to knowledge production that problematizes traditional positivist modes of knowledge production?

Multiple Choice Quiz Questions

1. Decolonial Afro-feminist research methods do not:
 - a. Centre the research participants.
 - b. Enable power hierarchies along the lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality. – CORRECT)
 - c. Challenge histories of colonisation.
2. ‘Othering’ as a concept within a social context engages with:
 - a. Additional/Additionalism.
 - b. Feminism.
 - c. Orientalism. – CORRECT
3. Creative action methods contribute to:
 - a. Social change. – CORRECT
 - b. Racism.
 - c. Classism.

Further Reading

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Globalgrace exhibition: <https://exhibition.globalgrace.net>

Globalgrace online course South Africa: <https://course.globalgrace.net/exploring-theatre-and-performance-as-feminist-methodologies/object/>

SW Theatre SA *Yeki Hambe—Let it go* performance:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g9KzorX7vOI>

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