

## What's a [Black] body got to do with it?: Brief notes on Lerato Shadi

Value has to come from somewhere. If not labor, then from somewhere else—risk, temporality, circulation, and so forth.

– Alison Shonkwiler, *The Financial Imaginary: Economic Mystification And The Limits Of Realist Fiction*<sup>1</sup>

Black language needs to be a different kind of language, it needs to be an anti-language [...], it needs to start where language ends or becomes impossible.

– David S. Marriott, *S Marriott in conversation with Frank Wilderson III*<sup>2</sup>

In the work of Lerato Shadi (b. Mafikeng, South Africa), we witness an encounter between the body, work (or more precisely labour) and history. Through primarily performance, installation and video, this body, a Black woman's body, is put to work in service of an extended inquiry into the constitutive relation between power and history, that is, how history is always fundamentally a question of power and that power is necessarily historical.

This labouring Black woman's body, placed on plinths and pedestals, reveals the structure of racially gendered domination and its relations to art's institutionality and the domain of the aesthetic *writ large*<sup>3</sup>. Shadi takes seriously the entanglements between artistic production and globalised circuits of racialized labour and commodity production within the context, first and foremost, of the *longue durée* of South Africa's history of racial slavery, White settler colonial conquest, apartheid and its afterlives. Take *Tlhogo* (2010), a work that echoes Shadi's contemporaries such as Bernie Searle's *Colour Me Series* (1998), Tracey Rose's *Span II* (1997), and less formally but more politically, the devastating politics of the practice of Senzeni Marasela<sup>4</sup>. *Tlhogo* (2010), like these fellow travellers who too wait and endure the cruelty of the spatio-temporal logics of an anti-Black world, is about the stakes of embodiment and social death. These violent processes almost descend, with all the full force of history, on the body. Shadi's practice is organized around a consistent and concentrated set of political concerns that range from Blackness' relation to labour, knowledge production and language, history and memory, subjectification and subjection, performativity and time, repetition and seriality.

In *Mosako wa Nako* (2014), for instance, Shadi is seen with a red ball of wool, the work's raw material from which she pulls from, the "somewhere" from which value emerges, to follow Shonkwiler in the epigraph above. This simple gesture stands in stark contradiction to the fictions of capitalist modernity and its tendency to obfuscate sources of value and wealth. It bears mentioning that wool as material recalls the history of its production and centrality in the Cape Colony's economy and according to historian JA Henry, "before the discovery of diamonds and gold, the entire economy of the Cape was carried on the sheep's back"<sup>5</sup>.

Shadi's practice, or more precisely her discourse, could be located at the critical point where Blackness exceeds language, pushes beyond the boundary of what can be said, where speech fails to symbolize, or more colloquially, represent (something). Speech or speaking, the domain of the conscious subject of cognition, is exposed as fundamentally lacking. This is strikingly evident in her text works, where there is a push and pull between legibility and illegibility, writing and erasure, forward motion and reversal. In these texts and incoherent sentences, it is less the structural integrity of the sayable (the what), nor the subject(s) of address and enunciation (the who) as much as it is what we might loosely describe as the register (i.e., the how); how are we going to say the things we think and feel, and those that are unthought and we are yet to feel. These works refuse grand political statements but retreat into the impossibly impenetrable abstraction, a swerving line, indeterminately beautiful line.

In Shadi's performances there is hardly any talking or dialogue (the closest being song), but 'pure' unmediated activity. The statement is the act, immediate and *vanishing*. Perhaps this is what's appealing to Shadi about performance despite its concreteness as an event; that it always recedes and resists (not escape) spectatorial capture, what Peggy Phelan, in the seminal chapter *The ontology of performance: representation without reproduction*<sup>6</sup>, called "performance's being", its very ontology, "becomes itself through disappearance"<sup>7</sup>. That is, at its most radical, performance *is* only when it *is not* (or no longer). This was the disruptive intervention of event oriented practices that refused the fetishistic relation to the object by the art market.

Further, Shadi's performances are a focused and profound engagement with time; her giving up her time to carry out this or that task, not unlike how one gives up or trades one's labour time in the marketplace. (We could think here of the late artist Pope L who reminded us that what bonds performance and language is nothing other than "duration"<sup>8</sup>). Time, as our capitalist modern order's prized possession, is numbingly explored by Shadi through the strategy of repetition. This repetition compulsion is the reenactment of the structuring lack constitutive of subjectivity, that is, repeating the primal scene not unlike how trauma victims return to and reproduce the fundamental traumatism.

Shadi's labouring on repetition as tool and motif (a banal 'formal' strategy) is a critical exposition of the manner in which, say, historical 'facticity' is secured through repetition and safeguarded as stable meaning or problematic normativity (be it Whiteness, or more precisely non-Blackness, heteronormativity, capitalist patriarchy, conservatism, fascism etc). In another register, to repeat is to remember against generalized wilful amnesia, to remember that "then and now coexist: we are coeval with the dead". As Jacques Lacan once put it, "remembering always involves a limit". If any, this might be the lesson from Shadi to us<sup>10</sup>: that, focused critical thinking necessarily entails that we learn the very limits of unlearning<sup>11</sup>.

Text by Vusumzi Nkomo

<sup>1</sup> Alison Shonkwiler, 2017. *The Financial Imaginary: Economic Mystification And The Limits Of Realist Fiction*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press; pp. xxiii.

<sup>2</sup> David Marriott, 2022. *CITY LIGHTS LIVE!* DS Marriott in conversation with Frank Wilderson III. [Online]. Available here: <https://youtu.be/Mw20cLg-iic>

<sup>3</sup> For a sustained engagement with this entanglement, see Rizvana Bradley, 2023. *Anteaesthetics: Black Aesthetics and the Critique of Form*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

<sup>4</sup> I have in mind, on the one hand, the language of performance and formal grammar of the colour red (from the red thread Marasela uses, to the red dresses she wears) and, on the other, Marasela's ethic of endurance through her durational work in 'projects' such as *Waiting for Gebane*.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Richard Steyn, 2024. *Rhodes And His Banker: Empire, Wealth And The Coming Of Union*. Jonathan Ball Publishers; pp. 1.

<sup>6</sup> From her 1993 book *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. London and New York: Routledge.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>8</sup> See Pope.L. *is Making a Commitment to Art* | Louisiana Channel [Online]. Available here: <https://youtu.be/kTs5QkK20M4>

<sup>9</sup> Saidiya Hartman, 2002. *The Time of Slavery, in The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101:4; pp. 759.

<sup>10</sup> I say "if any" because it doesn't seem Shadi is in the business of handing down lessons!

<sup>11</sup> The idea of 'unlearning' is cheaply thrown around in our liberal multicultural times and requires the greatest political vigilance.