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SUBVERTING THE NATURE OF THING: GENDER AGENCY IN SPIRITUAL SYSTEMS AND CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCES OF ZIMBABWE'S SHONA PEOPLE

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DISSERTATION

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My ancestors and my family are my inspiration—they are the shoulders I stand on. I would not be where I am today without their hard work and sacrifice. I only wish to make them proud. I am lucky to have the most loving and supportive friends and community who lift me up at every step. Thanks to all of my African dance teachers, who continue to introduce me to my deepest expression of my joy. I am eternally indebted to their generosity and support.

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ABSTRACT

Gender, ritual and performance in the Shona cultures of Zimbabwe, are inexorably linked. They demonstrate how the flexibility of the Shona spiritual systems offers agency to ritual leaders and practitioners. The story of Murumbi Karivara, a Shona rainmaker from the 19th Century, provides the inspirational imagery for the researcher's Masters of Fine Arts thesis concert DE RERUM NATURA - the way things are (performed on September 2 and 3, 2018). The researcher positions herself among contemporary Shona artists living in Zimbabwe and abroad who negotiate the spaces they occupy during ceremonies, on concert stages, and in institutions; to find autonomy through a variety of resistance practices and cultural performances. Additionally, this dissertation illustrates how the presence of black African performing artists, on concert stages and in academic institutions, dislodges age-old sexually and racially charged notions of Africanist dance practices, originated by the anthropological and historical accounts of colonizers and missionaries.

Table of Contents

Introduction

The mythology, cosmology, and historical and contemporary ritual practices of Zimbabwean women inspired my MFA thesis concert DE RERUM NATURA—*the way things are*[1], presented at the University of New Mexico Rodey Theater on September 2nd and 3rd, 2018. The concert involved fourteen female dancers performing a contemporary form of Zimbabwean and Guinea West African dance. They danced under dimly lit fabric and bamboo installations as soloists, in duets and trios, and as a full ensemble. They sat in chairs, and interacted with rocks, and yarn all to enhance the theme of empowerment and to create women's spaces. The combination of recorded and live music from Zimbabwe, South Africa, and the United States created a melodic and percussive soundscape. The motion graphic projections and lighting added to the ethereal experience created by the music and the movement of the dancers.

The production was developed within a community of women who dance together, and so was a reflection of years of cross-cultural collaboration inspired by rainmakers—*mhondoro* (clan spirits)*, vadzimu* (family spirits)*,* and *shave* spirits (foreign or non-human spirits)—and contemporary dance and music genres. Discovering the malleable attributes of Shona spiritual and gender systems has empowered me with knowledge that better serves my efforts at representation. As soon as African dances are performed outside of their ritual

[1]Dumbutshena, Rujeko. Choreographer. "DE RERUM NATURA - *the way things are."* https://drive.google.com/file/d/1NHxH8slCQxKXjwbSoohTMV6mInDJDxRs/view?usp=sharing

or ceremonial context, their complex journey of alteration begins. As a Shona woman and an immigrant dancer and choreographer living in the Diaspora, I believe that dance acts as my catalyst to personal change and transformation. My research gave me the opportunity to delve into my dance practice while expanding my knowledge of its historical and cultural context. I charge myself with being part of dismantling the white supremacist perceptions of African people and their varied African cultural practices that still exist today—decades after Zimbabwe won independence and the colonial apartheid rule came to an end in 1980. Navigating what American humanities academic Uri McMillan calls "the racially determined omission" of cultural performance (McMillan 2015: 7), I have adjusted these perceptions of African dance on concert stages by showing the resistance practices that allow African women artists and ritual practitioners to push through cultural structures that may otherwise limit their access to power. The presence of black performing artists on concert stages and in academic institutions, dislodges the age-old sexually and racially charged notions of African dance, seeded by the anthropological and historical accounts of colonizers and missionaries.

These racist notions were placed on the Shona who are the largest ethnic group in Zimbabwe and descendants of the Bantu people. Shona culture[2] sees dance as an instrument in ritual ceremony that can evoke the ancestral spirits.

[2] Culture, is communicated and expressed through a system of inherited symbols and actions. Culture develops a persons knowledge and attitude toward what they experience through their lives.

This notion was disrupted by the imperial perspectives of colonialism and Christianity, which restricted these dance performances, thereby limiting a Shona persons access to them. My commitment to learning and relearning African dance practices, provides me with the kind of agency I found in my research on Zimbabwean women who are cultural leaders and contemporary performers. I position myself among these women leaders to show how our cultural practices translate into individual power in both ritual ceremonies and performance arenas. Choreographing *the way things are* required me to remain open to the meanings the dancers brought to the performance while allowing myself to meld with my desire to represent my culture. The result was the creation of a new cultural performance that reflects my heritage[3]. My thesis performance incorporates the symbols of ritual practices via a hybrid African dance practice that forefront images of black culture and people, despite my lack of access to them during my participation in western education systems. Performance is a ritual, and my goal for my thesis concert was that the gestures and movements used could create and transmit a spiritual and emotional resonance. When an artist can bring a deeper sense of 'self' to their performance, this can be a shared experience that then allows others to bring themselves to the performance. By empowering myself, through performance, I

[3] "I define heritage as a mode of cultural production that has recourse to the past and produces something new. Heritage as a mode of cultural production adds value to the outmoded by making it into an exhibition of itself" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004: 1).

believed that I can be and instrument to empower others. This idea was represented in *the way things are* by a constant sharing of power by the women on stage. The sharing of the chair (*chigaro*) represented receiving and giving support to the leader or witness, which also represented another kind of leadership.

My modified performance of African dance reinforces the flexibility of its culture, and follows a lineage of contemporary African women choreographers, who take how their culture is represented in the Euro-centered world and refashion it. They tell their personal journey and infuse it with their traditions and national identity. They display ritualized practices by altering and adapting actions to subvert the effective means of social and cultural control of their new environments. Part of allowing this modification creates a form of preservation which becomes part of their charge to subvert their objectification. The cultural performances of contemporary African women choreographers, like Nora Chipaumire (who is highlighted in this dissertation), serve as a social strategy to push against postcolonial established orders, to form new self-defined identities through the use of their bodies. They have inspired me to approach my performance as a strategy to bring access to an exploration of the restrictive aesthetic categories placed on me and my art form by colonial classifications. This is especially important because dance emblematizes my personal beliefs and culture.

Through elements of African aesthetics such as polyrhythm and grounded movement vocabulary, and my nostalgia for Shona culture, I retell the

'old' in new ways. These reflect my displacement from home and my experiences of marginalization as an African female immigrant artist working in institutions in the US. Understanding my Zimbabwean culture better is at the forefront of my inquiry and performance. Ritual theorist [4] Catherine Bell describes culture as "the giving of performances" (1992:39). In my home in Zimbabwe and my home in the US, in both my daily life and my work as an artist, I often "perform," societies expectation of my culture. This dissertation investigates and narrates some of the ways Zimbabwean women understand the agency that lies within the personal, spiritual, and political ideas in which they locate and express their freedom via their ritual and performance practices. The women highlighted in this dissertation and in the thesis concert, inspire the renegotiation and rewriting of prescribed notions of gender, race, ritual and arts practices in Africa, and an examination of the complexity of the continually shifting sociocultural performances of women in Zimbabwe.

My dissertation focuses on the complex web of interdependence between God (*Mwari*) and humans that shapes the moral and spiritual beliefs of the Shona people of Zimbabwe. Shona cosmology, symbolism, and spirituality reflect the elaborate order of things and are simultaneously integral to the fight for national, cultural, and individual power and independence. The social and religious structure, strictly obeyed by the cultural practitioners devoted to their

[4] Ritual theories assert that focused interaction, which these theories refer to as ritual, is at the heart of all social dynamics. Rituals generate group emotions that are linked to symbols, forming the basis for beliefs, thinking, morality, and culture. (Erika Summers-Effler) https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-0-387-30715-2_7

traditions, creates space for individuals to disrupt age-old socio-political, cultural, and spiritual hierarchies to complement versus critique these systems. The women Marumbi, Nehanda, Chipaumire, Munjere and myself are examples of Zimbabwean women who exist in this space. I focus on the role of women in performance and ritual practice to show the nature of things as they are meant to be, and to glean from their stories the means of creating power through spiritual and cultural systems. Contemporary Zimbabwean women artists contribute to redefining spiritual, socio-cultural and political displacement through the transformative potential of performance. Conversations about African dance practice and its cultural context, must confront the stereotype that the gender, race, ritual and art practices of African people remain static and stuck in the past. Contemporary African artists charge themselves to address this oversimplification of their practices and performances that come from a grave lack of precise inquiry. Embodied memory of ritual, practice of African dance, and inspiration from stories about spirit mediums *Karivara* and *Nehanda* feed my work, which centers themes of women's resistance and resilience.

Performers, as ritual practitioners, display devotion to their performances. Their performance entails a long process of practicing, in order to accomplish growth in their technique and role as performers, which climaxes when it is received by those witnessing it. Performance displays the interdependence between performer and spectator. That dependence can vary for each actor. The presentation and representation of black bodies in predominantly white institutions and concert stages challenges this relationship.

It is impossible to generalize how every performer affects, or is affected by, the perception of those observing their actions. At times I perform in search of recognition or acknowledgment of my identity and culture, and at other times, I am intentionally unaware of how my performance might affect the audience. I find agency in being able to shift between these two states.

As a dancer and choreographer, I am less interested in the end product, and more interested in finding my own agency in the rehearsal process, while facilitating others to do the same. This leaves me less vulnerable to the objectification or lack of recognition that might come from the audience. With actors marginalized by the societies they live in, the hope may be that the audience and actor relationship can counter the denial of recognition that they usually experience. My investigations make clear that at the intersection of performance, ritual, gender, and race, lies the answer to how performers might negotiate their marginalized positions in society. Bell cites ritual practice as a place where "positions of domination and subordination are variously constituted, manipulated, or resisted" (Bell 1997:76). This idea emphasizes the similarity between ritual and performance practices and has lead me to seek to highlight how performance "rescripts how black female bodies move and are perceived by others" (McMillan 2015:7). Options for my own "rescripting" come from an opportunity to redefine myself, according to the knowledge gained through my research of the flexible spiritual systems and ritual practices of Shona people.

Chapter One
The Nature of Things: Myth, Politics, Symbols, and Memory

The deeply rooted sense of self and place displayed in contemporary Zimbabwean performances, is derived from communal connectivity in African culture and ceremony. The result of chosen or forced geographic displacement of Zimbabweans, along with increased globalization, creates other layers to this sense of self and place. Zimbabwean artists living in the Diaspora have been cut off from the opportunities to experience what Marianne Hisrsh[5] describes as "shared belief systems that frame memories and shape them into narratives and scenarios" (2012: 110). The distance from a group of people with common cultural practices forces artists to fashion an individual embodiment of collective memory that subverts their displacement and lack of cultural belonging. When Zimbabwean dances are displaced from their cultural context and performed to an audience that has little knowledge of their cultural heritage, they take on a modernized expression of their original ritual and ceremonial context. I embrace the fact that Zimbabwean ritual movements are part of the orchestration that carries messages to the spirit world. My new ritualized dances performed in the Diaspora are an act of my embodied cultural expression, based on Zimbabwean dances that are a symbolic language that can transform and communicate

[5] Marianne Hirsch professor of English at Columbia University introduced the term post memory

messages between performer and spectator, or between humans and the divine.

Shona ritual reveals an interdependence and reciprocity between humans and the divine. This union is evident in the *bira* and rainmaking ceremonies in which humans evoke their ancestral spirits to act on their behalf; the *bira* is an all-night ritual in which members of an extended family call on ancestral spirits for guidance and intercession. If people experience disorder, distress, illness, disharmony, they turn to ritual. Shona ceremonies align with ritual practices which are produced with the intent of "ordering, rectifying, or transforming the situation" (Bell 1992:108). Anthropologist Victor Turner's definition of ritual as "a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests" encapsulates Shona ancestral spirit possession ceremonies (1972: 1100). Shona ancestral rituals display this "sequence of activities" Turner refers to. Shona rituals also act as a cultural performance that holds symbolic value and is displayed through a variety of media. In Shona traditions, first, beer is prepared from millet for seven days. The individual officiating the *bira* ceremony offers prayers, and then the purpose of the gathering is announced. The rituals cannot begin until the seven-day fermentation of beer, a representation of the creation process, is over. The act of designating time, taking a specific number of days or hours to perform something, is an important element in ritual. The musicians are

expected to play the duration of the *bira* ceremonies, so as to not compromise the continuous stream of sound necessary to a successful outcome.

The music is the vehicle that calls to the ancestors and is, therefore, an important element of *bira* rituals. I have experienced the drums singing a melody and the *mbira*[6] beating a rhythm, with shakers that accentuate the percussive rhythms, and songs pull the melodies forward. At times the music is slow and sultry, while other times it is fast-paced and energetic. Tempo governs the dancer's movement as either understated and subtle (it seemed to me as though dancers were floating an inch from the ground) or dynamic and explosive (as if the dancer could take flight at any moment). The musicians drive the melodies and rhythms to such a height that the dancers and spirit medium become more animated. They start to incorporate high leaps, kicks, and jumps, or quick and precise stomping into the ground. The individual dancer or group of dancers cut through space, shifting forward and back, or in a circle that moves in multiple directions. Whatever the moment of dance, it remains orientated toward the earth, flat-footed and heavy in its aesthetic and rhythmic qualities. Music and dance can continue from dusk until dawn. Extended duration is essential and is an aspect that participants care little about, the outside eye does not exist because a persons' presence suggests their participation. As the tempo of the music quickens, time passing and loses its

[6] Mbira dzavadzimu or mbira is a sacred instrument played at ritual ceremonies in Shona communities. This instrument dates back to the iron ages. It is described as an African lamellophone. It has a wooden soundboard and two rows of metal keys the get plucked to produce sound.

meaning, because their call is answered when the invited spirit medium becomes possessed and begins to preside over the ceremony. The spirit medium may not be the only one to get possessed. While the music is still playing, some dancers may experience a state of trance or may get possessed, but not enough to take away from the goal —spirit possession of the medium communicating with a specific spirit. This possession results in one last dramatic shift in the ritual, as the kinetic energy of the medium, the dancers, and the musicians settle, so the community can ask the spirit their questions and pose their concerns about personal illness and familial unrest.

My dance practice has become an embodied expression of memory. I rely on my memory of beer brewed over seven days, sacred spaces, plants and trees, and images of the fabric worn by dancers slicing through air. My memories are layered on top of my growing knowledge of the symbolism involved in the cultural performances of *bira* ceremonies. I belong to a heritage that builds an understanding and belief that your ancestors carry your prayers to God. Because dance can be the means to invoke the presence of my ancestors, I find that the potential of this element of dance can be present even when a dancer's intentions are not for prayer. In *the way things are*, I combined the embodied memories and symbolic practices with evocative movements, to create a ritual for the stage that would produce an ethereal experience felt by audience and performer alike. Props, gestures, movement, and music were strategically deployed to replicate my memories onto the stage. Symbols and objects became tools with which to create multiple meanings that could

broaden the aesthetic language of our African dance performance. The use of props in *the way things are* were key to communicating the symbolism involved in the ritual for the stage.

My memory of the shuffling polyrhythmic pounding of bare feet on mud floors and my nostalgia for smoke-filled kitchen huts aside fields of corn and balancing granite rocks drives me to represent my culture via music, movement, vocals, and installations. In *the way things are* I created bamboo installations created from ideas generated from a 'practice as research' project, where we created a ritual using rock and yarn. On stage, they stood to represent my nostalgic memory of the blackened roof of a hut. Black and white fabric are often worn in rainmaking ceremonies[7] to symbolize the water and thunderbolts characteristic of heavy rain. In designing the stage for *the way things are,* I created installations using black and white fabric to represent this symbology in a new way. On top of fading memories, ritual symbols, and an awareness that those who dance with me do not share in my memories, I realized and understood that I needed to create a new ritual practice using new symbols to convey new meaning. The bamboo "hut roof," created from ideas generated during our ritual practice, kept ascending throughout the performance attached to our ceremonially yarn-wrapped rocks. The women mundanely wrapping the rocks with yarn on stage represented a prayer or meditation. Once the yarn was

[7] Rainmaking ceremonies (*Mukwerera*) are performed by communities across Zimbabwe. They are performed annually in August or early September. The ceremonies call upon the ancestors for rain.

attached to the roof and was raised, I saw their prayers and ritual connecting the dancers to the 'other' world. The yarn coming down to the rocks looked like rain and added to our ritualized dance which called for rain. This reflected the rain coming down from a different installation of black and white fabric on the other side of the stage, which descended after the ensemble of women danced their individual stories and communal dances.

Contemporary Zimbabwean women artists take cultural and aesthetic risks by utilizing the symbolic power transmitted by their dance and musical performances. Their risks might include being judged or ostracized by society. They show how ritual and performance practices redefine, recreate, and bring about a shift that offers opportunity and agency. My access to an academic institution during my MFA program gives me a broader platform from which to manifest my creative endeavors, I found renewed expressive agency through my performance of *the way things are*. The luxury of time to create and access to full production capabilities ignited my expressivity. As a Zimbabwean woman performer, I can use performance to assert new empowered strategies that dismantle systems of oppression.

Ritual also plays a crucial role in transforming self, status, and political structures. Bell points to how some ritual theorists are "more concerned with mapping the orchestration of complex relationships of power –especially how the power at stake is […] made amenable to some degree of individual and communal appropriation" (1997: 82). Ritual is thought of and used as a strategy to transform tradition and social structures. Bell describes how sociologist

Pierre Bourdieu "characterizes rituals as strategic practices for transgressing and reshuffling cultural categories in order to meet the needs of a real situation" (1997: 77-78). A spiritual system can either be restrictive of, or malleable to, such cultural transgressions.

The spiritual systems of the Shona people are rooted in the belief in *Mwari*, the supreme-being. *Mwari* is both male and female, omnipotent, and too awesome to be communicated to directly. It is, therefore, crucial to have intermediaries between God and the people. To interact with *Mwari*, it becomes necessary to turn to our ancestors who work through spirit mediums, to act as messengers. The *bira* and rainmaking ceremonies are engineered for this purpose. There are two distinct ancestral spirits to communicate within these ceremonies: *Mhondoro,* clan spirits, and *Vadzimu,* family spirits.
"The *Mhondoro*," author Michael Gelfand explains, "are usually concerned with the affairs of the clan or extended lineages, such as succession to the chieftainship, rain, drought, epidemic diseases, incest, […] indeed any matter which affects the well-being of the community as a whole" (1970). The *Vadzimu* are more concerned with the individuals in their family and do not preside over land or influence rainfall.

The importance of *Mhondoro* spirits, rainmaking ceremonies, and the symbolic objects attached to their position and involved in these rites, is reflected in the rule of rainmaker Marumbi Karivara which began in the late 1800s. Rainmaking ceremonies are among the most important rituals conducted

in Zimbabwe; they usually happen once or twice a year and are contingent upon the participation of powerful *Mhondoro* spirits.

> In Zimbabwean Shona cosmology, the one possessed by the *Mhondoro* automatically assumes a supra-masculine or supra-feminine identity, because the spirit possessing him or her was believed to be all powerful, all seeing, and all knowing and therefore had to be listened to by everyone, including political leaders like the chiefs. (Musanga and Mutekwa 2012: 83)

The *Hurungundo* or sacred pebble and other rainmaking paraphernalia involved in rainmaking rites, reflect the importance of the rituals conducted during these ceremonies.

In researching the *Mhondoro* spirit mediums, I found examples of women seizing power through their roles as ritual leaders. Zimbabwean history features the heroism of Ambuya Nehanda, a *Mhondoro* spirit medium who is a symbol of national pride, and whose prophetic powers helped liberate a nation. The history of the Marumbi Rain Cult and Marumbi Karivara, is not well known. She was a rainmaking spirit medium who, according to Africanist historian Joseph Mujere, "transformed her rainmaking powers into great political influence" (2007: 1). My discovery of Marumbi Karivara inspired the themes and imagery that I later put into my thesis concert *the way things are*. Her power to bring rain, her agency to take leadership, and the symbolically potent objects involved in her attaining political power influenced many of the themes in my concert. The scenario of a woman, who was able to gain power through a spiritual system that allows for

the subversion of a patriarchal social and political structure, was the inspiration for the opening image of my thesis concert. This was represented by the matriarchal figure sitting on a chair, on a raised platform, presiding over land and people. My growing insight into seeing ritual practices as "creative strategies by which human beings continually reproduce and reshape their social and cultural environments" (Bell 1997: 76) added to my interest in discovering ways to be strategic about the creative choices I make in the future. *the way things are* simply reproduced historic and cultural moments, where women display cultural and political power and the surrounding symbolism.

Marumbi Karivara's father, Chamutsa Mugonberwa of the Musha-Gumbu dynasty gave her his reign over land and people. Her rule was unique because rainmaking power, according to Shona patriarchal line, is ordinarily handed down to the eldest son. This breaking of a patrilineal line occurred through a uniquely rich symbolism that impacted history.

> When Chamutsa Mugomberwa was on his death bed, he decided to carry out the ritual of vomiting the water stone [pebble] (*rubwe* or *hurungundo*) which he had swallowed as part of a ritual for him to be possessed by a rainmaking spirit to live longer. Most Shona groups believe that a person who swallows this ritual stone will have a long life and would not die until he/she vomits the stone and passes it on to another person who would, in turn, swallow it and automatically, take over his/her powers of longevity. (Mujere 2007: 6)

The importance of symbolism in Shona rituals is displayed in the weight and power held by a single pebble. Mugomberwa sons rejected their father's offer to swallow the *hurungundo*, perhaps in an attempt to prolong his life and keep him alive, or in support of their sister's superior rainmaking skills. This simple choice left an opportunity open for a unique transference of power to ensue. This transaction occurred because of the symbolic value of the rainmaking charms and paraphernalia handed down from father to daughter. Possession of the rainmaking paraphernalia, *nhumbi* (goods), is yet another way that authority gets transferred and held. Anthropologist Yolanda Covington-Ward's research on how "spirituality, [has] very significant political consequences, especially as a competing source of authority and power" (2015: 25). The most symbolic transference that occurred is Marumbi's acceptance of Mugonberwa's offer to become the next rainmaker. As a result of her acceptance, Mugomberwa died, and the rainmaking spirit started to possess his daughter Marumbi Karivara (Mujere 2007: 6). The Shona belief in the interventions of the spirit world on behalf of humans, can lead to the assumption that the rainmaking spirits chose her "thus creating circumstances that would allow her to inherit the powers" (2007: 6). The ritual act of vomiting the *hurungundo* transfers the power, and her swallowing the pebble symbolizes her "acceptance of the powers being transferred" (2007: 7). The shifting of power such as this, manifests in Marumbi, and some of her descendants, inheriting a lifetime of political and territorial control.

The fact that Marumbi was still a young girl during this transference, complicates the symbolic value of age discussed in chapter three of this thesis. The amount of power granted to a young woman, who was not yet free of "excess fluids[8]" and still menstruating, is unusual in Shona culture. Her story emphasizes the importance of symbolism as a method of transferring power to the most unlikely recipient. Marumbi's story portrays the access granted by Shona spiritual beliefs for women to assume power within patriarchal systems. Her rainmaking powers remained unsurpassed and her appropriation of this power gave her access to land given to her by Chief Gutu. Rainmakers typically remained under the control of the chiefs, but Marumbi was able to assume the responsibility of choosing the chiefs in her region. After her death, she was buried in Vazizi river and her burial ground was turned into a sacred site, a fact that was "used by her descendants to claim ownership of the river and as justification to revere its water" (Mujere 2007: 11). The unique transference of power via ritual symbolism between Marumbi and her father had culture shifting implications that lasted for generations.

Marumbi's history helps to anchor Turner's idea of "social structure not as a static organization but as a dynamic process. Rituals did not simply restore social equilibrium; they were part of the ongoing process by which the community was continually redefining and renewing itself" (in Bell 1997: 39). Marumbi's story highlights the ambiguous spaces and symbols that appear in

[8] Older women are said to be dry and more like men while young girls and babies are wet. Women on their menstrual cycle are believed to lessen the power of a ceremony.

the spiritual systems of the Shona, where gender can be turned upside down and through that process, be used to create individual agency that has personal and political consequences.

Personal strategies that can be deployed by black artists while participating in the very structures that might subjugate them echoes Marumbi's subversion of a patriarchal system. The black artist has to confront the racial and sexually charged representation of their bodies on stage as well as "the racially determined omission" of their art in places where it is not seen as art (McMillan 2015: 3). I experience agency because I position myself in the space that my culture creates for me as well as in the space I give myself to assure the continuity of the presentation of black aesthetic practices. I do so via a process of ritualization. Bell cites/references Eric Hobsbawn who "speaks of ritualization to describe the process of 'inventing traditions' in modern societies" (1992: 89). Bell further highlights how, whether consciously or unconsciously, ritualization consists of social strategizing. Ritualization can expand our notions about ritual to allow us to "include ideas about inventing new rituals or traditions for contemporary consumption" (Bell 1997: 89). My performance practices and rehearsals process constructed a new ritual, which created a new symbolic system for our contemporary circumstances.

My creative process allowed individual actors to be free to set their own meaning to the actions and movements they were given, and our method of wrapping yarn around small rocks allowed for the creation of a ritual that took on and created a new agenda that entailed the formation of a shared embodied

experience. The rocks were interpreted by the participants in the ritual practice to symbolize the weight of the burdens of the day or on other occasions. They were taken to symbolize future potential. At first, there was an expectation that our intention would be the same, but the diverse members of the cast contradicted that notion. It was challenging to create a mutual purpose and we concluded, with the help of ritual theorist Bernard Leistle, that a shared intention was not necessary. Leistle states that "the subjective intentions of participants simply does not matter when it comes to defining ritual […] what counts is your 'ritual commitment' (2006: 37). The newly formed ritual presented symbols that, coupled with our shared action of wrapping yarn around rocks, created a resonance that contrasted our everyday practice of African-based movement vocabulary. The fact that not everyone could necessarily relate in the same way to the symbols presented, did not take away from our sense that what we were doing represented our collective ritualized practice.

Our rehearsal process followed a similar process, the movement came before its purpose and, more often than not, a shared goal was not conclusive. I am reassured by Leistle who states that "in ritual, you do not choose your acts in order to enact your intention" (2006: 38). The process allowed the practice of actions to grow into intention. The dancer could have some freedom in how they chose to be seen and their choices were then combined with my chosen representation of our cultural performance. That is, I showed the dancers the movements but did not take too much control of how they interpreted them. Dropping the expectation that, as the choreographer, I would be the absolute

authority and tell the performers exactly how to act, helped individual dancers access their agency. Communities can be the agents that "address when and why ritualization is deemed to be the effective thing to do" (Bell 1997:81). An artist's aesthetic choices are their agency. Ritualizing my complex national and cultural identities present the opportunity to offer new and different representations of myself and my culture. Ritualizing has potential to bring agency to black artists, because it can be a strategy for transforming the power relationship between the artist and the spectator in institutions and concert stages. Their chosen gestures and actions can be strategically implemented to shift power dynamics. Their actions and "schemes are generated by the gestures and sounds of the body and act to qualitatively structure the physical environment" (Bell 1997: 81). Black artists can decide when to perform a ritualized action as an embodied strategy for moving through their daily experiences, on stage and off.

My strategy involved creating a quality in the combination of movement and music that resonates with individual dancers and audience members. This can produce the sense that there has been an exchange, a beneficial cross-cultural communication, without shared understanding among the audience, or shared intention among the dancers. When one thinks of the elements we use as performers—the gestures, actions, songs, word, prayers, and symbols—in our daily performances on and off the stage, we can begin to take more interest in investigating how the ritual practice of these actions, and use of symbols, can alter a cultural structure. Performances can incite transformation in ways that

can bestow power to the marginalized. In bell hook's book, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* she speaks to the "power of looking" and how it can be used to empower (1992: 115). She goes on to state "Even in the worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's face in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, open the possibility of agency" (1992: 116). I experienced this while working with soloist, Gabi Rojas, on one of the sections in *the way things are.* Rojas and I engaged in conversation about the practice of returning the audience's gaze by shifting some of the movements, and points of focus to better embody her personal intention, without it being interrupted by the outside eye.

Zimbabwean-born and New York-based dancer and choreographer Nora Chipaumire's use of the body as a radically expressive tool that allows for the manipulation of how it is understood and received by Western audiences. Her methods of weaving her present situation and opportunities with her African histories demonstrate how "performances as explicitly intentional acts" (Covington-Ward 2015: 22). Covington-Ward speaks to the intersection of power, identity, history and religion and how performance "can be strategically used […] in shaping sentiments of nationalism" (2015: 22). Chipaumire performs her national identity, in her collaboration with exiled musician and revolutionary artist Thomas Mapfumo, in her *lions will roar, swans will fly, angels will wrestle heaven, rain will break: gukurahundi*[9] performed at The Maggie Allesee National

[9] Gukurahundi, loosely translated from the Shona language means, "the early rain which washes away the chaff before the spring rains," was a series of massacres civilians of the Ndebele tribe of Zimbabwe. The

Center for Choreography (MANCC) in May of 2008 and 2009. Chipaumire firmly situates her Zimbabwean identity and immediately ties her to those who share that cultural knowledge. Mapfumo's *Chimurenga* music that was born from the nationalist struggle for Zimbabwe's independence from apartheid rule was "used to perform a solidified national identity" between Chipaumire and Mapfumo (Covington-Ward 2015: 23). Her performances reflected "inherited memories," or memories rooted in cultural memory, as well as her newfound individual expressive embodiment. Her art allows slippage between race, culture and national identity and performance. In the documentary video for her piece *R-i-t-e Riot*, 2016, Chipaumire shows how her performances reference ritual when she describes a performer as "the chosen one." She describes her performance as an "offering" of her "black female body as the sacrificial body," as "the gift" she offers to society to "regenerate" itself. Her ritual generates Chipaumire's strong sense of self and helps clarify her African identity outside of stereotyped blackness.

Chipaumire's body introduces its potential for an expressivity that allows for the manipulation of how the female body is understood and received, and how it can be made to be seen in radically different ways. Feminist writer Janet Wolff in her article "Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics," highlights the idea of a prelinguistic writing of the body where women, not men, are the authors of their own bodies. Chipaumire's work does this in its

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massacres were carried out by the Zimbabwe National Army, of the Shona tribe, from early 1983 to late 1987.

manifestation of an “experience which is not mediated by men and by patriarchy” (Wolff 1997:91). This is exemplified in her piece *Portrait of Myself as My Father,* created in 2014*,* where Chipaumire reconstructs black African gender roles by not shying away from gender subversion. Here, the realm of performance echoes what is seen in spirit possession ceremonies, where gender roles are not strictly bound, and where a female spirit medium can be possessed by a male spirit. Journalist Lauretta Charlton describes how Chipaumire “transposes the results of her investigations of the black male body onto her own, blurring the line between male and female” (2016). Chipaumire’s transformational performances, push at boundaries to subvert gender roles. Her performances echo Zimbabwean ritual ceremonies and practices that demonstrate this sort of transcendence and transformation. As with spirit possession, this metamorphosis happens via the dancing body. Just as Zimbabwean women musicians subvert gender roles by playing instruments usually reserved for men, Chipaumire uses her body to embody a man, her father, to exemplify the capacity for performances to create opposition for women seeking to transform their socio-cultural realities.

Chapter Two
Gender and Age: Complex and Ambiguous Spiritual Systems and Flexible Symbols

Shona spiritual practices undermine the oversimplifying of gender, imagined to exist in ontologies in African culture by early Western explorers, missionaries, and colonizers who refused to acknowledge the importance of the

diversity and depth of these practices. It is essential to write these complexities back into history, to shift the perceptions of African culture and its movement practices as fixed while building an appreciation of their ingenuity. Africanist historian Eugenia W. Herbert emphasizes how gender is a critical component of African cosmology and how it must be instrumental in explaining how power intersects with gender (1993: 2). Postcolonial researchers Terrence Musanga and Anais Mutekwa show the examination of the intersection of gender and cosmology to lessen the likelihood of creating ontologies of gender in Zimbabwe that are "based on fixed boundaries between masculinity and femininity" (2012: 81). Finding the complexities of gender relations and agency that reflect the spiritual systems and cosmology of Shona culture, creates my need to point out this agenda in more conversations. From my research analysis, and through my thesis performance, I argue for the need to move agency and empowerment to the forefront of our observations and conversations about women in Zimbabwe.

In examining the systems of Shona spiritual practices, I consider the advice of anthropologist Todd Sanders who, while studying the rain ceremonies of the Ihanzu of Northern-Central Tanzania cautions not to "gloss […] gender relations monolithically as 'patriarchal' or 'matriarchal' (2002: 293). In his article *Reflections on Two Sticks: Gender, Sexuality and Rainmaking*, Sanders shows what he calls "gender complementarity or symmetry" (2002: 293). He observes gender complementarity as occurring in situations where there is an acknowledgment of the interdependence of gender relations. Rainmaking

ceremonies fall into the category of gender complementarity because they require males and females to be present.

In my interview with musician Patience Munjeri, she points to the complexity of the symbolism attached to gender roles in ritual ceremonies. She shows how a woman's access to rituals is based on the symbolism attached to her age, fertility, and menstrual cycle. What complicates this is that none of these examples are bound conditions. Their symbolic meaning can shift, and are fluid and dependent on time and context. Munjeri, states that,

> The […] reason why they do not like us is the menstruation cycle that we go through, they say [that it] lessen[s] the powers and the energy, [and] bring bad energy. Then the second thing is women who are nursing their children; they are not allowed […] just the smell of the breast milk, the spirits do not like it. (Munjeri 2017)

The symbolism attached to menstrual blood and breastmilk, create the rules that establish the circumstances barring or disallowing breastfeeding and menstruating women's active participation in the ceremonies.

Avoiding a simplified critique of Shona culture allows the development of a broader view, based on the understanding that gendered symbols and spaces can hold multiple meanings. "Symbols […] do not have a fixed meaning; they can condense many meanings together. Inherently "multivocal," symbols must be interpreted in terms of the variety of positions they can occupy in relation to each other in systems of symbols" (Turner 2011: 41). Menstrual blood, for

example, can be seen as a powerful symbol or as a substance that can diminish the potency of the spirit medium's power. On other occasions, blood can represent death; in another context, blood can be associated with fertility and life force. The symbolic meaning of blood and breastmilk cannot wholly communicate negative attributes of women because, depending on the context of a ritual ceremony, these meanings can change. I use these examples to show how symbolism is multi-layered and produces varied meanings and consequences.

The role of cooking and cleaning for the spirit medium is done by *vakaranga* and some mediums do not like this work being done by women (Matsuhira 2013: 72). In her interview Munjere states: "In Dzivaguru where I come from, [the *Mhondoro*] does not like [women], young boys have to cook his food, or he has to cook it himself" (Munjeri 2017). These restrictions point to a role reversal in gendered chores that contradict the simplified description of gendered spaces born from Western patriarchal perspectives.

The symbolism attached to age shows the flexible nature of access to power in Shona belief systems and elaborates on what symbols can communicate. The power and access given to elder Shona women are explained through the various degrees of "dryness" and "wetness" a woman is deemed to have. Children are believed to be "wet" and with age, they become less wet. Only when they are "more dry," more like men, are they given the power and privilege to enter male spaces (Lan 1985: 94).

> Young toothless children, remote from the ancestors and lacking all authority are wet, soft and bloody. The older people are closer to their ancestors and the more authoritative they become. They are dryer, harder and bonier. Both women and men gradually acquire dryness as they progress through life. However, women periodically revert to utter wetness. It is only when they lose the ability to produce children when they are least like women and most like men that they have really begun to dry out. So it is that the only women who play an individual role in the rituals of possession by [royal spirit], the women who brew the beer, must be post-menopausal, thoroughly brittle and dry. (Lan 1985: 94)

In this statement, social anthropologist David Lan offers more clarity about the complexities of gendered symbolism, and how it affects the avenues to attaining power in ritual and social structures of Shona people. It reiterates anthropologist Todd Sander's call to not "gloss over" gender ontologies referred to above. Ethnomusicologist Jennifer Kyker discusses the importance of showing how, in Shona culture, gender intersects with age (2014: 110). The symbolism attached to wetness and dryness demonstrates the link between the shifting of power in ceremonies and a participants age. Ideas about age and access to ritual power were complicated by Marumbi Karivara's rainmaking powers that were evident at a young age, and her acquisition of rainmaking paraphernalia which began her legacy as a political leader.

The fact that positions in Shona societies are not fixed but will shift with time, provides yet another layer of potentiality. Munjeri offers explanations of gendered access to ritual and its association with age where dryness in elders is symbolic of being closer to God: “First thing is [that] there is a belief that the old people are closer to the creator and if they make prayers […] their prayers bring quick answers as compared to the young age” (Munjere 2017). Elders take on the role of caring for the youth in their community because they are closer to the ancestors and their prayers are more likely to be heard. Anthropologist Katherine Snyder believes that this ever-evolving power structure within communities can offer an explanation for why people accept their social status (1997:562). A restrictive position in ritual ceremonies is easier to accept when there is an appreciation that, in time, that reality will change. Snyder believes that this can contribute greatly to women’s faith and investment in the power of ritual ceremonies. Their investment in their cultural structures reflects the belief that endurance can eventually adjust and balance your status within a community. Interdependence between the young and old in a community offers yet another explanation of the investment made to social structures. Where the western lens of gender sees sexism (toward menstruating and breastfeeding women) Shona systems glean age as being more culturally significant. The interdependent and complementary roles that people play in African society should always be put at the forefront of conversations about gender.

The gender flexibility in Shona cosmology and spiritual systems offers agency that grants women power and position, that is not always readily evident

in the glossed over examinations of sacred and social systems of Zimbabwe. My dissertation explores where gender hierarchy becomes gender "symmetry" in Shona spiritual belief systems and how this symmetry is not stagnant but aqueous. To shift how power dynamics in Zimbabwean culture are represented, it is essential to show examples of women finding empowerment through ritual practices and ritualized performances. Chipaumire's embodiment of both genders in performance through her self-prescribed spirit possession, where she "carries her father with her both physically and spiritually, without really having known him" (Charlton 2016). Chipaumire's *Portrait* amplifies the gender flexibility present within Shona spiritual practices. Her work is an example of the continuity of how ritual practices can find a place in performance spaces.

Chapter Three
Symbol and Object: Liberating Black and Female Bodies through Performance

The idea that symbolism shifts with time and circumstance can offer a key to post-colonial theorist Frantz Fanon's plea for people to contemplate how the marginalized in society can revolt. It can provide a space to confront issues of "black selfhood, suffering, identity and liberation" (Sithole 2015: 178). In his article "Frantz Fanon: Africana existentialist philosopher *[sic]"* South African scholar Tendayi Sithole positions Fanon as "the African existential philosopher," while bringing attention to his contributions and concerns about "subjugation, it's dehumanizing effects and the manner in which it should be confronted by the black subject" (2015: 178). In performance, the body is the point of action.

The recognition given by witnesses can transform an actor's status from unknown to known. That shift of status brings a platform that can transmit an artist's agenda in the same way as ritual does for women. The intersection of race and performance complicates this possibility because the black body is most often seen as object, as other, or as less than human. Performance scholar Uri McMillan's book *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* states that black performance is "tangled with deep histories of objectification" in the United States (Sithole 2015: 15). Yet for some performers the black bodies "becoming objects, […prove] to be a powerful tool for performing one's body" (McMillan 2015: 7). McMillan argues that the choice to make oneself into an object can create a liminality and agency that can transform the symbolism and realities of objectification. Chipaumire employs this tactic in *r-i-t-e riot* where she performs in an encased glass box. In this performance, she controls her objectification by exaggerating being seen as object. Her empowerment comes from controlling how she is being seen, by intentionally creating the actions that are most likely to project her own objectification. In his film *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin White Mask*, writer Issac Julien acknowledges the lineage of the type of ritualized action that Chipaumire displays. Black performance artists are tasked with reflecting a lie that the "gaze" places on us about our meaning and contribution to the world. In Julien's film, he cites Fanon imploring us to "return the look in the opposite way" (1996). The actors in performance can create, mold, and refashion the ways that their bodies are received through their physicality.

The transformative potential of performance is evidenced in the type of ritual that can provide a liminal space where black people, through an "embodied agency," can confront their "silencing and marginalization" (Sithole 2015: 178). Performance, like ritual, can be an agent for change that can facilitate one's transition from one social status to another,and from object to agent. In *Black Man White Mask*, Fanon shares his resolve "to assert [himself] as a BLACK MAN. Since the other hesitated to recognize me, there remained only one solution: to make myself known" (1964: 115). Finding recognition through a self-fashioned presentation, can bring the artist a sense of control over their objectification. My ritualization of performance in *the way things are,* allowed me to manipulate actions to lessen the power of the outside gaze that creates objectification of black and female bodies. Creating a circle of women engaged in an intimate ritual moment together softens the effect of the male gaze.

Sithole shows how Fanon exposes subjugation "to diagnose options which black subjects can engage in" in the hope of facilitating a liberation (Sithole 2015: 180). Performance, whether on stage or off, is a useful tool for women to use to unfix ourselves from objectification. In dance performance, this liberation is delivered a women's embodied resistance practices. Chipaumire exemplifies this resistance by confronting the misconceptions and misdefinition of African culture, people, and art. She states that she, "wanted to make a work that tackled the African brands: Africa as violent, Africa as disease and dying, Africa as famine and hunger, Africa as exotic, happy, Africa the silent and ancient, and darkness" (Chipaumire 2009). Her disruption of stereotyped

Western images of Africa and Africans is present in her performance *lions will roar, swans will fly, angels will wrestle heaven, rain will break: gukurahundi.* Chipaumire uses the body as a site of resistance against colonial, authoritarian, majoritarian, and racist ideas and practices. She heeds Fanon's call to "[use] the symbol of [her body] in action to take back and to throw those symbols against their most obvious meaning" (Julien 1996). Chipaumire's performance of self-objectification in *r-i-t-e riot* and her cultural-objectification in *lions will roar* does exactly that.

I come from a lineage of African master music and dance artists, who manifest themselves as ritual agents in their daily formal and informal performances. I am inspired by this lineage and take up Fanon's call to awaken "from the ontological slumber which is created and sustained by subjection" (Sithole 2015: 179). Navigating our own presentations can lead to the destruction of our negative representation. Black performers and arts practitioners have the potential of finding "individual agency" with which to "acquiesce yet protest, reproduce yet seek to transform their predicament" (1997: 82). An artist has complete control of their personal practice, their mastery grows from that practice. Their practice and mastery can help navigate, negotiate, and reconstruct their environments to create avenues to their personal emancipation.

Chipumire's piece *lions will roar, swans will fly, angels will wrestle heaven, rain will break: gukurahundi* performed alongside Mapfumo's music demonstrates the fact that historical and cultural memories can, and do,

continue to exist in the body, despite geographic proximity and newly created shared embodied practices. MANCC website describes the way this piece "examines the art-making landscape in Zimbabwe after years of independence and questions the limitations and benefits of what it means to live outside of one's native culture" (2008). Chipaumire finds an expressive agency in this displacement, because of her talent to discern her ability to deepen self-knowing through the process of redefinition, to "make you understand again, who you are" (2008). Accordingly, applying Covington-Ward's idea of "the body as a way of remembering" helps keep Chipaumire rooted in the sense of knowing and place (Covington-Ward 2015: 12-13). The rootedness in history is coupled with a fearlessness that comes to renew and reinvestigate the self—these are the characteristics that drive the power of her ritualized performances.

Spirit possession and ritualized performances can be analyzed as a rites of passage because a spirit medium or artist can experience at least one of Arnold Van Gennep's three phases of rites of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation. The transition phase is characterized by liminality. Liminality is experienced when an individual detaches from a group or socio-cultural status while awaiting their reintroduction and status change (Turner 2011: 94). The transition phase is where one loses one's status to wait for another, the place of nothingness before a great transition is made. It is an in-between state of being. Liminality, according to Turner, has "ambiguous and indeterminate attributes" (2011: 95) and speaks to the power offered by those moments before a transformation has occurred. The agency found in liminal states coupled with

Fanon's idea of the active confrontation of "the gaze" can result in the taking or throwing back of negative symbols associated with the black and female body. These liminal states reflect the Shona spiritual systems ambiguous flexible states that have potential to transform. Societal rules do not bind this liminal phase, gender hierarchy is absent, and the agents of liminality are neither here nor there. A spirit medium can be said to pass "through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" (Turner 2011: 94). This distorted "cultural realm" during possession ceremonies is ripe for a disruption of the gendered reality of things. Gendered power dynamics are transmuted in a way that breaks down gender norms.

Liminal qualities that describe ritual subjects as being "weakened" and "having no rights" can be related to black peoples existence in "the anti-black world" (Sithole 2015:178). In this world, black people exist in a perpetually liminal state. The power and agency that Turner describes as being drawn from this state can free practitioners from strict adherence to socio-cultural, race or gender structures. If we are, on some level, "dead to the world," then the potential lies in our rebirth or birth into a "non-world." The unknown nature of "a next world" offers agency for performers to flow through and transform because that world offers a place where innovation can occur. I have experienced this in my research and writing of this dissertation and in my nearing the completion of my MFA program, a rite of passage in and of itself. This liminality results in a "disappearing of the individual with an opportunity to shine, be rewarded and change social structure and status." Turner believes in "liminality as pure

potentiality." He goes as far as seeing it as the "institutional capsule that holds the gem of future social development of social change. Fanon believes that black people constantly see themselves through "the gaze" of white people and can lack the ability to release themselves from the gaze. This prison can be shattered by the rebirth of one's own sense of self. The potential of the reassembling of self can produce an agency that results in taking control of the gaze.

Black bodies in performance spaces lack the liminal quality of anonymity. There is no ambiguity about the way those bodies are received in institutional spaces. The black performing artists must actively work to confront "the gaze" of their audience. The black performance artist constantly sees herself being seen and is left with the task of reassembling more of herself. In Fanon's accounts of blackness in the book *Black Skin White Mask,* the mask can become a tool that allows space and distance, it can protect the actor from the sexualized and racial nature of "the gaze." The mask is a tool that can be used to "[introduce] black subjects as subjects proper as opposed to objects. This means that black subjects are in charge of method […]" (Sithole 2015: 179). The mask offers the method that results in the courage to confront and attack culturally and socio-politically charged spaces.

Performance can dramatically subvert the negative images or absence of black women on concert stages (and a general lack of recognition of African arts). By manipulating and taking control of how the black female body is understood and received, *the way things are* works to repair the invisibility of

African stories on concert stages. African artists work to shift their position in order to claim more leadership roles in communal, social and institutional spaces by translating the elements, acts, and symbols from history, memory, and traditions onto the stage. We create images that affirm the importance of our contribution to and inclusion in international, institutional performance spaces.

Investigation and experimentation are avenues for forming new ideas that further the possibility of social strategizing. Our physical practice as dancers results in change; we were not the same dancers at the beginning of the process as at the end. Our dance practice resulted in an expansion of knowledge through the experience of individual intentional ritualization of a practice. Because the intentions set were relative to the dancers making them, they could deepen their expressivity according to their own personal beliefs. The people that were on stage, the props, and installations simultaneously anchored and modified the expressivity of our neo-traditional African dance praxis. Through our methodology as dancers, we created our compositional structure based on the sensory perception of our actions both individually and communally. Through personal practice, a dancer can create meaning and intention around an action. Creative processes that involve more than one person requires sensitivity to the community and an openness or insight into what each individual is driven to bring. Group work involves a shared communal experience.

My experience with working on *the way things are* with such a diverse ensemble was that our intentions mostly remained separate although at times we made choices and agreements based on our sensory perception around our actions. If a dancer placed personal intention onto a movement and they chose to share their intention with their community, then the community could choose to adopt the dancer's new meaning. This was rare and really was not encouraged in this particular process. I decided that it was more important for each dancer to connect their own movement with their own intention. Although the structure of the performance became firm, our experience of it continued to evolve. Rehearsals helped concretize the composition and structure of the production. Yet each time we practiced felt like the first time. This may have been the result of the challenge of bringing together a cast of fourteen people during their busy summer holiday months. The challenge of having a different group of dancers at each rehearsal encouraged the relative intentionality of our shared practice. In our practice and performance, we were moved in ways that have mainly to do with the innate effect of the rhythms and melodies on the body. I believe that the potential to transform and create community is innate to the practice of African dance. The movements themselves and the music have been engineered over thousands of years to have this effect. Our African dance practice is ultimately what brought us together as a community and allowing experimentation within the rehearsal process promoted the possibilities to shape cooperation, symmetry, and complementarity while holding onto individual autonomy.

Chapter Four
Spiritual and Performative Instruments of Personal Agency

If contemporary Shona cultural gender relations were to reflect their cosmology and spiritual systems, there would be more conversations that were attempting to find the complexity of gender relations and the agencies demonstrated by women.

Along with my research into the lack of fixed gender boundaries, there is also cooperation, symmetry, and complementarity during spirit possession. In her book *Mapira: Shona Ceremonies* Patience Munjere (Chaitezvi) describes the kind of shared work that happens in the spirit world where "female spirits are [just as] powerful and work together with male spirits" (Chaitezvi 2013: 11). Patience Chaitezi describes how ancestor spirits "need to work together … in order to provide the family with food, wealth, and protection" (2013:27). Her observations buttress Sander's notion of the "interdependent and equal […] complementary combination of the cultural categories male and female (Sanders 2002:289). Musanga and Matekwa emphasize the importance of not duplicating systems of subordination in Africa (2012: 81). They encourage the examination of the intersection of gender and the spiritual systems of Zimbabwe.

Cooperation and equality have the potential to reposition Shona cultural understanding of gender roles and hierarchies from colonial perspectives, by deemphasizing the idea of women as the 'powerless victims' of patriarchy and emphasizing their agency within socio-cultural and spiritual systems.

Some African instruments are symbols of socio-cultural and spiritual power. The *mbira dzavadzimu* is one of those instruments previously reserved for men that few women are permitted to play. Kyker states "the Zimbabwean *mbira dzavadzimu*[10] is particularly vested with power" (2014: 115). Her article "Learning in Secret: Entanglements between Gender and Age in Women's Experiences with the Zimbabwean *Mbira Dzavadzimu*" supports the notion that a woman's access to the *mbira* is created by the flexible, cooperative, and fluid nature of Shona spiritual systems, cosmology, symbolism, and ritual practices, that undermines gendered divisions. The Shona believe that a person's talents and skills are given to them by *shave* spirits that reside outside of one's lineage, which allows for an interpretation of talent as a sort of possession that explains their calling to dance, sing, or play an instrument. This provides an example of the personal agency that is found in the Shona spiritual system. It provides an example of a place where power does not need dramatic transference, like that performed by rainmaker Marumbi, but rather it offers a subtly subversive transference that resides in an individual's ritualized actions which can lead to personal empowerment that can manifest in social and economic freedom.

Shave spirits show another level of cooperation within the Shona spiritual system, because they assist *vadzimu* "in providing for the needs of the family" (Chaitezvi 2013: 4). Unlike the *vadzimu* or *mhondoro* who are responsible for

family, clan, and land, *shave* spirits are said to bestow people with the extraordinary talents that they possess.

> Therefore it is considered that this talent comes from a foreign spirit outside the family, from that of a stranger who died far from his home in a foreign land. This person was a hunter or one blessed with some exceptional talent and was not buried following his customs, and his spirit roams until it selects a host or medium who will accept it and in return, it confers its talent on the new host whenever he needs to use it. (Gelfand 1970)

A belief that talents are not necessarily hereditary provides spaces where gender delineations can be crossed. This realm of the *shave* spirit world explains some of the agency that women find in ritual practice and ceremony: just as the *vadzimu* do not limit their choice of host based on gender, the *shave* spirits can endow their host with talents that do not conform to everyday gender hierarchy, or fixed geographical or cultural location.

Because *shave* spirits do not subscribe to the same rules as ancestral spirits, they can bestow talent out of the ordinary. *Shave* disrupt ancestral and familial systems and structures. There are *shave* spirits that provide the skill to hunt or prophetic abilities. The few Shona women who are known to play *mbira,* attribute their expertise to their "spirit-given" talent. Patience Munjeri shows this gender subversion through her *shave* for playing *mbira*. "Female *mbira* players are actively involved in reshaping a series of powerful, shared cultural tropes"

(Kyker 2014: 113). Today, more women find ownership of inherent power "via a discursive means of laying claim to the *mbira*" (2014: 113). Despite cultural and social restrictions, they can evolve their participation and role in rituals through resistance practices that fulfill the need for their progress.

Once it is clear that these *shave* spirits want the individual to play, then their family and community cannot deny it. In my interview, with *mbira* player Patience Munjeri, she told me that:

> Like myself I was brought [up] in a traditional family my mother gets possessed by seven different spirits. My brothers, they play [*mbira*] for her, especially the older brother. I would just watch my [younger brother] failing to get what my older brother was trying to teach. The younger brother was struggling to get it. I said to him, "you are being asked to play that key, the other one, and that one." My elder brother said, "then I should teach you," so he began to teach me and […] in three weeks time, I was asked to play [for a ceremony]. (Munjeri 2017)

Patience was a young girl when she started to play; and some people did not approve especially male *mbira* players. Fortunately, there was no denying or ignoring the fact that there was "a spirit behind" her. This acknowledgment from the spirit realm, allowed for the family and community to release prescribed gender notions about women playing the *mbira,* and allow Munjeri to play. So began her journey of playing *mbira*. "Another man came again to tell me to go and play outside. I started walking out, but the spirits said no 'let her play" she

narrated, “so I had the support of the spirits, and my mother and my brothers even though other men didn’t like it” (Munjeri 2017).

After her brother’s death, Patience chose to “walk away from” playing *mbira*. Then she got sick. The story that followed would be a further affirmation that she was destined and supported by the spirits that wanted her to play *mbira*. “I went to the hospital, they could not see any problem. Different doctors, they could not see any problem. I tried *vapostori*[11]. Actually, those *vapostori*, they said, “if you don’t play *mbira* again, you won't get healed, that’s the only way […]. So I started to play *mbira* again, and I just got healed. So to me, that explains there is a spirit driving me to do this” (2017). There are parallels in the cooperation found in the relationship between *mhondoro* spirits and their spirit mediums as they preside over people, land, and rain and in the relationship between *shave* spirits and their hosts. Munjeri is one example of a growing number of female *mbira* players revered for their contributions to the cultural arts of Zimbabwe and the global recognition of the instrument. They are an active and vital part of instilling cultural and national pride, and being part of the transformative power of ritual in Africa. They are an excellent example of women’s ability to subvert gender hierarchy through their ritual and performance practices.

I have emphasized that the spirits being prayed to, and the spirit mediums they possess, constitute a significant example of how gender, in the

[11] *Vapostori* is plural for *Mpostori*, which refers to a person that follows a sect of the apostolic faith in Zimbabwe. It is interesting to note that they are often against traditional practices and ceremonies.

spiritual systems of Zimbabwe, is not strictly delineated by a Western gender binary. The *mhondoro* and *vadzimu* spirits being prayed to are either male or female, and there are no fixed gender boundaries around whether a male spirit possesses a female medium or vice versa, and therefore speaks to the ambiguous nature of Shona spirit mediums. In the sacred space that occurs during spirit possession ceremonies, the male body can take on the characteristics of his female host. Musanga and Mutekwa argue that these particular ceremonies, when carefully analyzed, show how "masculinities and femininities are therefore pluralized and not perceived as single and fixed entities and patterns of behavior" (2012: 81). Instead, they propose that possession is "a site in which gender boundaries could be transgressed" (2012: 81). The fact that male and female spirit mediums are not necessarily possessed by spirits of their own gender offers transcendence of the "conventional conceptualizations of gender based on fixed boundaries between masculinity and femininity" imposed by British colonization (Musanga and Mutekwa 2012: 82). The idea that *shave* spirits give abilities that are not compliant with gender systems, support what occurs in the ancestral spirit realm where gender boundaries are not strictly adhered to.

Conclusion

My choice to work with mostly female dancers and collaborators, is a consequence of my research on women in ritual ceremony, and my desire to bring women together in creative ritual, performance, and resistance practices.

the way things are represents a feminist performance that incorporates ritual to create opposition, resistance, and subversion. The research into the spiritual systems of the Shona, and how women have negotiated those spaces, translates on the concert stage through my perspective and representation of women as strong and resilient. We can perform and embody some of the principles of ritual practice by using "flexible sets of schemes and strategies" while "simultaneously instigat[ing] transformation of those very structures and patterns as well" (Bell 1997: 82). My praxis of African dance is at the center of my ritual practice. The knowledge gained through practice, memory, investigation, and researching my feminist heritage, reenergizes my performances to produce a sense of female liberation felt by performers and audience alike.

A chain of communication between humans and their ancestors, and between ancestors and God, form the base of the belief that human misfortune can potentially be rebalanced within the supernatural realm, and that humans are the agents of correcting wrongdoing to redress and set things straight. In Shona culture, when something is imbalanced, a prayer, a ritual, or a ceremony is performed to a deceased family member who steps in to correct the individual, familial, and communal distress. The "secular distinction of rank and status disappear or are homogenized" during these ritual acts (Turner 2009: 95). The ambiguity of the social and gender hierarchy of these rituals is key to a transformation that is not limited by everyday acts that occur outside of the ritual sphere. Instead, an acceptance of this ritual morphing creates an

openness to a subversion of the norm that results in a recognition in the socio-cultural realities of the people. The ambiguities that exist in the liminal phase of Van Gennep's and Turner's description of rites of passage, are the places where a shift of power or status can occur. This fact makes ritual an important place to examine and investigate gender subversions. Through the processes of spirit possession in ceremonies, access to power via playing the *mbira*, creating movement-based performance or seeking knowledge through researching can create a newfound identity, a renewal of self and a positive shift in status.

The individual practices I have shown in Shona ritual ceremonies confirm the complexities of gender systems. The cornerstone aspects of African cultural and spiritual practice are order and hierarchy, which results in a clear sense of self, place and structure. However, in Shona spiritual systems, there is an acceptance of a ritual morphing, and there is an openness to the subversion of the norm that transgresses everyday gender boundaries. Women move through barriers and stretch their spheres of influence personally, communally, regionally, and nationally, whether they choose to or not. Shona women get presented with the opportunity to find agency within their spiritual and cultural practices and beliefs. *Mbira* player Patience Munjeri's legitimacy to authority is attributed to her spiritual drive, or *shave*, to play the *mbira* which provides her with opportunities to perform, teach, and lecture in the U.S. Patience's authority and agency lays in her connection with the spiritual realm, and her support of her family.

For Zimbabwean artists who reside far from their own culture, embodying historical, cultural and spiritual practices as well as national, political, and cultural memory, becomes even more poignant, as they navigate their "otherness" in their new home. Their bodies become less "mediated" by communal embodied practice and more [by] symbolic systems" (Hirsch 2012: 110). Living outside of your culture and country, takes away the embodied practices that come from shared cultural performance. Instead, as African artists living in the Diaspora, we challenge ourselves, and are constantly challenged to reinvent ourselves in our daily actions and performance practices. Chipaumire exemplifies this through her performances by using cultural and national symbolism and "intentional embodied action" (Yolanda-Ward2015: 22). Chipaumire's legitimacy to power and authority rests in and on her body.

Rituals "affirm the social order while facilitating disordered inversions of that order: through such inversions, the original order is simultaneously legitimated and modified" (Bell 1997: 40). Women can move themselves from one status to another through their dramatic performances that can have lasting consequences for socio-political and cultural structure. Marumbi Kaivara's claim to power resides in her acquisition of the symbolic objects that marked the transference of the *mhondoro* rainmaking spirit from one host to another. Her performance of the act of transference of power, marked the beginning of a reign that subverted the otherwise patrilineal inheritance of power and territories.

Contemporary ritual leaders and artists living in Zimbabwe and abroad negotiate the spaces they occupy in their homes, during ceremonies, on concert

stages, and in institutions, to find autonomy through their various practices. Their praxis and performance provide inspirational imagery that appeared in the production of *the way things are.* To examine the history of women in African culture, is to be confronted by an ever-shifting complexity that can be creatively explored. My research continues to anchor me in my own culture, while informing my creations and desire to transform the world around me—to infuse history, heritage, and tradition into my past and present.

I am a Zimbabwean immigrant artist tasked with confronting the images of African people, our culture, and their presentation in white institutional spaces. I strive to offer inversions that alter the norm of these spaces, by presenting performing black bodies in the institutions that were created to subvert the power and beauty of those bodies. The refashioning of these presentations can occur through ritualized communal embodied practices that take authority over the expressivity of one's own body, to subvert relationships of domination and submission.

The order of Shona spiritual and cultural systems addressed the disorder that counters that order. Both order and disorder are built into the spiritual, cultural, and performance systems that I research, discover, and experience. The subversion of gendered socio-cultural-spaces and structures by Zimbabwean women artists, results in a transformation of their status that successfully dismantles age-old assumptions about African female disempowerment. It is important to continue to renegotiate and rewrite prescribed notions of race, gender and age so as to better reflect the diversely

spirited rebellions of African women. Showing the depth and power that lies within ritual and performance to transform the personal, spiritual, and political lives of African women in general, and Zimbabwean women in particular, inspires my desire to continue to investigate their stories. The durability of our cultural structure is maintained and can exist simultaneously with our desire to negotiate these structures to meet our current realities.

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