

## CHAPTER 3

# DBLE: A CURATORIAL APPROACH TO PRACTICE AS RESEARCH

By Khanyisile Mbongwa

### **INTRODUCTION**

“I curate because I do not know, I curate because I do not want to lose my ability to imagine a world...” Khanyisile Mbongwa

Drawing on curatorial practice as research, this chapter explores *Demonstrations and Demonstrating: Black Lived Experience (DBLE)*, a term I coined in 2013 during my Honours degree in curatorial studies at UCT. I have been developing my thinking around it as a site and archive from which strategic methods of tracing, mapping, discerning are used as tools for PaR.

In thinking about this chapter, I begin by positioning *Demonstrations and Demonstrating: Black Lived Experience (DBLE)* as a site and archive from which my practice is conceived, informed, influenced and developed. It is this positionality that has given me the capacity to develop the language in my practice as research. I attempt to understand the range of methodologies that surface during the relationship or tension between intuitive practices and institutionalised protocol as the researcher moves between states of nimbleness, agility, shape-shifting and code-switching. I also touch on what I term ‘the pillars of my practice’, which form the foundation and are the guiding principles of my curatorial practice. It is these pillars that inform my intention in terms of how I approach my research and also that hold me accountable in the process of research.

### **DEFINING DEMONSTRATIONS AND DEMONSTRATING: BLACK LIVED EXPERIENCE (DBLE)**

As a site and archive *Demonstrations and Demonstrating: Black Lived Experience* depicts that first moment in history that an African person, alongside their native land, is extracted and reduced to a Black Body of labour and currency – placed on a plinth, naked, unnamed and renamed, stripped of personhood and marked by enslavement permanently. This is the first moment of demonstrating Black lived experience. Apart from acknowledging histories of extractions as archival sites *Demonstrations...* acknowledges Black people as the first modernists through processes of abduction, alienation, displacement and dispossession. Kodwo Eshun refers to the significance of remembering “the collective trauma of slavery as the founding moment of modernity” (2003:288). Eshun highlights Toni Morrison’s argument that:

African subjects that experienced capture, theft, abduction, mutilation and slavery were the first moderns. They underwent real conditions of existential homelessness, alienation, dislocation and dehumanisation that philosophers like Nietzsche would later define as quintessentially modern. (289)

Eshun further argues that this “dislocation and commodification that constituted the Middle Passage meant that modernity was rendered forever suspect” (289). My practice starts here to trace, map and discern the timeline on both ends, which is to say, from before the colonial enslavement extraction and decolonising practices that emerge in and through the conditions of such violences, until what I call the ‘emancipatory practices’<sup>6</sup> that arise in what is defined as the post-colonial free world. In my attempts to find language to define what we (Black people) do, it is this word *Demonstrations*, this moment of *Demonstrating: Black Lived Experience* that I move through in search of emancipatory practices that resurrect, acknowledge and instigate a curing and care for my ancestors, my lineage and us Black people now.

*Demonstrating: Black Lived Experience* is about reading, mapping, thinking and imagining through the Black body – the Black body that centralises itself as a point of departure/enquiry in the work of art, literature, philosophy, new media and visual culture.

In this context, the word ‘*Demonstrations*’ has a number of associated meanings and connotations:

*Demonstrations* is forced removals; exile; toyi-toyi; lifeless Black body; dismembered Black bodies; unnamed graves; *irhanga* (alleyway); the Middle Passage; the legacies of slavery; the disturbed flow.

- *Demonstrations* is the expounding of Black historical narratives; Blackness moving as archive and in memory; invoking the ancestral knowledge; in pursuit of remembering; tracing through movement (dancing, *ukugida*,<sup>7</sup> libation, migration, the slave ship).
- *Demonstrations* seeks to create a space where we imagine the afterlife in and of Black trauma. It probes at what survives and the ways in which Blackness continues to make living.

In formulating my practice I realised that there is a conversation that ensues between tracing, mapping and discernment when I anchored *DBLE*, which centralises Blackness and the bodies of Black people as the starting point of my thinking. My questions

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<sup>6</sup> I define emancipatory practices as creative modes of communication and expression that chattel through the violent histories of colonialism, slavery, apartheid and racism as practices that insist in imagining Black life into existence. That is visual arts, literature, philosophy, new media, curating, live and public interventions that apply themselves to systematic structures that deny us access to ourselves.

<sup>7</sup> *Ukugida* is an ancient cultural Zulu dance. We use it here to infer global Black diasporic indigenous ways the body moves to connect with self, the ancestral and celestial.

began with a mundane: What and who do I see when I look at the mirror? Who stares back at me and how? Who are the people and what are the places that configure this ensemble? These questions required me to see myself; but how do I see myself when I'm socialised and trained to see through the eyes of a white man or white gaze? Then the questions became: How do I reach my eyes so I can see me? How do I remove this white gaze veil? How do I remove the invisible white hand orchestrating continued conditions and circumstances of violence? What is the undoing work? How do I train my eyes to see, look and transmit?

### **TRACING**

I use the Sankofa method of tracing. *Sankofa* is a Twii word from the Akan tribe in Ghana. The literal translation of the word and the symbol is “it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind” or go back and fetch it. *NgesiZulu* we speak of *ukuzilanda*, to go fetch yourself through the family and clan names, the stories and metaphors embedded in them and the places they point to. Here, my ancestors have left me with a blueprint of how to trace, what to look out for and how to look, how to read the symbols in the dreams, clothes, songs, food, dances, figures of speech, bodily gestures and the everyday. My ancestors knew I'd come looking so they left me clues that require an ancestral alignment to awaken the spiritual eye for me to be able to trace. The trace is the retrieval, a retrieval of that which we have been denied access to; a retrieval of that which has been left behind; a retrieval of that which sits in the disturbed flow; a retrieval of that which survived the triangular seas crossing. For this to happen you have to be a participating observer. Participating means that you partake in the happenings so you can observe yourself and any somatic response your body might move through; you can learn through your senses and your ancestral/ indigenous perspective; you get to engage with other people who carry the lineage and knowledge that resides in all their movements. ‘Observer’ means you assign yourself to an ancestral listening, a deep-time listening, a forensic listening. To observe is to train yourself how to listen, to listen before formulating a question because how could you possibly know what to ask when you have not listened? In order for the observer to emerge you need to be curious, it is the curiosity that will open you up to the practice of listening.

But your participation and observation has to be regulated by the customs of the people and the place, the kind of invitation extended to you, your intentions communicated clearly and not overstepped. As a participant you also have to offer a ‘happening’ in order to be participating *with* and also *to be observed* by the people and the place in question as a sign of mutual respect for being invited and accepted into their process. In this way there is an exchange rather than an extraction for your sole benefit – in my practice it is always a question of balance. After all the information has been sourced and gathered, it is to be cross-referenced with the people in question as verification and to determine what is secret, sacred and therefore not for public consumption.

Entering a museum archive where they house ancestral or sacred objects from different parts of the African continent is tracing. Let's say it is an *Nkisi Nkondi* from what

we now call the Democratic Republic of Congo. But how does one trace in the absence of the maker of the object? The first trace is to find out where the object is from; how the object became part of the archive; how it was received or welcomed into the archive; what information was made of the object; how the object was taken care of; how many times has it been on display and why. The second trace is to find the people where the object is from and enquire from them about the object – what is the intention and function of the object; in which particular region it was made; how is it supposed to be cared for; does it need to be returned or can it continue to exist in the museum archive and do you have permission to touch it, speak to it, speak about it and write about it. The asking of these questions is but one way one can practice tracing without being extractive or continuing the culture of anthropological extractiveness through research.

### **MAPPING**

Mapping is following your intuition, which is developed over time through trusting what you feel as valid for enquiry, it is educated or informed hope and it is listening to the somatic response your body encounters. Mapping allows you to sketch, chart and outline your tracings. It creates an operation that either associates elements to each other, sees where links happen, where possible narrative or narratives of possibilities can occur. Lines are drawn and redrawn to read what the links are and where the tensions happen. It is a layering of information to make sense of it, or rerouting a line to move beyond the obvious or what keeps occurring so as to test the limits and examine how you can move beyond. It is here you begin to formulate your language that gives life to the work and defines your practice. Mapping requires agility, nimbleness and the ability to shape-shift because it is the part of the research where institutional protocol rubs against your intuitive process, because the rhythms are not the same or might not align. This tends to be the crucial part of the research process, where the institutional timeline has no space for expansion and requires you to shrink within its limits and or confines. Mapping can also assist you to manoeuvre the institutional tension through mapping its layout in a way that makes sense to your process and to the integrity of your work, and it helps to identify where there are possible synergies and hone into those so as to relieve institutional and systemic pressure. This in turn sharpens your skills of critical mapping as you learn to code-switch in a way that is sensitive to your own personhood.

During my MA I curated a series of interventions at UCT, one titled *kuDanger! kuDanger* is an electrical box that is found ekasi (in the township), commonly placed at a street corner with a lamp post looking down on it. On any given day, from early morning till late at night, young boys gather around it and sit on it. It is typically adjacent to *irhanga*. *iRhanga* is a township alleyway; a passageway between rows of township houses and at its mouth is another gathering of young boys, leaning on its walls with a streetlight shining down on them. Sometimes, a brave girl sits amongst the boys, earning a less 'feminine' status.

Down in the furniture storage basement of UCT's then Drama Department,<sup>8</sup> I installed *kuDanger!* Generally, this basement is a clutter of furniture used as props by the

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8 Now the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies.

department. The first aspect of the work was to create space within this basement for *kuDanger!* to exist as an experiment that explores *irhanga* as a public space by imaging what a free Black child looks like. This act of place-making and labour revealed some of the pressing questions that the performative installation grappled with. The piece is a montage including fairy lights, video installations, three Black beings packing and repacking empty beer crates, and one Black being standing on a room divider, moving in slow motion. The only source of light comes from the pulsating fairy lights and the television screens placed in precarious positions. There are multiple layers that plunge the viewer into a curated atmosphere: these layers are spatial, as the viewer goes down the stairs; visual, as you enter a darkened room; and aural, as you find yourself within a specific soundscape. Every layer is a careful choice, intended not to override the Black Lived Experience *ekasi*, not to reduce it to only a Black body and not to spectacularise its labour, but to bring to the surface its nuanced textures and rituals of resilience.



Figures 3.1; 3.2; 3.3: 2017 MA explication in UCT Drama storage basement as part of the ICA Live Art Festival. Curated/Choreographed by Khanyisile Mbongwa. Demonstrators: Khanyisile Mbongwa, Nicholas Ngimkhethile Sithole, Asanda Muchatuta, Aphiwe Nyezi. Photographs courtesy of the Institute for Creative Arts and the curator.

This mapping exercise engages with the township as an illegitimate space that is legitimised by the existence and insistence of Black life and living. It uses the concepts of township planning, forced removals and choreography as templates to formulate grids and imagine from them. To read the township beyond the perspective of a place that reproduces violence, is a way to introduce other possible narratives that occur; reading the Black body as a being that imagines and creates from that imagination. It also presents other perspectives from which to enter the township, and thus Black life.

### **DISCERNMENT**

Given the history of how Black people are invisibilised or hypervisualised – placed in conditions and circumstances that are precarious, therefore placing our bodies on the

line as available, accessible, disposable and erased – discernment in my research process is where I critically look at the tracing and mapping to see what I might have missed. To discern is to possess “the quality of being able to grasp and comprehend what is obscure” or in the Christian context, it is “perception in the absence of judgment with a view to obtaining spiritual guidance and understanding” (Meriam-Webster.com). Discernment is about paying attention to detail; unpacking and distilling ideas/ findings; going back to the scene or site for further observations to see what you might have missed; asking questions from various perspectives; discussing your thoughts, ideas, findings with your family (I always call my mother) and community (my friends and peers are people I think alongside with when I am formulating and examining my ideas). In respect of where I am thinking from in my practice, I always ask the following questions: How do I safeguard the sacred and secret sacred? How do I respect Black privacy? What do I need to put in place to acknowledge and pay respects?

### **THE PILLARS OF MY PRACTICE**

Defining the pillars of your practice is a guide for how you conduct yourself during your research and what considerations you need to have as you formulate your research parameters. Pillars are what hold the structure of what you do and act as roots and reinforcement of the practice. A pillar is a supporting, integral or upstanding part of a frame. In my context I think of the pillars of my practice as the lifeline between my ancestors and me, the lifeline between the celestial and me. The pillars are a vertical line running from the bottom (ancestors) and top (celestial) towards me on this timeline. Thus, my curatorial practice is concerned with Curing and Care, engaging with creative processes to instigate spaces for emancipatory practices of joy, care, play, love and freedom. Curing and Care form part of intentionality in my practice, hold me accountable in my process of conceptualising, thinking through and manifesting curatorial propositions. They are the guiding principles and ethical considerations asking what are the particularities of care one needs to put in place to hold the space for the creative as an artist, for the narrative and for their personhood; asking what considerations and sensitivities need to be put in place and activated to instigate a curing.

### **CURING AND CARE**

These are Khanyisile Mbongwa’s guiding principles and ethical considerations for curatorial practice. The approach asks what are the particularities of care one needs to put in place to hold the space for the creative as an artist, for their narrative and for their personhood? Understanding that the careful design of space-holding for each artist is a process to instigate a curing.

An example of how I approach research through Curing and Care, is how I conducted my artist research for the Liverpool Biennial 2023. When I started studio visits both in

person and online, I wanted to put together a process that was not extractive, given that curating as a practice sits within that realm.

**Phase 1:** I wrote a research curatorial framework that I shared with the individuals and institutions I approached, asking them to suggest artists.

**Phase 2:** I honoured each suggestion by reaching out to the artist to set up a studio visit.

**Phase 3:** I made a decision while I was putting together the process that I would not Google or do a social media search of the artist; I would not read any articles prior to my visit to the artist; I would come into the conversation not knowing how the artist looks, what kind of work they make, with no questions – so as to be introduced to the artist and their work through their own positioning. In this phase I would introduce myself and my research framework, and inform the artist of my approach and that I was present to listen as they introduced themselves and guided me through their practice.

**Phase 4:** I make a decision on which artists to invite and then write a personalised email to all artists, including the artists that I had no capacity to invite due to institutional constraints.

This 4-phase approach was me figuring out how to hold the process of research within my curatorial process of Curing and Care.

## **CONCLUSION**

As I am writing this essay, transmitting how I have been conducting my research, it becomes clear again that it is within practice. By which I mean, it is in situ, and in the act of, in which I could formulate this research model and the language that comes with it. The research framework for me appears through curiosity – a curiosity that can't always be held by institutional framing because sometimes the source of the knowledge and my curiosity sits beyond the bounds of it all.

What I have also learnt is how to *transmit*, which is not to translate or explain, from the source from which the knowledge derives and also from my curiosity which probes the journeying. The transmission is to find the language that does not harm you – as in the languaging is not a violent act in attempts to create access but more about a necessary shift. Keeping the integrity of transmitting from one place to another – which is to say, going into the ancestral-spiritual-indigenous knowledge systems and transmitting into the framing of the institutionalised knowledge, has to be done in a way that is not extractive but generative.

So, what my concept of *Demonstrations and Demonstrating: Black Lived Experience (DBLE)*

does, is give me the space, the hold, the language and pathway to do practice as research and conversely that PaR gives me a means to work through my concept of *DBLE*.

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## **REFERENCES/ RESOURCES**

Eshun, K. 2003. Further considerations on Afrofuturism. *CR: The New Centennial Review*. 3(2): 287-302.