

The fire in the voice: Umlilo and the performance of queer South African life

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ABSTRACT: This article investigates queer vocality as it impacts on contemporary experiences and imaginings of race, gender and sexuality within the South African context. By examining the very applicability of queer (as term and methodology) within the South African context, and paying particular attention to its relationship to voice, this article explores how ideas surrounding race, gender and sexuality bears on South Africa as a sonic environment. The work of South African performing artist Umlilo is specifically drawn upon, with their song *Umzabalazo* serving as the basis of this investigation. As a self-identified queer, black, non-binary artist, Umlilo offers a vocal challenge to patriarchal, racist, hetero- and/or cisnormative conventions, and this article explores how such challenges are brought into effect and into voice.

KEYWORDS: Umlilo; queer voice; race; South Africa

INTRODUCTION

Undergoing radical changes with regards to conceptions of race, gender and sexuality, post-apartheid South Africa bears witness to vocal challenges to what has long been seen as a heteronormative, white and cisgender status quo. One such provocation comes from contemporary performing artist Umlilo, who uses their¹ body and voice to evoke the queerness of everyday living spaces. Presenting an “unapologetically queer, black, South African and non-binary perspective” (cited in WHITE 2017), Umlilo’s voice is the basis of my investigation into the entanglement of race, sexuality and gender in contemporary South Africa. As a sonic intervention of sorts, Umlilo’s voice speaks against a culture of heterosexist complacency. Meaning ‘fire’ in the indigenous South African language isiZulu, the word ‘umlilo’ was strategically chosen by the artist to speak of the desire to burn, to enrapture and to set alight.

¹ Avoiding gendered pronouns when performing as Umlilo, the artist prefers ‘they’, ‘them’ and ‘their’ when referring to their artistic output. Hence, when reference is made to Umlilo, this mode of address is used throughout the article.

Umlilo’s work, be it in music or performance, forms part of a larger contemporary movement of South African artists who are drawing on or mobilising queerness to speak about their experience of gender, sexuality and race. For example, *FAKA* – a performance art duo comprising of Thato Ramaisa and Buyani Duma (who also work under the aliases Fela Gucci and Desire Marea) – explores how sexuality and race is understood and negotiated in a post-apartheid South African context. Being interested in the power-dynamics of sexuality and gender, *FAKA* advocates an “in-your-face” approach to heteronormative power structures that still linger in the local landscape – as they argue: “it’s important for black, queer people to be aggressive with their voices. There are so many things working against us: our sexuality, our race. It’s important to make our voices heard whenever the opportunity presents itself” (cited in MANETA 2016). As Neo Maditla (2017) argues, *FAKA*’s work is deliberately suggestive and confrontational, be it in the title of their debut extended play album *Bottoms Revenge*, the name *FAKA* itself (which refers to the act of penetration), or the name of their self-titled queer movement and website ‘Siyakaka’ (<http://www.siyakaka.com>), which can be translated into ‘we’re shitting over you’. As Maditla (2017) asks, towards whom is this act of shitting aimed, “you? the art world? the music industry? transphobia? your guess is as good as mine”. Despite the open-endedness of their antagonism, Maditla (2017) emphasises the importance of such gestures, insofar as South Africa is still rife with forms of homo- and transphobia, and the overt demonstration of politicised queerness can be an important tool for fighting bigotry and hate.

Such artistic (and, one can argue, activist) endeavours for creating awareness around expressions of gender and sexuality that do not conform to a hetero- and/or cisnormative standard are also reflected in the work of collaborative performance group *Femme in Public*. Comprising of Alok Vaid-Menon, Gary Mikey Collins, Joshua Allen, Kieron Jina, Sandiso Ngubane, Githan Coopoo, Vuyisani Bisholo, Quaid ‘Queezy’ Heneke and Umlilo (the subject of this article), *Femme in Public* presented an interdisciplinary platform where “stylists, designers, photographers, musicians, writers, activists and performance artists ... [staged a] live fashion protest on the streets” (Mamba 2017). According to the collaborating artists, this public intervention into South African city space “aimed to unapologetically bring trans and gender non-conforming issues to the fore ... [and to] disrupt the heteronormative and colonial gaze with their unwavering

celebration of femininity” (cited in *Mamba* 2017; also see DUROSOMO 2017). Central to the work of both *FAKA* and *Femme in Public* stands the motive to produce bodily, visual and auditory traces that speak of the lives of people who are not necessarily heterosexual, white or cisgender.

This is of great importance to the contemporary South African moment, where the very idea of homosexuality and trans(genderism) as local (or African) phenomena is still a contested topic. On the one hand, the post-apartheid South African environment is reputed for its liberal jurisdiction (especially in comparison with some of its African neighbours), thus facilitating a space for *lbgti* citizenship, protection and belonging (see, for example, CROUCHER 2002; VAN DER WAL 2018; VAN ZYL 2005). In spite of the legal protection that *lbgti* subjects might potentially enjoy within post-apartheid South Africa, historical processes that simultaneously articulate and disown the heritage and political currency of these subjects are also at play. Such processes revolve around the complex relationship between (South) Africa and the West that has been marked, to a large degree, by colonialist encounters. Those products, cultures and identities that are widely perceived to have been brought into and enforced upon the local population during colonialism are specifically flagged as “Western imports” (SPURLIN 2001: 189) and, as a result, they are placed under severe scrutiny in a postcolonial context. Homosexuality and transgenderism are some of the phenomena that are often interpreted as a vestige of colonial imposition and later apartheid legislation. This has profound implications for black queer subjects, whose expressions of identity, intimacy and desire are often met with condemnations of being ‘unAfrican’ (see SANDFORT *et al.* 2015; VAN DER WAL 2018; VINCENT *et al.* 2014).

It is within such a creative environment of actively questioning the status quo that Umlilo uses their voice to spark debate on contemporary queer identity and to bring discourse on black queer lives into the public arena. By examining the very applicability of queer (as term and methodology) within the South African context, and paying particular attention to its relationship to voice, this article explores how ideas surrounding race, gender and sexuality bears on South Africa as a sonic environment. Umlilo’s engagement with their own voice stands central to this investigation, while one of Umlilo’s works, *Umzabalazo*, is specifically drawn upon as an example of their artistic engagement with the South African context.

ON VOICE AND QUEERNESS

The air that is breathed is not neutral or lifeless, for it has its life in sound and voice. Its sound ranges from the barely or not-at-all noticed background of our own breathing to the noises of the world and the singing of word and song among humans. (IHDE 2007: 3)

When looking at the phenomenon of voice, Don Ihde's reminder of the very loadedness of the air that we emit, inhale and infuse with ourselves is of significance. Consisting of sound emitted from and created by the body, the human voice is a form of sound production in which the vocal folds, lungs and articulators (tongue, palate, cheek and lips) work together to generate sounds ranging from talking, singing and screaming to whistling, whispering and murmuring. Ideas surrounding the human voice and its impact on everyday life are also wide-spread and permeate human understandings of self and other. For example, 'voice' can refer to the expression of a particular opinion, attitude, wish or desire. An individual can find their own voice (that is, find a distinctive style or vision of artistic expression), give voice to something (express feelings, for example) and get a voice in something (have or attain an active role in decision-making processes, thus speaking of an experience of agency). A voice can also be raised against something (by publicly stating that one does not agree with certain plans or actions) and one can thus use it to express dissent. Hence, the human voice can be understood as a physical and conceptual medium for mediating social relationships and negotiating areas of consent or conflict.

Such an idea of the human voice as central to forms of social organisation is echoed in the work of Zeynep Bulut (2010). As Bulut argues:

As a 'fleshed' sound, or as sounds of a particular flesh, voice bridges self and the other, and facilitates a kind of oscillation between them. The phenomenon of the voice suggests pure interiority. Its existence seems like a mystery, but indeed, the very existence of a particular voice comes into being with exteriority. Voice engages a relation, a liquid conversation between one and the other. The sounds of the voice make this conversation fluid and enigmatic. Functioning like the filter of various bodily sounds, voice becomes the 'house' of the sounds. Yet still as sound, voice addresses a foreign land. It is both here and there. Being here and there, the continual conversation or the oscillation I suggest resists and transcends the duality of the self and other. (2010: 46)

For Bulut, the human voice is crucial for understanding the relationship between various realms, be it the self and the other, the ideological and physical or the very experience of bodily interiority and exteriority.² Don Ihde (2007: 118) echoes this sentiment by arguing for voice as “the polyphony of experience [that] binds what is ‘innermost’, the imaginative, with what is also the broadest in human experience, the intersubjective”. As such, the human voice is a crucial mechanism for understanding the self and its relation to a social other, insofar as “the voices of others whom I hear immerse me in a language that has already penetrated my innermost being in that I ‘hear’ the speech that I stand within. The other and myself are co-implicated in the presence of the sounding word.” (IHDE 2007: 118).

Such writings on voice present a complex picture in which the sounding human subject emerges as contingent upon and reflexive of various social, ideological and corporeal processes. As Bulut (2010: 50) maintains, through voice we experience the “self [as] dynamic, contested, conflicting and changing”. Of interest to this article is the question of how such conceptions of voice resonate with the idea, expression and articulation of queerness. While queer can be thought of as a strategic *troublant*, a way to *twist* (SEDGWICK 1993: xii) and a means of *torturing* lines of demarcation (Hall 2003: 14), it also speaks about a process of questioning and destabilising normative assumptions around (inter alia) gender, sexuality and, I would argue, race. Queer as methodology is sceptical of dialectic frameworks that fixate upon a final outcome or a place of arrival where norms and boundaries are finally and resolutely eradicated. Rather, its usage (especially in the context of this article) is more geared towards understanding its potential as disruptive because of its ability to question binaries of gender, sexuality and race.

The term ‘queer’ has also been opened up to critical investigation in terms of its relation to race. For example, in response to the general treatment of “race as an addendum” in gay and lesbian studies and queer theory, José Esteban Muñoz suggests that the term ‘identities-in-difference’

² Such an experience of corporeal interiority and exteriority is facilitated by the human voice insofar as it “speaks through two layers: inner voice and outer voice” (BULUT 2010: 49). Hence, “inner voice can be associated with conscience, which functions as filter, and as common sense, as the voice of the other ... Outer voice, on the other hand, is what is manifest, what can be more associated with consciousness rather than conscience. Outer voice says out loud ... it is the voice of face, vocalizing the social mask, the mediated soul, the ‘exteriority’ as Lévinas would put it. Yet inner and outer voices are essentially intertwined” (BULUT 2010: 49-50).

is better suited than ‘queer’ to accommodate a range of sexual and racial identities that stand in opposition to normative discourses (1999: 6-7). Jarrod Hayes calls for a redeployment of queer within the postcolonial context by dissociating it from gay archetypes and Western standards of liberation, and rather using queer “as a verb to signify a critical practice in which non-normative sexualities infiltrate dominant discourses to loosen their political stronghold” (2000: 7), while E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson (2005: 7-10) also interrogates what they identify as queer studies’ fixation upon whiteness and its blatant disregard for black voices. In an attempt to activate the creative tensions between ‘black’ and ‘queer’, Johnson and Henderson coined the term ‘quare’ (a black-dialect inflected pronunciation of queer) to accommodate suppressed racial and class knowledges. Such work has played an important role in drawing attention to the intersection of, and conflicts between, experiences of race, gender and sexuality, and how that impacts on the deployment of ‘queer’ in academic, political and everyday contexts.³ Given the fact that most contemporary academic scholarship still uses the term ‘queer’, and that it was also preferred by Umlilo when speaking about their own work and identity politics, I use the term throughout this article, but with a critical awareness that other words and expressions are also in circulation.

Writing on the intersection of queerness and race in the South African context, Xavier Livermon (2012) argues that black South Africans who identify as/with queer are often excluded from the privilege of fully enjoying the acceptance and possibilities afforded to their white counterparts. As Livermon (2012: 314) demonstrates, this can be attributed to the way in which “cultural politics consistently mark the black queer body as the constitutive outside of blackness and the queer body is subsequently racialized as white”. A critical point of departure for South African black queer subjects is, as Livermon argues, the exercise of their own freedom through acts of creativity – in the words of Livermon (2012: 300):

Black queers create freedom through forms of what I term cultural labor. The cultural labor of visibility occurs when black queers bring dissident sexualities and gender nonconformity into the public arena. Visibility refers not only to the act of seeing and being seen but also to the process through which individuals make

³ Also see Jafari Allen (2012), Roderick Ferguson (2004) and José Esteban Muñoz (2009).

themselves known in the communities as queer subjects ... How that recognition occurs varies and includes the range of sensory perceptions including sight, but also important for my argument, sound in the form of speech acts, public pronouncements, and the act of listening.

Speaking on recognition as a both a visual and an auditory engagement with presence, Livermon reminds the reader that there are various ways to engage with queerness. Of specific interest to this article is, of course, the manner in which queer presence and practices are negotiated through sound, voice and bodily performances.

Here, the field of black performance studies offers a vital point of entry into the entanglement of race, voice and the performative body. By engaging with the enactment and experience of race, this field is interested how blackness stands in relation to geographical and temporal understandings of identity and place (YOUNG 2010), as well as the bearing that gender, sexuality and class might have on such understandings (also see SMITH 2011; DEFRAITZ *et al.* 2014). Of particular importance to this article is Soyica Colbert's (2012: 275) description of black performance studies as a means to draw attention to the multisensory experience and imagining of blackness; that is, the way in which certain "cultural workers ... make use of the fluidity of identity categories in order to liberate subjectivities and collectivities ... [by] redefining, reshaping and re-signifying blackness". Be it through image or sound, theatre or literature, the performance of blackness is, as Colbert argues, tied to certain "aesthetic movements [that, in turn] enable and imagine political movements" (2012: 275). For E. Patrick Johnson (2006: 446), the power of black performance studies is to ground theory in praxis, "especially within the context of ... white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist, homophobic societ[ies]". As a means to articulate resistance, black performance "functions to suture the gap between the oppressor and the oppressed, *the vocal and the voiceless*, the dominator and the dominated" (*my emphasis*, JOHNSON 2006: 457). In the context of this investigation into the work of Umlilo, the experience and vocalisation of blackness *as queer* (as a site of sexual and/or gendered resistance) is informed by both black performative studies and queer theory, both of which address the radical marginalisation of human subjects on the basis of sexuality, gender and race.

When investigating the idea and presence of a racialised and/or queer

voice, two highly divergent interpretations come to the fore – one as methodology for thinking critically about categories of gender, sexuality and race, the other as practice for ‘fixing’ these categories to a given body or subject. In terms of the latter, research into the voices of, amongst others, homosexual subjects form the basis of various projects that try to chart the recognisability of a ‘gay’ or a ‘straight’ voice. David Thorpe’s documentary film *Do I Sound Gay* (2014) is an example of popular media that explores the existence and accuracy of idiosyncratic speech patterns amongst self-identified gay men. Thorpe’s self-reflexive examination of voice presents a study of how a ‘gay-sounding’ voice can potentially be changed to make it seem, or become, more masculine (or straight), while it also investigates forms of internalised homophobia that affect gay men’s perception of their own voice. In addition to such forms of popular representation, a contemporary strand of academic research also aims to demonstrate how sexual orientation can be reflected by a given voice. Such research draws on speech patterns, pitch range and other factors to locate a ‘typical’ gay voice. For example, the work of Rudolf Gaudio (1994), Ron Smyth *et al.* (2003) and Erez Levon (2007) are but some of the studies that aim to do empirical research into the so-called identifiability of the ‘gay voice’. In the words of Ron Smyth *et al.* (2003: 329), the central goal of such research “is to understand why some men’s voices are perceived as sounding gay (homosexual) and others as straight (heterosexual)”; hence, making some connection between phonetics, voice and sexual orientation. Such projects are, however, largely skewed towards a Western, white, cisgender, male demographic, and it is problematic, in my view, for its reduction of voice to a very particular imagining of body and experience. Such research and representations also beg various important questions – why is it important to locate a gay voice within a given subject? How do these enquiries deal with the complexity of sexuality, for example: how do you locate a bisexual voice or an asexual voice, for that matter? How do such representations reassert the assumption that the voice is ‘straight’ (or, for that matter, ‘normal’) unless it diverts in some marked manner from a generalised paradigm or matrix? And what is the impact of such generalised representations of sexuality and gender when it comes to the fact that the world is not only the voiced territory of the West or those who are white?

This article diverts from such endeavours to locate ‘gayness’ in a given

body, or to imagine some sonic trait as a generalizable feature for ‘accurately’ capturing sexuality, gender and/or race. Rather, I am interested in the queer potential of the human voice – that is, its ability to destabilise and question conceptions of what the gendered, sexualised and/or raced body *is supposed* to sound like. Such an interest in queer voice resounds with contemporary studies, such as Marion Wasserbauer’s *queervoices* project (<http://queervoices.be>). Featuring an online repository, this is an audio-visual attempt at creating a “queer archive” (WASSERBAUER 2018) – a space where music, sound, voice and image create a dense map of queer existence.⁴ Other contemporary projects that take queer voices as their point of departure include *Hear is Queer* (<https://www.hear-queer.com>), which is more orientated towards critical interrogations of gender and sexual norms. The latter offers an interactive online platform that aims to amplify queer voices that might lie beyond a cisgender, white, homonormative perspective. Other examples include the work of Airek Beauchamp (2015), which is more interested in the way that queer voices potentially “rejects binaries and speaks without definitive vocabulary, syntax, or grammar”. As Beauchamp argues, “marginalized bodies produce marginalized sounds to communicate things that escape language ... So where do sound and affect meet in queer bodies? How do marginalized peoples use sound and the body to express liberation, objectification, joy, and struggle?” (2015). Yvon Bonenfant’s (2010) research into queer voices are also aligned with such questions (2010, 74). As Bonenfant asks, “what might it mean to have or to hear a queer vocal timbre? Can such a concept be of any real use to us?” Both Bonenfant and Beauchamp ask important questions about the very idea and manifestation of queer voices and how such voices resonate with or depart from larger auditory cultures.⁵

In the context of this article, Umlilo’s own interpretation of queer voice

⁴ As Wasserbauer (2018) explains, *queervoices* chronicles “individuals’ stories not only by transcribing them, but by mapping them during the interview and making them audible as well. Each interview is accompanied by a soundtrack, created according to the music mentioned in each story, which provides another layer of voicing the narrator’s experiences. The narratives are also accompanied by field notes; a map of how I experience each narrative will be made during the interview, and the narrator is most welcome to suggest where to add or place elements. Another important research principle is that all narrators are asked to think about objects connected to music and important moments in their lives. The narrators are thus able to structure their story in advance and convey what for them are the most important musical influences.

⁵ Also see Julia Eckhart’s *Grounds for Possible Music* (2018) in which she investigates the intersection of gender, voice, language and identity in the production of music, voice and sound.

is, of course, of seminal importance and it provides a key point of entry into questions surrounding the existence of non-normative vocal cultures. For Umlilo, queer “means someone who paints outside of the dotted line... [it] makes room for the complexities and dichotomies that exist within myself, my gender, sexuality, worldview, my music and human beings in general” (Personal Interview 2 February 2018). When thinking about the music and sounds that they produce, Umlilo argues that:

I think my voice is synonymous with my gender and sexuality. The way I speak, the language I choose, how I use it, what I say. All of these things are my voice and I cannot separate my voice from who I am as a person or my worldview. I think it's because most people that are non-conforming to the general binaries of sex and gender end up really creating their own unique identity, it becomes difficult to separate that identity from what they do because society views us as other and I'm a whole lot of other and I love it. I've embraced my uniqueness and I love the idea of difference, we are all different and that's ok ... One of the things I love about South Africa is that we have to grapple with that exact fact daily and learn to live with difference and that's exciting because once we learn to live and love our differences, we are one step closer to embracing what it means to be a human being. (Personal Interview 2 February 2018)

While Umlilo speaks of the entanglement of their voice with their conception and experience of gender and sexuality, it comes with an overt awareness that this is a complex site that is marked by divergence. As Umlilo argues, difference marks the human being and the voice emanating from the lived body. At the same time, Umlilo also draws awareness to the fact that their voice is a space of change, but also of conflict:

I think my voice is something that is a constant discovery for me. I do feel a lot more confident in what I want to say and how I want to say it and that comes with experience. I try to be experimental, playful, hard but soft. I like looking at binaries and then smashing them and turning them on their head. My voice has always been an issue of contention because I've been singing since I was a child and when my voice broke as a teenager I really hated it. I was soprano and dropped to a tenor. I was devastated because I felt like I had lost my femininity and the scales were imbalanced so I had to go through a process of understanding why I hated the change and how to embrace my new voice and the freedom that comes with that. My voice extends beyond music now, it is in my art, it's in my activism, it's in my journalism and everything I create. (Personal Interview 2 February 2018)

The freedom that Umlilo ascribes to their own voice is also reflected in the various musical genres that inspires their sound – as Umlilo explains: “I think my upbringing and my music are so synonymous because I am still heavily influenced by sounds of kwaito, blues, choral, Maskandi, gospel, hip hop, pop, R&B, and rock. When I mix it all up I can hear it in every one of my songs. I think growing up in a time when SA was ‘free’ and experimenting was [a] really great influence for me” (cited in COOPER 2016). The blending of musical genres is central to Umlilo’s work, which has been described as a form of “post-kwaito electronica” that, in both its lyrics and style, is socially conscious and questioning of traditional gender roles (COOPER 2016).

Umlilo’s reference to kwaito (and a post-kwaito moment/movement), demands some consideration. Kwaito is a form of electronic dance music that “emerged alongside the democratization of South Africa between Nelson release from prison (1990) and the democratic elections (1994)” (STEINGO 2008: 76). While its historical emergence is quite complex and encompasses a multiplicity of sources, voices and styles, kwaito can generally be seen as a “direct response to the end [or the fall] of apartheid and the birth of the South African ‘rainbow nation’ (STEINGO 2008: 76; also see COPLAN 2005 and IMPEY 2001).

As Sharlene Swartz (2008: 20) argues, the provenance and development of kwaito is important to black youth in a contemporary South African context insofar as it speaks about “identities in transition” – about the ability to build new cultural products out of remembered fragments by “colonising ... the grooves, styles and techniques of dominant music (like hip-hop) and with it, producing a new identity”. In addition, Swartz emphasises kwaito as a form of resistance to cultural hegemony insofar as it represents a potent multiplicity of languages, “everything from isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sesotho and Afrikaans to tsotsitaal”, that largely makes it unintelligible to white, English-speaking South Africans (2008: 21). As a “sardonic reversal from Apartheid”, kwaito “makes ‘white’ people feel uncomfortable, out of place and – ironically – like second-rate citizens” (SWARTZ 2008: 21-22). Lastly, Swartz emphasises the kwaito as a “political act with strong social activist leanings that is often “harnessed in the service of social interventions against violence, AIDS, rape, poverty and substance abuse” (2008: 23). While the sometimes misogynistic nature of kwaito has also been

emphasised by some researchers,⁶ it is important to note that the genre is largely seen as productive of an experience of agency (KEYLOCK 2006: 61), even amongst a younger demographic of black artists who draw on, and critically renegotiate, the genre.

Umlilo's strategic re-employment (and queering, one could argue) of kwaito is of great consequence, insofar as it provides a sonic platform with which to engage with the contemporary South African context. Their reference to this genre speaks about the abovementioned ideas of resistance, linguistic multiplicity and social intervention, with sexuality and gender specifically being brought to the forefront. In Umlilo's work, kwaito becomes a vehicle for exploring and voicing black queerness – to draw on Livermon's (2012: 300) earlier argument, it becomes a means for “black queers ... [to] create freedom through forms of ... cultural labor ... [by] bring[ing] dissident sexualities and gender nonconformity into the public arena”.

THE QUEER REVOLUTION: *UMZABALAZO* AS A CASE STUDY

To understand the abovementioned complexities that Umlilo refers to in their conception of voice, I focus on a song that was produced for Umlilo's 'Aluta' extended play album (2016), namely *Umzabalazo* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9VrclwRb3cA>). In the words of Umlilo, this album reflects their journey of figuring out where they fitted in as a young, black queer person. The songs coming from this album “are largely about escaping the many binaries that we often face within life, whether its gender, race and sexual politics.” (Personal Interview 2 February 2018). While other songs, such as *Magic Man* and *Toyi Toyi*, also offer rich material for exploration, I focus on *Umzabalazo* as it was highlighted during personal correspondence with Umlilo as one of one of the songs in which their interpretation and employment of voice takes on a particular sonic, political and bodily dimension. For in this song, Zeynep Bulut's (2010: 46) idea of voice as a “fleshed sound” (which is central to my own interpretation of voice) comes strongly to the fore. Bulut's contention that voice is the “house of sounds” (2010: 46) – that which transcends the duality of the self and other, the interior and exterior, the private and public – provides the backdrop to my own investigation of Umlilo's work. As this section will demonstrate,

⁶ See, for example, Esinako Ndabeni and Sihle Mthembu's *Born to Kwaito: Reflections on the Kwaito Generation* (2019) for their research into the complex entanglement of kwaito with patriarchal practices and institutions.

Umzabalazo is a good example of how the fleshing of sound occurs in Umlilo's work – how voice can be understood as a localising, agential and socialising medium that takes form in various ways, be it through or from the body, or reflected in the landscape that surrounds it.

Umzabalazo, meaning 'strike' or 'struggle' in isiZulu, presents a distinct aural and visual perspective on Umlilo's interpretation of queerness. This song takes the premise of two characters sharing one body, the one being the personal narrative of Siya Ngcobo (the artist behind Umlilo) and his everyday life experiences, and the other being Umlilo as the free and fluid embodiment of queerness. As Umlilo explains, this song speaks to the experience of having two intersecting lives, of "not knowing if I should introduce myself as Siya or Umlilo" (cited in MANN 2016).

Of visual significance in the accompanying performance-style video (which was conceptualised by Umlilo and Odendaal Esterhuyse, who also directed the video) are the two characters that are introduced as the different embodiments of Umlilo and Siya's respective lives. When appearing as Siya, the viewer sees a lethargic male character moving sluggishly around in what appears to be a lavish, suburban villa. As Umlilo, the viewer is confronted with a radically different person – a seemingly genderless, highly evocative character that seems much more attuned to the vibrant environment they are appearing in and responding to. For the latter, Umlilo chose to appear in places in Johannesburg that are sites of historical struggle (such as Northcliff Ridge, West Park Cemetery, Constitution Hill, Mary Fitzgerald Square and Jeppestown). As Umlilo explains, this is their desired life – a life of freedom and fluidity that is situated in and responsive to the historical and contemporary political moment. In the portrayal of Siya, however, the viewer is confronted by an environment that appears quite bland and lifeless, and a character that seems exhausted, largely unresponsive and silent, above all.

Despite the differences represented in the lives of these two personas, there are points of connection that are suggested through visual and aural queues. At the beginning of the extended music video (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9VrclwRb3cA>), we see the South African flag waving in a breeze, which situates the film in the contemporary socio-political moment. With the accompanying sound of a cable hitting a flag pole, the aural suggestion is that of rising suspense and tension. This quickly moves over to film footage that documents the South African #FeesMustFall and

#RhodesMustFall protests of 2015 – events that were known for their radical questioning of the lingering institutional discourses of apartheid and colonialism.⁷ Of importance in this particular reference is the fact that it is displayed on a computer screen, with the latter becoming one of the most important devices for suggesting the existence of two different worlds, but also of a point (or surface) of connection between them. For it is on the computer screen that the character of Siya seems to connect to a larger socio-political landscape beyond the confines of suburbia. In addition, it is also the surface through which Umlilo seems to enter this suburban space, and it becomes a vehicle for facilitating contact between Siya and Umlilo. It is then also from this surface that Umlilo’s call to “start a revolution” (UMLILO 2016) arises. Mixed with jarring and grating noise that overlays the beat of the song, the voice of Umlilo brings the discordancy needed to the bland space that Siya inhabits. Here, Bulut’s conception of voice as that which “speaks my body and through my body ... [and] responds to other external bodies” (2010: 48) again comes to mind.⁸ Umlilo’s voice not only speaks from his own body, but it also speaks back to his body as ‘other’ – hence, it activates a corporeal multiplicity insofar as it emanates from the body of the self and, in returning to that same space, finds a different person whose body reacts anew to the sounds that have travelled back.

At the beginning of the music video, Umlilo’s voice overlays scenes of everyday domesticity. Coupled with the cries of *hadedas* (a bird sound that is typical of the early morning soundscape of residential suburbs in South Africa), the aural environment produced at the beginning of the film increasingly becomes unsettled as Umlilo’s call to “start a revolution” takes shape. “They said he was broken”, Umlilo sings in the opening lines of this song (UMLILO 2016), and this sense of brokenness is suggested in what can perhaps be identified as a schizophrenic aural landscape – one in which

⁷ These protest movements began in March 2015 in Cape Town as a collective response to institutional racism. Rhodes Must Fall initiated its call for decolonisation by focusing on the removal of a statue of Rhodes on the University of Cape Town campus, arguing for its removal as symbolic for the fall of the white supremacy and privilege that Rhodes (amongst others) have stood for. Coupled with the occupation of buildings and forms of civil disruption, the Rhodes Must Fall movement saw the removal of Rhodes’ statue after approximately a month of protest action as the strategic starting point of a larger drive towards decolonisation and addressing economic inequality.

⁸ Also see Ruthie Abeliovich’s (2009) reading of ‘envoicement’ as a sonic space for embodiment and disembodiment, presence and absence, and interior exterior, as it echoes much of Bulut’s ideas.

bird calls resound with sounds of student protests, with the suburb and the city calling to one another. However, as the music video progresses, the sounds from the 'outside', the call to revolution that Umlilo personifies and brings into voice, increasingly seems to affect the space that Siya inhabits. Hence, the call to revolution is, in many ways, an auditory one.

In addition to such sounds, the moving presence of what appears to be a horned traditional African mask also adds to the sense of something or some realm being infiltrated. Appearing in the streets of the suburban space, the garden and even at front of the door of the house, this mask provides an unsettling presence that seems to speak symbolically of some alternative reality that threatens the complacency of the suburban neighbourhood. As the somnambulist character of Siya starts reacting to the sound of the music – his body performing in response to the beat – the idea of something starting, of change or revolution, is manifested. And as the song progresses, Siya becomes increasingly affected and agitated by the voice of his alter ego, Umlilo.

This effect of a voice (Umlilo's) on the lethargic body (of Siya) reminds one of the act of ventriloquism – the practice of making a voice appear as if it arises from elsewhere; another place, object or body. Against the provocative agency that Umlilo displays in his engagement with the city space, Siya appears largely inert except for those moments when Umlilo's voice calls him into action. As Steven Connor argues (2018) in his historical analysis of ventriloquism, the:

dissociated voice is a recurrent source of excess, menace and awe. Because it is a category of excess, a figure of nonfigurability, it has no one meaning ... it is both wound and cure, enigma and explication, trauma and therapy. The dissociations and resituations of the voice are always a matter of power. Firstly, the dissociated voice of ventriloquial fantasy mediates between the body and language, which is to say also between the body and culture. The variability of the voice's origin, whether magically detached from the body, or erupting from illegitimate orifices, means that the ventriloquial voice is both an attempt to imagine and pit the speech of the body against the speech of culture, and an attempt to control that illegitimate speech, to draw it into discourse. It is for this reason that the ventriloquial voice is associated both with challenges to political authority, and with their reassertion. For the voice is the mark both of the self's presence to and its estrangement from itself; the ventriloquial voice enacts the strangeness of the self's self-presence.

In the context of *Umzabalazo*, Connor's above argument for the "strangeness" of the ventriloquial voice takes on a distinct political tone, for the voice that returns to the human body is one that has travelled – Umlilo sings to Siya from across some divide that is both physical and conceptual. Umlilo's returning voice carries with it the traces of a revolution – traces that speak of violence and political upheaval, but also of a body where sexuality and gender is not as fixed as it is often imagined.

CONCLUSION

As the end of the music video of *Umzabalazo* draws near, Umlilo's voice dims out. The sun is setting on the suburb where Siya lives – the viewer sees doves returning to the roofs of the suburban villa, outlined as they flap their wings against the twilight sky. In a close-up view of Siya's face, we see his eyes flitting, fighting to stay open, and then finally closing – apparently overcome by the fatigue that has been haunting him for the duration of the film. But as Siya closes his eyes and Umlilo's voice disappears, the music video cuts to a Youtube clip that is displayed on a computer screen of young protesters being arrested by the police force during the Fees Must Fall protest of 2015. As these protestors are shoved into the back of a police van, we hear them screaming "for our rights ... for our rights ... for our rights ...". And only *then* does the music video end – with this open-ended, somewhat dystopian view of a revolution that affects not only Umlilo, but that resounds within the larger South African landscape.

Umlilo's call for revolution extends beyond their own conception of self, especially in terms of their description of themselves as someone who deliberately takes up the loaded positions of being a queer and *kwaai* diva. As Umlilo explains:

In South Africa, 'kwaai' is a word used by many different cultures and languages. It's a traditional Afrikaans word that means angry but has been re-appropriated in colloquial coloured and Xhosa and Zulu slang to mean fierce, hot, ferocious ... A diva is someone who is confident, high-maintenance, not afraid to speak their mind and be themselves, and I identify with that because I've had to bring out that side of myself a lot more when I make music within a patriarchal cis-white, male-centred world.

It is exactly this fierceness and aggravation that Umlilo brings to their understanding and embodiment of queer voice. It is an understanding of

voice as that which carries multiple selves over physical and conceptual landscapes where gender, sexuality and race are still strongly delineated. The socio-political here and there, the historical then and now, the bodily inside and outside – all of these are simultaneously activated in the sounding body. And it is the ability of this sounding body to react to its own complex interiority and exteriority that Umlilo brings into voice. In the words of Connor (2010: 6):

A voice ... establishes me as an inside capable of recognizing and being recognized by an outside. My voice comes from the inside of a body and radiates through a space which is exterior to and extends beyond that body. In moving from an interior to an exterior, and therefore marking out the relations of interior and exterior, a voice also announces and verifies the co-operation of bodies and the environments in which they have their being. The voice goes into space, but also always, in its calling for a hearing, or the necessity of being heard, opens a space for itself to go out into, resound in, and return from.

As Umlilo demonstrates, some of the voices currently resounding in South Africa call for an understanding of being and experience that runs against those norms long upheld by a white, heterosexual and/or cisgender status quo. These voices speak of the entanglement of landscape and body, self and other, and they return to us, louder and ever more urgent, carrying the traces of a burning landscape.

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