# Makhubu, Seriti Se, Basupa Tsela—Where We're at According to Lerato Shadi †

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**Abstract:** The focus of this text is on three installations/performances by the South African artist Lerato Shadi: *Makhubu*, *Seriti Se* (both since 2014) and *Basupa Tsela* (2017/2018). The works dialogue with a remark made in a public interview in 2016, where Shadi postulated self-positioning in two diametrically opposed ways: to express one's self-perception as "I am because you are" (which is situated within the philosophical traditions that are particular to South Africa), and the seemingly incompatible Cartesian "*Je pense donc je suis*". While the initial context for this set of ideas stems from the writings of Yvette Abrahams, Pumla Dineo Gqola, Steve Biko and Frantz Fanon, Shadi's remark is also connected with the student protests, which, since 2015, have claimed the recognition of situated subjectivities while aiming towards a decolonised South Africa. Shadi's work operates within processes of political transition, of institutional and structural erasures. The artist asserts a position by means of dividual subjectivation, stating her subjectivity and agency in the beginning of the twenty-first century. According to Shadi, this position is claimed by calling out to those who have shown her the way.

## 1. Introduction

Three contributions by the South African artist Lerato Shadi provide an entry point to crystallizing divergent ways of conceiving one's "being in the world". To say "where we're at" implies that this act of self-positionning, approached as artistic practice asserting an individuated position, emerges in reciprocity with a changing constellation of circumstances—a form of interpersonal and dialectical interconnectedness or "dividual participation" (Ott 2015). The three chosen proposals are performance drawings, making use of a video, or culminating in an installation, as the case may be: *Makhubu* (performed several times since 2014), *Seriti Se* (also since 2014) and *Basupa Tsela* (2017/2018).

The initial gesture in each of these artistic interventions is that of writing immediately followed by erasure—rubbing out—drawing attention to the material paradox of producing by undoing. By putting effacing into action, the three

interventions can be read as three experimental replies[2] to the problem of (dis)identification, which coincidentally also transpires from a public conversation between Lerato Shadi (Shadi 2016) and art critic Neelika Jayawardane held in Grahamstown, South Africa, on 8 July 2016. N. Jayawardane (2016, pp. 19, 21) launched the discussion by referring to historical erasure. As in any critical rereading of history,[3] she is well aware that this erasure is omnipresent in the ways in which history is presented from a Western point of view—all too often written as if the majority of decisive actors were Western and male—and as though the rest of the world had played a marginal role. It turns out that rather than being a mere omission, this erasure is a deliberately constructed and artificially maintained myth. The two interlocutors (L. Shadi and N. Jayawardane) exchange their experiences of how this silencing configures in relation to their personal family history and in their artistic or theoretical work. At a crucial moment in the debate, Lerato Shadi conflicts two ways of defining her subjectivity: expressing self-perception by stating "I am because you are" and the seemingly incompatible Cartesian "*Je pense donc je suis*" ("I think therefore I am").[4] Shadi points out that if one of the postulates were used to judge the other, both philosophical attitudes would be doomed to failure. By introducing the notion of judgment, Shadi considers that the problem is of a philosophical nature. Since the first—"I am because you are"—is based on an idea of multitude, while the second—"I think therefore I am"—reasons in singularities and binary notions, Shadi points out that the dialogue between the two perspectives, positioning themselves at diametrically opposed points of view, are condemned to perpetual misunderstanding.

Several members of the South African public who attended the debate enthusiastically supported Shadi's proposal, and broadened the discussion with new questions. This strong interest in Shadi's remark can show that, in the South African context, this is an important concern, and that it struck a chord in on-going debates. Indeed, the South African interlocutors are the first public targeted by this remark (Legalamitlwa 2016, p. 8). In the European context, however, reception proves more complicated. While Shadi's hypothetical European interlocutors would easily be able to identify "I think, therefore I am" as a Cartesian postulate, they will need supplementary information before the complexity of the reasoning behind

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[2] The other voices in this hypothetical dialogue would be those of Frantz Fanon, Steven Biko, Achille Mbembe, Yvette Abrahams, Sylvia Wynter, Gilbert Simondon and Michaela Ott; see below.

[3] The term "historical erasure" is used by most of the writers referenced here, notably in Jayawardane (2016) and in Mbembe (2016b).

[4] (Shadi 2016). Within the 90-min interview, the remark is made at [00:22:15]; a member of the audience who did not introduce himself deepens and contextualizes what has been said in a rather intuitive way—Shadi agrees without reservation. Further research has not permitted the authors to identify the speaker.

"I am because you are" may become intelligible to them. This task can be started by analysing Shadi's three performances in order to complexify and contextualise the tensions between the two ways in which social "belonging" is positioned and conceptualised, i.e., in the way the task of self-positioning (Pumla Dineo Gqola 2006, p. 72) is approached as a dividuation process (Ott 2015). The fact that the first two performances, *Makhubu* and *Seriti Se*, preceded the 2016 interview shows that Shadi thought about and materialized this problem in other formats before expressing it in articulated speech. The third performance, *Basupa Tsela*, which followed two years later, is a provisional synthesis of this set of questions. Before specifying (dis)identification, as articulated by Shadi, in order to underline its urgency, its contextualization within recent South African cultural production is necessary as a preliminary step.

## 2. "I'm Not Who You Think I'm Not": The South African Context and Questions of (dis)Identification

On 27 April 1994, at South Africa's first elections by universal suffrage, the country emerged from half a century of racial segregation imposed by nationalist legislation. This turned out to be a moment when interpretations of the past had to be re-examined, and when all South African citizens were compelled to radically revise the way they perceived themselves (Baderoon 2011). While, before 1994, life in this country was compartmentalized and segregated, they now needed to "learn to unlearn" to think by these categories. A vast amount of memory work that does not seek to avoid misunderstandings and violence (Coetzee 2013) is still to be provided before a non-segregated society can become operational.

Before 1994, the nationalist government imposed its version of history that ignored the stories of the vast majority of the population in an act of deliberate erasure. Since the emergence from apartheid legislation, the endeavour to fill the void thus produced has become a crucial concern of the human sciences. In this context, it may have seemed self-evident that identity questions[5] were the main concern put to artists in the early "post-apartheid" years. The plethora of responses (Atkinson and Breitz 1999) written to Okwui Enwezor's critical text, "Reframing the Black subject: Ideology and Fantasy in Contemporary South African Representation"

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[5] This implicit assumption should be put into perspective. According to most viewpoints, the institutional framework (on a national or foreign level) seeking to establish categories orchestrating a so-called "South African" identity is not a legitimate voice. Many artists would have preferred to be questioned about the complexities and subtleties underlying their artistic work rather than about the various markers of their "identity" (family, religion, language, etc.). But it is also true that the question of identity is a matter of urgency since, as Sharlene Khan points out following Stuart Hall, one must know how to find the position from which to speak in order to participate in a dialogue. Khan (2014, pp. 23, 26) introduces the notion of a process of collective redefinition.

(Enwezor 1997, pp. 21–25), demonstrates the unhealthy twists and turns that these debates have taken. Enwezor addressed a lack of self-criticism on the part of artists already recognized by the system, which betrayed their lack of lucidity about the complexity and gravity of identity issues. The ensuing debate highlighted the overwhelming predominance of attention to male subjectivity in somewhat hasty readings of Enwezor's criticism (Greig 1999, pp. 310–13). The period 1997–2007 saw a number of exhibitions for which artists were selected according to their ability to become ambassadors of a presumed new national identity. Among the pioneering artists of this period, Tracey Rose and Berni Searle have a special significance for Lerato Shadi; they represented personalities with whom Shadi, as a woman of colour, could identify.[6] Despite the criticism that an exaggerated form of "identity politics"[7] undeniably necessitates, this generation of artists has laid the foundations on which the artists emerging after 2000 can build their contributions.

The polemics and controversies of questioning identity—debated with the seriousness imposed by the political situation during the immediate post-apartheid period—are taken up a generation later in the form of humorous deflection or by claiming the urgent necessity of pushing beyond constructions of officialised identity. In curating the 2018 Berlin Biennale, Gabi Ngcobo (Ngcobo 2018) writes "*I'm Not Who You Think I'm Not*, disavowing assumed beingness and know-hows. Those assumptions are based on existing, constructed social frameworks and their associated speculations about particular subjectivities". Ngcobo (2013, pp. 237–40) also describes this process as "the unknowing grammar of inhabiting an identity or a subjectivity".

The spirit of deflection can be exemplified when paralleling the work of Athi-patra Ruga with that of Barend de Wet. In a carnivalesque mood, the former sets in motion a "slow, time-inspired unveiling of identities" (Ruga quoted in Fourie 2015, p. 66–69). Athi-patra Ruga devises a "costume" of balloons filled with liquid paint, which, once pierced, flood the performer with multiple colours—Ruga refers to a "utopian counter-proposal to the sad dogma of the division between mind and body". In reverse of this "unveiling" gesture, Barend de Wet (Fourie 2015, pp. 26–29) asks his friends to dress him, in an endless series of possible identities. Although both approaches (dressing or revealing) can be seen as a humorous diversion from the seriousness of the introspective exercises of previous years, both cases reveal underlying tensions. Created in 2012 and 2013 respectively, these performances foreshadow a new radical change in South African society.

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[6]  Shadi refers to Rose and Searle, in particular, during interviews with Katja Gentric in Berlin, 14 and 20 November 2017.

[7]  Jamal (2017, pp. 11–13) points out that identity issues in contemporary South Africa can lead to a form of "dangerously exclusionary identity politics".

Since March 2015, the resurgence of conflicts in the form of student protests on all South African campuses show how fragile the new, presumably non-segregated society is, and that the challenges facing it are far from being resolved. Among other demands, directed against their untenable financial situation under the neo-liberal policies of the current government, the students denounce the very phlegmatic process of decolonisation and the excruciatingly reluctant dismantling of white privilege (Gamedze and Naidoo 2018). Students from each campus in South Africa respond to the protests by adding their own most urgent grievances: among others, the protest concerns rape culture, institutional racism, and intersectionality; it opposes outsourcing, and claims equal opportunities for all. The expression "Fallism" initially appears as an umbrella term for the individual names the movements use to refer to themselves, of which "Rhodes must Fall" and "Fees must Fall", which originated at UCT and at WITS, are the most widely known. "Fallism" has since acquired the status of a decolonial framework wherein future academia and future society are heedful of the issues raised by the students. A performance by Sethembile Msezane titled *Chapungu—The day Rhodes Fell* (Msezane 2015) has become emblematic of the movement, because it condenses its multifaceted concerns into a single gesture. While problematizing the position of women in public space, S. Msezane points to the urgency with which a new organisation, recognizing the ancestral dimension[8] and adapted to the daily life of the connected generation,[9] is sought. Some activist collectives seek to apply the hoped for change in mentalities by experimenting with forms of organization where the group operates horizontally, where all decisions are taken collectively, where thought evolves by interconnectivity (Nkosi 2016). This horizontal organization is also evident in the way women activists become increasingly vigilant about compliance with parity laws, countering leaders who in the first phase of the protest were exclusively male and permitted themselves dominant, even abusive, behaviour[10].

Discussions around these very complex challenges frequently reference a worldview that would be able to encompass apparently irreconcilable dualities and to overcome the categorizations inherited from apartheid. These debates, in turn, have a history that should be outlined here. In the publications of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1996–1998), for example, *Ubuntu* (Commission 1998, p. 126) is defined as a social attitude based on sharing and respect. In isiXhosa, it is transcribed by the sentence: "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" (a person is a person because of other people). In Sepedi, the same sentence would read: "*motho ke*

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8   This dimension is represented here by the reference to the *chapungu*, the eagle of Great Zimbabwe.
9   Present in the image through the countless portable devices used by demonstrators/activists.
10   In some universities, protests against the culture of rape become a concern for activists (Ratele 2018), also see Miller (2016, pp. 278–79).

*motho ka batho*": the individual is defined on the basis of his or her belonging to the community. This principle of interdependence can be extended to the relationship that the individual has with his or her material surroundings (Nyamnjoh 2015, p. 1–10).

"*Ubuntu*", a word from isiXhosa, has been adopted more generally to designate a consciousness that exists in most languages in southern Africa, as in a large majority of African countries. Western observers have interpreted this form of social organization as a "holistic" philosophy, a premise that was widely adhered to during the colonial period, as exemplified by the French CNRS Congress in 1971 (Bastide and Dieterlen 1973). A critical look shows that crude simplifications were drawn from the observation of communal agency. Scientific descriptions of "holistic" social organizations were ultimately instrumentalised to justify and reiterate forms of administration that erased the individual. An oversimplified reinterpretation of this so-called "holism" is still found today, in the cultural domain, amongst others, in the ways in which a Western "free will" is emphasized as opposed to a so-called "non-Western determinism" (Garnier 2014, p. 389).

As far as South Africa is concerned, the popularization of *Ubuntu* was greeted with enthusiasm as part of early post-apartheid optimism, eager to promote the miraculous harmony of the "rainbow nation" (Samarbakhsh-Liberge 2000). The somewhat too idealistic reading of the notion of *Ubuntu* is countered by Françis Nyamnjoh, a Cameroonian anthropologist living and teaching in South Africa. Beyond the ancestral ideal to be recovered, he sees in it an emancipatory potential to be mobilized as a critique of modernity in the West. But Nyamnjoh also points to abuses committed in the name of what he calls "dead-end ubuntu-ism": "To argue for inclusivity, domesticated agency, conviviality or *Ubuntu-ism* and the opportunities it affords individuals and collectivities does not imply the absence of opportunism and conflict in societies that ascribe to such aspirations. Indeed, opportunism and conflict are the products of inclusivity" (Nyamnjoh 2015, pp. 83–84, 127).

In the name of the same scepticism, ideas of shared responsibility in horizontal forms of organization advocated by students of the 2015 protest movements are criticized for defending a utopian cause. The students' arguments are considered unrealistic and impracticable; some interpretations may go as far as to suggest that the struggle for recognition of the individual's subjectivity was incommensurable with the demands of a horizontal social organization. This categorical analysis of the situation proves to be a simplification; it is perfectly possible to behave as an autonomous and responsible individual while subscribing to an interdependent ("holistic") social organization (Nyamnjoh 2015, pp. 6–8).

Pushing beyond the complications inherent in the term "*ubuntu*", Achille Mbembe (Mbembe 2017, p. 25) uses the formula "*l'éthique du devenir-avec-les-autres*" (the ethics of becoming-in-midst-of-others), and describes a way of operating where:

*"Le moi se forme au point de rencontre avec l'autre. Il n'y a pas de moi limité au moi: l'Autre est notre origine par définition. [...] Ce qui fait notre humanité est notre capacité à partager notre condition..."*[11].

It is in this context, taking into account the divergent and sometimes abusive ways of reading the notions of "holism", "ubuntuism" and "becoming-in-midst-of-others", that Shadi's remark must be placed when she sets "I am because you are" in conflict with the Cartesian "I think therefore I am". In doing so, she seeks to place her artistic activity among the dominant narratives of society, where the personal stories of her fellow human beings—by which she means all social groups marginalized under apartheid and any other form of colonial state or normative thinking—have been successfully erased. The debate referred to as "Black Feminism", led by thinkers such as bell hooks, takes the complexities of this situation into account (Shadi 2018, pp. 13, 34, 42). Many South African students since 2015 challenge the scientific rejection of local knowledge in the same spirit as they challenge the separation between body and mind that is the basis of Western thought. These debates have repercussions in the dialogues around contemporary art in South Africa (Legalamitlwa 2016, p. 7), and Lerato Shadi identifies with the questions raised in this context, expressing a strengthening interest in Black Feminism. In her master's thesis, Shadi (2018) reacts to the Sarah Bartmann debate, from which Bartmann's own voice is entirely absent while, under the pretence of scientific interest, her physical presence is abusively discussed way beyond the limits of ethical conduct. The concept of "hypervisibility" coined by Pumla Dineo Gqola (2006, p. 45) expresses the anomaly wherein unhealthy racist over-curiosity in physical appearance is coupled with drastic silencing and effacement of the sensibility and intelligence of an individual, who is thus successfully objectified as a research specimen.

By means of the description of Shadi's three performances, coupled with a re-membering process of how the presumed mind and body duality (or to put it in Athi-patra Ruga's words, the "sad dogma of the division between mind and body") came to be erected in a philosophical "given", or a priori, it is possible to complexify and contextualize the tension between the different self-perceptions and to describe the line of thought that leads Shadi to set the cartesian and "holistic" aphorism against one another. The artistic work that led to the first two performances preceded their theorization (Shadi 2016).

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[11] The self is formed at the point of intersection with the other. There is no self limited to the self: the Other is our origin by definition. What makes us human is our ability to share our condition. (our translation).

## 3. Where We're at—Artistic Positioning in *Makhubu* and *Seriti Se*

*Makhubu* can be translated as "wave", (Macmillan Setswana and English illustrated Dictionary 2012, pp. 273, 1175). On the wall of the exhibition space, Shadi writes her personal biography supplemented by her projections of the future. How to find a place for these memories and how to find the trace of these lives?[12] How might these thoughts and actions attain recognition? As part of the performed action, which lasts several days, Shadi enacts several cycles of writing (Figure 1) and effacing (Figure 2). Unlike previous interventions, for example *Seipone* (shown twice in 2012), *Makhubu* is positioned in a space where the public can see the artist. The body of the performer bends and stretches to produce three circles in accordance with her bodily measurements; the analyst might be tempted to refer to them as "Vitruvian". When opting for the shape of the circle, Shadi is well aware that her performance speaks of gravitational force, of autonomy, of her capacity to take action. *Makhubu's* phase of constructive intervention (Figure 1) is followed by perpetual "undoing"—like water going back and forth when the waves meet the shore. However, in undoing, this action leaves tangible traces in the form of remnants of rubber and faded crayon marks on the wall. No less than writing, erasing requires significant physical investment on behalf of the artist—the photographs show the artist leaning in, in order to exert sufficient pressure on her rubber to wipe out the words written in red crayon (Figure 2). The same physical involvement on the part of the performer is called for in *Seriti Se*, which, in its choreographic aspect, goes further because it also involves the body of the audience (Figure 4).

*Seriti Se* (Figure 3) can be translated as "shadow", "aura", "charism", "presence" or "status"[13]. The performative action is preceded by a long research period seeking names of women of colour who have made significant contributions to society without their names becoming regarded as general knowledge (Figures 3 and 4). Everything happens as if they had been consciously erased from the history books while, by their contribution to the common good, their recognition/presence (*seriti se*) in this pantheon would have been entirely justified. Shadi lists the names of women

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12  As Steven Biko puts it: "Thus a lot of attention has to be paid to our history if we as blacks want to rewrite our own history and produce in it the heroes that have formed the core of our resistance to the white invaders..." (Biko [1978] 2004, p. 105).

13  *Macmillan Setswana and English illustrated Dictionary*, p. 485; also see Shadi (2018, p. 73): "*Seriti Se* means this dignity, this honor, this aura and this shadow. Translation in this case is difficult because it does not take into account the cultural context of what is being translated, how meaning can be lost when the context of what is being said is not taken in to account, in addition to how meaning can be changed when the context of the conversation is not clarified and respected. I am interested in what happens when translation requires a history lesson. When translation requires a pronouncement of tonal and facial demonstration to fully express meaning."—The form *Seriti Se* indicates possession which I interpret it as "her presence" or "her charisma"—"what we can recognize her by" and, conversely, "her recognition".

researchers in nuclear physics, Olympic sports, airline pilots, dancers, activists, politicians, doctors, etc.



**Figure 1.** Lerato Shadi, *Makhubu,* performance drawing and installation, (Iniva, London, 2014/15) photo by dewil.ch (cc by-nc-nd 4.0 int)—2014.



**Figure 2.** Lerato Shadi, *Makhubu,* performance drawing and installation, (Iniva, London, 2014/15) photo by dewil.ch (cc by-nc-nd 4.0 int)—2014.

**Figure 3.** Lerato Shadi, *Seriti Se,* installation and performance drawing, Lerato Shadi (Galerie-Wedding, Berlin, 2015) photo by dewil.ch (cc by-nc-nd 4.0 int)—2015.



**Figure 4.** Lerato Shadi, *Seriti Se,* installation and performance drawing, (GoetheOnMain, Johannesburg, 2016) photo by dewil.ch (cc by-nc-nd 4.0 int)—2016.

This research sometimes required Shadi to travel in order to access specialized archives, but most of the work could be done via the Internet. This process is guided by the hope that it will be possible to revise canonical knowledge "from below". During a first phase of the performance, Shadi writes the names directly on the gallery wall. She writes at a height where she has to stretch—stand on a plinth, even—and very low, which forces her to lower herself. Then, by making a brush and white paint available to the public, she invites her visitors to re-enact the gesture of erasure these women have been victims of (Figure 4). By his/her involvement, the visitor assumes responsibility for the name he/she deletes and becomes its guardian. In the gallery, Shadi does not give information on the identity or the personal story of the women; it is up to the visitor–come–guardian to do his/her own research. Shadi highlights the cynicism of the paradoxical lack of fame by the fact that, unlikely as it might have seemed to some, "they [the names] are googleable" (Shadi 2017). While being intensely critical of digital research engine methods, where dominant knowledge is continuously prioritized by means of algorithms—still reinforcing the current inequalities—Shadi insists that it is possible to become familiar with the names of these women by the simple act of launching a "google search". If, after participating in Shadi's project, the public continues to deny knowing these women when their

names, thanks to the globalized computing tool, would be so easy to integrate into general knowledge, this ignorance would amount to perpetuating the act of voluntary erasure. Given the uncomfortable positions (near the floor or more than two metres above the ground) at which Shadi writes the names, the spectator-participants, like Shadi before them, are forced to "bend to the task", in order to accomplish (and owe up to) the act of erasure, as they will be obliged to take on the research entrusted to them.

In both performances, *Makhubu* and *Seriti Se*, Shadi fully involves the corporeal in the activity of writing and erasing. During this action, she shows impressive endurance, working for several days at a pace that leaves little time for rest. With *Seriti Se*, the artist entrusts part of the task to the audience. By means of the gestures performed. A reciprocal relationship is built between speech and corporeal movement. Unlike *Seriti Se*, *Makhubu* is a cyclical work—concentric in relation to the scale of the length of the performer's arms. The activity revolves around central points, divided into three circles. In *Seriti Se*, which links a multitude of elements in a linear, hierarchically equivalent way, Shadi writes the names of a multitude of women. Meanwhile, in *Makhubu*, she writes the biography of only one, her own. *Makhubu* could then seem to be an individual struggle, while *Seriti Se* would be a collective effort. In both proposals, however, the circular or linear organization and the individual or collective effort are not attributable to a specific metaphorical meaning. Through a work as circumspect as it is meticulous, Shadi moves back and forth multiple times—as would replies in a dialogue—between two ways of perceiving one's identity while putting both into action through repetitive bodily movements. According to Shadi, the two projects are a form of struggle claiming the right to be there, to occupy space, just as they would be a commemoration of the lives by which we identify ourselves when we speak, write, or perform.[14] In each of the two bodies of work, the immediacy of the performance seeks to position itself between past and future; the two amount to a staging of repeated erasures as well as their multiform historical dimensions in an open-ended temporal continuity. In *Makhubu* and *Seriti Se*, Shadi shows a radical progression from previous work performed in 2010, for example *Thlogo* and *Se sa feleng* or *Mmitlwa*, where only the performer's own body was involved (Shadi n.d.). In the two performances of 2014, Shadi uses her body to launch the trajectory that evidences the presence or absence of all the women to whom Shadi refers. They can be understood as tangible investigations of an idea that will be expressed in the form of a philosophical remark two years later.

In no case should comments on the back-and-forth between two identity perspectives be read as instating yet another dualism: *Cogito* versus *Ubuntu*. It is

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14    Interview Shadi/Gentric, Berlin, 14 and 20 November 2017.

not a question of defining an "either–or" binary opposition between two mutually incompatible world orders. Rather, Lerato Shadi warns us of the perpetual dilemma we all face in the globalized world where multiple ways of positioning ourselves must be negotiated on a daily basis (Nyamnjoh 2015, p. 140). When approaching an as yet unknown person, entering into dialogue, helping each other, organizing ourselves, i.e., becoming a coherent organism, Shadi warns against judging others according to any personal world view, while forgetting to take into account that our interlocutor may well proceed from an entirely different position. When Shadi chooses to mention only women's names in her performances, which seemingly amounts to ignoring men's names, she does not seek to establish a new form of discrimination. She made this choice in order to compensate for a scandalously unbalanced situation (Ahmed 2017, p. 15). Shadi's work does not immediately intend to militate for the feminist cause, but aims at a form of retribution of the wrongs of the past in the form of an artistic proposal. By enacting the same performances in turn on the African and European continents, the challenge can be interpreted as follows: ask the Cartesian subject to imagine how the Cogito would be read in view to an ethics of "becoming-in-midst-of-others". This judgment would ultimately be none other than a "mirror attitude" of a tradition that the Western observer has been repeating for several centuries now, wherever he was confronted with cultural divergence (Abrahams 2007).

## 4. Re–Organize? (The Activity of "Being Human")

To articulate the re-organization that Shadi envisioned as an artistic action in both performative installations, it seems useful to sketch an intellectual path that could take Frantz Fanon as a starting point when he positions himself as a non-Western subject caught up in in the colonial situation. This subject is faced with the task of imposing itself on a struggle for recognition as a thinking, emotionally conscious individual. Fanon wrote in 1952: "*Amener l'homme à être* actionnel, *en maintenant dans sa circularité le respect des valeurs fondamentales qui font un monde humain, telle est la première urgence de celui qui, après avoir réfléchi, s'apprête à agir*"[15] (Fanon [1952] 2011, p. 243).

It would be erroneous to insinuate that Lerato Shadi meant to illustrate Fanon's words in any way, but *Makhubu* seems to give a plastic form to Fanon's intent. Shadi would know the essence of Fanon's thinking through the filter of Steve Biko's texts. Formulating the Black Consciousness Movement in the early 1970s (1969–72),

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[15] To lead man to be an individual taking action, while maintaining in his circularity a respect for the fundamental values that make up a human world, this is the first urgency for the one who, after having reflected, is about to act. (our translation).

Biko tries to put words to everyday experiences he is faced with, observing society's cleavages along contradictory ontologies in the South Africa of the late 1960s, when the laws of segregation were implemented and when they were felt in their full brutality. These were the harshest years of apartheid. Biko nevertheless maintains that "[o]urs is a true man-centred society whose sacred tradition is that of sharing. We must reject, as we have been doing, the individualistic, cold approach to life that is the cornerstone of the Anglo-Boer culture. We must seek to restore to the black man the great importance we used to give human relationships, the high regard for people and their property and for life in general...". He adds that, in the name of Black Consciousness, resistance cannot do without intellectual recognition because "the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed". (Biko [1978] 2004, pp. 101, 106).

In 2015, Biko's words are taken up amongst the student movements' motivations. The students point out how intellectual equality is complicated by the fact that scientific knowledge and criteria for its recognition are subject to a system of thought that is diametrically opposed to theirs by thinking in binary categories and oppositions (Mogorosi 2018). Shadi refers to Yvette Abrahams, who, by what she defines as "womanist methodology" endeavours to summon the necessary mental strength to impose a form of embodied knowledge (Abrahams 1997, 2007). The historian applies this method in her approach of historical personalities (giving a predominant position to Sarah Bartmann), claiming common family membership, and thus identifying herself personally with her research subject. Rather than illustrating Yvette Abrahams' claims, Shadi puts them into action through her own bodily involvement. Abrahams' method, combining the corporeal and the narrative, is similar in many ways to the one chosen by Jayawardane and Shadi in the 2016 interview, and also to the approach of the Caribbean historian Sylvia Wynter. The latter stresses the essential narrativity underpinning human consciousness as a central point of her thinking. Wynter rereads Fanon by highlighting man as a hybrid being: ("the human as a hybrid-auto-instituting-languaging-storytelling species: bios/mythoi." (Wynter and McKittrick 2015, p. 23)). Her argument introduces the idea that, according to this model, the expression "human being" does not function as a noun but as a verb, referring to the activity of being human. According to Wynter's model, because of their essential hybridity, humans would extend beyond their bodily presence and be intimately intertwined (Wynter and McKittrick 2015, p. 43–45) with their environment. An interdependence that Shadi claims by identifying herself with the names of women and their paradoxical presence in erased form, but also by using the digital tool in the reorganization of knowledge, a logic that sees interdependence also in inter-connectivity in the digital sense; this is an idea Achille Mbembe (Mbembe and Van Der Haak 2015) adheres to in several of his texts, especially in the distinction he makes between an "Afrocentric" and an "Afrofuturist" (Mbembe 2016b, pp. 145–51)

reading when it comes to defining the humanism in "*une Afrique à venir*", yet another expression borrowed from Frantz Fanon.

Through the notion of Afrofuturism, Mbembe positions himself in a context (Heidenreich-Seleme and O'Toole 2016) where philosophic defences of the black cause connect with debates on socio(techno)logical processes of the early 21st century (Mbembe 2016a, 2016b). The unlimited inter-connectivity we maintain with our environment (including languages, images, sensory technologies, social and ecological surroundings), which is virtually extended to all humanity, and which also implies the genetic understandings delimiting an organism (Sorgner 2015), calls into question the indivisible nature of what (Western) philosophy constructed as an autonomous "individual" (literally "that which can't be further subdivided"). For this reason, Michaela Ott proposes to increase the notion of the process of individuation (as she finds it in Deleuze 1983, p. 131 or Simondon [1958] 2013) by the notion of "becoming dividual" (Ott 2015). Simondon ([1958] 2013, p. 325) described the "*problématique interne et externe toujours tendue*", defining ethics as that by which "*le sujet reste sujet, refusant de devenir individu absolu, domaine fermé de réalité, singularité détachée*"[16]. Extending upon Simondon, Ott's notion of "becoming dividual" implies "*Teilhabeprozesse*", literally "the processes of being part of", and "*Teilhabvervielfältigung*", "the multiplication of being part of" (Ott 2015, pp. 15, 36, 40), and is repositioned in a self-perception which is aware of the multiple participation processes it is inevitably part of. It is, however, also an ethics aware of the fact that our virtual or "connected" identities would be reduced to a despotic *cul-de-sac-ubuntuism* (Nyamnjoh 2015) from which it would be impossible to extract ourselves[17] if it were not for a situation of mutual reciprocity (Mbembe 2016b, pp. 43–44) and re-cognition (Mogorosi 2018, p. 51). Dividual participation as suggested by Michaela Ott thus speaks of an "empathic 'consubstantiality', which signifies at once participation in 'Self' and 'Other'",[18] and which reads artworks not as self-contained entities, but with attention to "*Verwiesenheit*" (Ott 2015, p. 306–12), reading any aesthetic articulation as "a partial and non-concluded statement", referring to artworks and "their new way of relating to themselves, self-subdivided and participating in a number of Others".[19]

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[16] "The perpetual tension of the simultaneously internal and external problematic" which defines ethics as that by which... "the subject remains subject, refusing to become an absolute individual, i.e., a closed domain of reality, a detached singularity". (our translation).

[17] Ott (2015, pp. 26–38) refers to "*Teilhabezwang*" and "*Teihabepflicht*" (coercion and obligation to participate), forced interactivity in the digital age.

[18] Michaela Ott, "Dividual participations? A history of the entwining and disentangling of European-African-Antillan cultural understandings", manuscript transmitted to the author on 26 March 2019.

[19] Ott, *ibid*, p. 9.

It turns out that on the ethical and aesthetical level the question of the "individual" needs to be approached quite differently today at the beginning of the 21st century; the new form of interdependent thinking (whether we want to refer to it as an "ethic of becoming-in-midst-of-others" or as a form of "dividuation") would be particularly efficient for organizing ourselves in our contemporary "connected" world. This form of re-organization can be exemplified through the artistic gesture. By the attention that Shadi pays to the ethical implications of her position, by contravening any judgment or prejudgment whatsoever, she goes beyond South African "identity politics". Instead, she puts her thesis into action—enacting it—by "being" human in both a bodily and a narrative sense.

## 5. Basupa Tsela (Dinonyane Tse Pedi)

In a performative intervention presented at the Documenta in Kassel in 2017 (Figure 5), Lerato Shadi produced a synthesis of the questions raised in the interview and in the two works of 2014. The public program with the title "The parliament of bodies—How does it feel to be a problem?" claimed that the intention was not to look for identities but for "critical processes of disidentification". Shadi responds to this invitation with an aesthetic articulation, combining a performance entitled *Dinonyane tse Pedi* and a video with the title *Basupa Tsela* (Shadi 2017). The video *Basupa Tsela*[20] shows a blank sheet of paper and the hands of the artist, writing. Using a red crayon, Shadi writes the names of her female pantheon, one by one. She writes the name and then erases it, writing a new name in its place. The soundtrack consists of the ambient noises generated by this work: the dry and abrasive scraping that occurs when the pencil scratches against the paper, then the rather hollow but softly rhythmic beat of the eraser, and finally, the silky rustle when Shadi passes her hand over the textured paper to wipe away the leftovers of rubber. Mechanically, Shadi writes and deletes name after name. As she works, the eraser is reduced, consumed, mere crumbed rubbings remain, turned red because of the crayon—while the paper retains the traces of each new act of writing, impossible to erase without leaving a red shadow deeply embedded in the sheet, layer upon layer. The paper, too, is consumed, weakened; the action lasts until the sheet tears after about thirty minutes. The lines inscribing the letters of the names overlap and form a surface of intertwined lines ("*Tsela*" meaning line, or path), like a disordered, finely textured, graphic, organic and meaningful woven fabric.

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[20] *Basupatsela* is a combination of the rootword *-supa*, "to recognise", "to testify", "to point" or "to show" and *tsela*, meaning "line" or "path". *Basupatsela* are the guides that show the way (Macmillan Setswana and English illustrated Dictionary, pp. 539–540).

**Figure 5.** Lerato Shadi, *Basupa Tsela*, video-still, (cc by-nc-nd 4.0 int) 2018.

Shadi stands facing the projection. She pronounces the names at the rhythm of her breathing. With the title *Dinonyane tse Pedi* (two birds), Shadi references the lyrics of a song about the movements of two birds in flight, twirling, becoming interchangeable as in a dialogue. Words fly away as soon as they are spoken, as they detach themselves from the one who pronounces them, venturing into the environing space, they occupy it. In several of her previous performances, Shadi submits to meditation exercises, punctuated by breathing. In Kassel, Shadi uses a microphone to ensure that, in addition to her voice, her breathing will be heard throughout the auditorium. In the way these women's names are pronounced, Shadi's voice invokes them,[21] one after the other, calling each of them in turn. With their names spreading throughout space, we are indeed in their presence. Shadi would like her listeners to get to know these women. The semantic root "*-supa*" (we will recognize the root of the word *basupa*) means "to attest", "to give a testimony"; it is therefore a call to recognition. But beyond this testimony, Shadi refers to the expression "stand on the shoulders of giants",[22] by which the title has an additional meaning: *Basupatsela* means "guides". *Basupa Tsela* (which, in its first reading translates as "path", or "line") turns out to be a case where "translation requires a history lesson" (Shadi 2018, p. 73); these women are also the guides who showed the way (*tsela*) to the young artist. Without these other women (the "giants"), Shadi would not be in Kassel on 27 April 2017[23] at 8:45 p.m., where she can pronounce their names in the presence of an assembly of attentive and listening bodies, at a high place of contemporary art of the 21st century.

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[21]  For a comparable and equally complex logic, see Tracey Rose's ambulant invocations in her video *Die wit man* (O'Toole 2016).

[22]  Shadi/Gentric interview in Berlin, 14 and 20 November 2017. Shadi compares her approach to that of the student movements.

[23]  27 April 2017 is the 23rd anniversary of the first democratic elections in South Africa.

When Shadi interprets the tearing of the paper as representative of systemic and structural violence,[24] she refers to the concomitant fragility and violence in the struggle of South African students claiming a decolonial curriculum by which they intend to overcome binary thinking and the segregation of the past. Shadi also thinks of the sorority of the thinkers of black feminism who intend to reorganize knowledge and institutions beyond the violence of historical erasure. With the expression "stand on shoulders of giants" Lerato Shadi surpasses this violence because it dissolves the alleged contradiction between the individual and society (Miller 2016, pp. 277, 285). According to Shadi, violence can only be defeated by collective action, claiming that every member of the public who undertakes the search for one of the names she invokes is part of the collective overcoming of the violence of historical erasure.[25]

Shadi's invocation is both auditory and visual; she pronounces a name aloud and writes it in a double gesture of inscription/deletion. By pronouncing the names, she, like those she has chosen to follow, asserts her position in a dual past and future movement. The traces of the invocations persist in the form of a "drawing" that turns out to be an "erasure" which is always on the verge of tearing apart; a story or narrative intertwined and infinitely complex, a recognition (-*supa*), made of writings, erasures, multiple layers, systemic ruptures, multiple individuals, a whole, an ethics of becoming-in-midst-of-others, who, again and again, seek a way to say "I" by saying "us". *Makhubu*: making waves (a concentric work extended to the past and the future); *Seriti Se*: obtaining recognition (a linear multitude retrieving names from the past for the future); and *Basupa Tsela*: following those who have come before us (call and response between image and sound affirming a presence in a place) are strengthened by action, recognition, memory and future. The subject, who is the artist, Shadi, ventures out into the 21st century, having positioned herself in time and space, taking action: where we're at.

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24   Interview Shadi/Gentric Florence 2 March 2018.
25   Interview Shadi/Gentric 19 July 2018.

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