

## **THEATRE, PLACE AND PRIVATION: STAGING SILENCE AND PRECARIOUS EXISTENCE IN LARA FOOT NEWTON'S *TSHEPANG***

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### **Abstract**

This article interrogates landscapes of precariousness in Lara Foot Newton's play *Tshepang*. It examines how Foot Newton dramatizes the structuring of a post-apartheid theatre in which landscapes of fragility and vulnerability are augmented by strategies of silence and isolation. The different nuances of silence, its domination and ubiquity in the play underscore the materiality of trauma and dislocation in contemporary South Africa. The dramatization of corporeal vulnerability in this play animates the long lasting effects of the apartheid legacy. The playwright offers *Tshepang* and its complex articulation of the experiences of place and sound as a reconfiguration of post-colonial existence in South Africa. Emanating from a social and political context that is in the process of self-renewal, *Tshepang* scripts embodied acts that signal agency as desire for African recuperation. The article interrogates notions of memory, sound, and silence as performance, and explores how this interlinks with privation and precarious life as experienced in post-apartheid South Africa. It draws on post-colonial theory to examine how the play dramatizes visualizations of the body and the power of agency.

**Key words:** African memory, silence, precarious life, post-apartheid drama.

### **Introduction**

Silence is also speech. Many playwrights from across the world have written dramas that corroborate this assertion, including South African playwright Lara Foot Newton through her play, *Tshepang*. This play poignantly dramatizes the sonic dimensions of place, particularly the power of silence to animate geographies of privation, alienation, and human vulnerability. The play is based on the historical incident of the brutal rape of a nine-month old baby who came to be known as Baby Tshepang in South Africa in 2001. Initially, six men had been arrested for the crime, but they were later acquitted upon discovery that the baby had been raped by her mother's boyfriend. News coverage of the incident led to more reports of similar crimes, revealing astounding statistics of child molestation in South Africa. Set in a poor, isolated South African village that resembles the rural town of Louisvaleyweg (Northern Cape) where the infant was raped, *Tshepang* interrogates the atrocious acts of sexual violence against children that occur in South Africa every year. Newton introduces her play with a note

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that it is “Based on twenty thousand true stories.” Inspired by the Baby Tshepang rape incident in particular, Newton wrote and directed the play’s premiere production at The Tropen Theatre in Amsterdam in June 2003. It was also produced at The Gate Theatre in London in September 2004, in Williamstown, Massachusetts in September 2006, and at the Baxter Theatre in South Africa in May 2009.

*Tshepang* is a one-act play with two characters. It stages Ruth, the mother of the baby that was raped, and Simon, the man who has loved Ruth since their childhood days. The play presents a Second Passion, this time suffered by a woman (Ruth) and a child (Baby Tshepang). Simon, the only speaking character in the script, narrates the whole story while Ruth remains silent. Ruth’s ubiquitously dominant silence foregrounds Simon’s performance as sonic. Simon’s voice, set against the muted Ruth, is a powerful acoustic apparatus that articulates the landscapes that concern him, Ruth, and citizens of their township. Ruth’s verbal utterance in the play is only one word, muffled imperceptibly at the conclusion of the play. Throughout the play, she carries a baby crib on her back, and continually rubs salt into a pile of animal skins. The playwright’s conception of the South African landscape is acoustically conveyed through these two characters’ expressive enactments. In this play, speech is as powerful as silence.

Nothing ever happens here, Simon repeatedly tells us about the small, isolated rural township that he and the other characters inhabit in *Tshepang*. Yet, the audience knows otherwise: atrocious incidents have happened here. A baby girl has been raped, several other children have been physically, sexually, and emotionally abused, and women and men have been permanently scarred by the social and political structuring of place, of belonging, of access (or the lack thereof) to resources. *Tshepang* dramatizes this paradox—a place simultaneously inscribed with a history of nothingness and atrocity. This play, as Tony Hamburger (2005) observes, is reminiscent of other plays such as Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*, Van Trier’s *Dogville*, Dylan Thomas’s *Under Milk Wood*, and, one might add, Athol Fugard’s *Blood Knot* and *Boesman and Lena*; dramas that bring to the stage the “physical and emotional state of the town”. The play dramatizes the township inhabitants’ feelings of rage, anxiety, fear, and mourning, as Judith Butler would have it (2004, pp. 28-29), which are characteristic of precarious lives exacerbated by social and political conditions of violence, corporeal vulnerability, and privation.

### **Human Voice, Precarious Conditions**

The story of Baby Tshepang’s rape unfolds gradually through Simon’s sonic acts of recall. His memories of violence are mostly communicated acoustically, particularly when juxtaposed with Ruth’s. Acoustic communication, as Barry Truax (1984) has it, embraces all manifestations of sound, and in *Tshepang*, the playwright demonstrates this notion through the theatrical tradition of story-telling, which in the play is an

acoustic activity that resonates with localized experiences of place and sound. Newton uses Simon as an embodiment of the African performance tradition of story-telling to enable us to hear about the character's encounter with his environment. Stylistically, Simon's performance is one very long monologue augmented by gestures, mostly of his memories of crime and violence in the township, and Ruth's unprocessed grief due to the loss of her child. He recreates poignant scenes of crime and moral degeneracy, as heard during the rape scene where he says that the community "stood dead still... and had been turned into salt" (36). In a particularly poignant sonic event, he re-enacts the moment when the townspeople encountered the body of the violated child:

She had been raped, sodomised, disembowelled ... Everybody stood dead still. We stood in the hot sun ... None of us could move. We were like Lot's wife. We had been turned into salt. (36)

Simon embodies this symbolic translation of bodies into silent pillars of salt. His direct speech and vocal sounds animate this performance of silencing.

Human voice, as Truax (1984, p. 42) points out, is a strong manifestation of a person's conception of others, including the environment. In *Tshepang*, Simon's voice comes across as a powerful acoustic icon of the character's encounter with the environment. Through his voice on stage, he animates the socio-economic landscape of the township. Although his threadbare costume "speaks volumes" about his poverty and deplorable living conditions, his vocal sounds foreground his attitude towards the landscapes he inhabits. His encounter with place and history is marked by a voice of resignation and hopelessness. Despite Simon's contention that nothing "ever happens here," all the inhabitants of *Tshepang* are allegorically silenced by their social and economic conditions. This dramatization of display and silence implicates Newton's conceptual construction of the South African political landscape. Throughout his narration, Simon creatively embodies the playwright's critique of the historical baggage of inaccessibility to economic and cultural resources through apartheid exploitation and segregation. Simon's voice serves to underscore the lasting effects of apartheid, showing how sound communicates gaps in the not-so-idyllic post-apartheid South Africa. Notably, the play is silent on the social causes of the crime, leaving them only to be suggested by the characters' memories. For instance, in his ritualized remembrance, Simon tells us how place can silence and exclude. Nothing, he repeatedly emphasizes, ever happens in his town, "here, nothing much happens" (22, 25). Desolation characterizes the space that he and others inhabit on a daily basis. "No one can sleep here (19)... No one ever buys things here (21)... Nobody ever goes anywhere ... nobody ever comes here either" (23). The inhabitants of *Tshepang*, echoes Simon, remain isolated, ignored, and excluded. These repeated tropes of isolation elaborate Una Chaudhuri's notion of "static exilic consciousness" (Chaudhuri, 1997, p. 11). In her interrogation of the interplay of drama and place in *Staging Place*,

Chaudhuri discusses scenarios where a character experiences displacement while at home. Such characters “are not exiled *from* where they belong but exiled *to* where they belong.” Simon’s encounter with place and environment extends his understanding of *place* to *home*. The figure of home, as Simon experiences it, produces feelings of anger and desire for crime.

This ritualized remembrance echoes the legacy of exploitation and deferred dreams in the post-colonial space. Simon tells us the story of Trompie who has “always wanted to be American” because his life in this isolated township follows irksome routine tasks of “wake, wipe, eat, drink, *naai* [have sex], and sleep” (26). The economy of ennui engenders crime and decadence, including prostitution, alcohol abuse, theft, and rape. In her discussion of the interplay of place, theatre, and crime in Johannesburg, performance critic Loren Kruger writes that “the end of apartheid has not brought peace to Africa’s wealthiest city, but rather unleashed the lawlessness that plagued black township residents for decades on the wealthy (mostly white) population as well; a ‘Lost generation’ of youth with little education and no prospects has turned not only criminal but violent, matching theft and burglary with apparently gratuitous rape, torture, and murder (Kruger, 2001, p. 223). The evoked environment of hostility—critiqued by Kruger and scripted by Foot Newton—accentuates the culture of unemployment and boredom and its resulting aggressive responses from the inhabitants of *Tshepang*. Being distressed over these conditions, they either scream at one another, remain decidedly silent, or resort to crimes that speak of their isolated and silenced bodies; enabling their actions to speak louder than their words.

In *Tshepang*, Newton arranges a reverberant *mise en scène* that resonates with figurations of privation and precariousness. The bare stage set is comprised mainly of “a heap of rock-like salt, which covers a pile of skins” (11). There is also a loaf of bread, a broom, and a nativity set. The stage directions indicate that the “loaf of bread represents the baby, and the broom represents Alfred Sorrows” (11), the victim-cum-rapist. These two props suggest the body as a site inscribed with the history of depravity. All human figures in this play are marked with this inscription.

Many social critics (Meszaros, 2005; Rose, 1994; Connell & Gibson, 2003) have observed the links between place, sound, and social behaviour. Beth Meszaros argues that “acoustically polluted landscapes can render their inhabitants inattentive, distracted, heedless, and, in some cases, hostile, even violent” (Meszaros, 2007, p. 118). This observation is relevant here. Newton uses noise and sound metaphors to symbolize how the denizens of *Tshepang* manifest these attitudes. A good illustration is the percussive striking and chopping that accompanies the stabbing of human flesh with a knife. Simon gestures and amplifies the “Kwa! Kwa! Kwa!” sound of Sarah’s flesh being stabbed by her boyfriend. This sound amplification captures Ruth’s attention; she “stops rubbing” and remains “still” (13). Such sound events serve to manifest both sound production and sound reception. They become an integral part of

what Truax (1984, p. 57) terms “acoustic community” because they are created and understood by a community that is unified by memories of violence. Ruth’s reaction of stillness to Simon’s mnemonic enactment is a poignant performance of this unity.

That notwithstanding, the performance of witnessing is most significantly animated by Simon, from whose perspective we come to understand how Alfred Sorrows became a rapist. In fact, through Simon, the play attempts an implied exoneration of the rape perpetrator as a victim of the geographic, conceptual, and cultural geopathology of his town. Simon tells us that Ruth’s failure to perform her sexual duties as Alfred’s girlfriend led to the rape of her child. She refused to have sex with Alfred, choosing instead to go out and drink at the bar (51). What becomes apparent from the figure of the girlfriend in the play is the transferring of blame from the perpetrator to the victim. Exonerating the rapist is further extended to Alfred whose violent behaviour is explained as being the result of the traumatic upbringing that he incurred at the hands of his father’s abusive girlfriend. We hear that as a young child, Alfred Sorrows was physically abused by Margaret, his father’s girlfriend, when she severely punished him by beating him with a broomstick for wetting his pants. “She had become the devil. I ran and hid in a big drainpipe, and watched as she pummelled Alfred until his small body lay quietly in a pool of piss” (29). Simon’s narrative re-enacts the trauma of physical and emotional abuse—incurred and witnessed—suffered by young boys at the hands of women. The scripting of Margaret leads us to read the play’s engagement with inscriptions of violence onto the female body.

Additionally, through the figure of “houvrou” (girlfriend), as the woman who traffics in her body, Newton dramatizes the cultural demonizing and devaluing of the female subject. Simon talks about Sarah who has “got a loose panty” (12), and whose brother uses her to perform violent sex initiation to young boys. The figure of Sarah, the “whore” who is exploited by her brother in a harem, is the one who heard the screams of the child being raped and did nothing. After walking in on the actual rape of Baby Tshepang, she remained silent. Thus, Sarah does not listen to the child’s cries for help, but instead acoustically represses and sacrifices her. Sarah’s silence and act of silencing the child contributes to the wrongful arrest of six men. However, the drama does not explore the reason for Sarah’s silence.

### **Silence and the Articulation of Corporeal Vulnerability**

“Landscapes,” according to Arthur J. Sabatini, “retain visible and invisible voices, histories and memories” (Sabatini, 2002, p. 324). Simon’s sonic performance in *Tshepang* corroborates this observation. His performing body emerges as the “inscribed surface of events” (Foucault, 1975, p. 148) and expresses the encounters of place in the play. But it is Ruth’s expressive silence that significantly elaborates landscapes of depravity, wickedness and dispossession. Through this character, we

observe the playwright's theatrical technique to show how silence signifies or communicates. The play situates Ruth as the embodiment of contradictions to script performative overpopulation and acoustic under-stimulation. Simon is dominant in speech, whereas Ruth is dominant in performance. Although she is muted, Ruth is eloquent in her performance. She is constructed as a paradoxically muted character whose body is acoustically oppressed. Her silence is suggestive of the catatonia that frames her experiences of place—a place rife with renditions of agony, hopelessness and powerlessness, leading to her stupor and excessive salt-rubbing. Her body is actually a noisy landscape, overpopulated with inscriptions of traumatic events, including the agonizing screams of her raped baby. The baby crib that is strapped to her back throughout the play is a manifestation of not only the absent child, but an evocation of “aural claustrophobia”, to echo Truax (1984, pp. 57-58), to symbolize landscapes of isolation and degeneracy. Her body echoes the physiognomy of landscapes of deprivation. The place that she inhabits has ceased to be a home, and has characteristically silenced her politically, economically and physiologically. Simon tells us, “For three years she has said nothing” (54), fixed in perpetual waiting for her child's return from the orphanage.

Through the mute character of Ruth, Newton also depicts the acoustic colonization of female space. Vociferous renditions of crime, desolation and privation are inscribed on this female character. This noisy landscape—embodied by the figure of Ruth—is particularly intensified by the interplay of the figurations of the baby crib and the pile of salt. Ruth engages in two distinct embodied rituals of memorialization. Throughout the play, she carries a baby crib on her back and obsessively rubs salt onto a pile of animal skins. These ritualized acts serve to express not only crime and guilt, but also pathology and moral judgment. She bears the burden of her abused infant, her complicity in the baby's violation painfully echoed in the fact that she left the child unattended on the night that she went to the tavern. The crib functions metaphorically as the producer of the noise of child discomfort and the agonies of motherhood. It intensifies the decibels of Ruth's fragmented psyche, and performs a memory of derelict and silenced parenthood. Thus, we note Ruth's body as a site burdened with guilt and agony.

More pointedly, the mini-crib has social and psychological significance. It is a powerfully charged object that is inscribed with a history of violence, including the violence of rape and severed ties of motherhood. Simon narrates an incident when he found Ruth lying down on the bed on which her child had been raped, her chest, face and hands covered in blood. She had cut off one of her breasts. The playwright figuratively portrays ruptured motherhood through the images of the empty mini-crib and the severed breast. This embodied ritualistic act of bloodletting and self-penetration serves to underscore Ruth's experience of rupture and loss. She acts out a trauma, showing how violence has robbed her of motherhood. The memory of her

daughter's physical and psychological sacrifice haunts her. This moment of psychic crisis revitalizes African female agency by calling forth the proverbial principle that "*mmangwana o tshwara thipa ka fa bogaleng*" [a mother daringly holds the sharp end of a knife]. This proverb evokes motherly protective instincts, poignantly portrayed through the image of a sharp knife. According to Tswana cosmology, a mother is invulnerable to fear or danger and always unflinchingly protects her child. Ruth's act of self-penetration animates this proverbial formulation, as she appropriates a cultural discourse of female corporeality to generate value to a female body. This is a performing female body that resolutely remembers and performs blood-connectedness. Through this ritualized act of remembering, she articulates the desire to exorcise her guilt and to redress the scars of violent abuse. Thus, as American theorist Judith Butler would say, Ruth's acts of memory articulate loss, grief, and the vulnerability of human bodies; bodies that are physically and socially vulnerable (Butler, 2004, p. 20).

But these are burdened bodies as well. Ruth carries the burden of the crib in a manner that is similar to the burdens carried by the characters of Boesman and Lena in Athol Fugard's play *Boesman and Lena*. Boesman enters the empty stage "Heavily burdened" with his mattress, blankets and utensils on his back. He is followed by his wife Lena, "similarly burdened ... and carries her load on her head. She has been reduced to a dumb, animal-like submission by the weight of her burden," (Athol, 1974, p. 167), as the stage directions elaborate. In these post-colonial dramas, Ruth, Boesman and Lena carry props that symbolically reinforce their traumatic memories and experiences of place. The objects that they carry are emblematic of the burdens of precarious existence. *Tshepang* and *Boesman and Lena* can thus be read as "histories of the body and of discourses on the body" (Roach, 1989, p. 101). They are theatrical representations of the burdened (post) apartheid body.

In *Tshepang*, the child's (implied) sound—symbolically reinforced through the conspicuously empty crib—is fore-grounded and intensified by the image of plethoric salt. In this play, the figure of salt resonates with a number of significations from the Biblical allusions of "the salt of the earth" and the evocations of Lot's wife to the localized, allegorized landscapes of desolation in (post) apartheid South Africa, and to Newton's dramaturgical strategy of utilizing the performer's body as a cultural text. Ruth occupies her time by obsessively rubbing salt onto the skins. Culturally, the act of salt-rubbing evokes the traditional manner of curing animal hides. Theatrically, it is an expressive activity that articulates her "geopathic disorders" and response to depravity. Geopathic disorders, as Chaudhuri has it, refer to "the suffering caused by one's location" (Chaudhuri, 1997, p. 55). Ruth's excessive obsession with salt suggests her desire to traverse her suffering. Her performance of rubbing salt translates her muted speech. She is hypervisualized as a figure of the geopathology of the play. Arguably, the geopathology of the play is South African socio-economic landscapes of privation and isolation, and the play's characters remember these landscapes which are

characterized by excessively abundant crime, unemployment, poverty, boredom and incestuous acts. The staged salt articulates Ruth's muted speech. The tears that Ruth sheds for her daughter have crystallized into salt. The use of salt thus expresses her grief and her traumatic encounter with the place she inhabits. By alluding to "the salt of the earth" in an absurdist fashion, the playwright hints at a society that has lost value and an existence that has become meaningless. Figuratively, Ruth and the salt become one, echoing each other to perform place. Ruth translates into salt. Thus, the figuration of salt is used to underscore the idea that Ruth has precarious existence.

The figure of salt also symbolically echoes South Africa's history of social and economic exploitation through colonization and apartheid. Violence-begets-violence-begets-violence is a significant theme of the play, echoing how the violent act of rape rubs salt into the wounds left by the violence of apartheid and colonization. On the one hand, the staging of salt is an allusion to salt as a curative substance, that is, a substance that restores freshness or prevents decomposition, as in the tanning of animal skins. This referential association of salt means that the rape itself is a metaphor for the traumatic years of apartheid, and adding salt is the painful process of coming to terms with the past. The performance of reconciling with the past means not denying it and forgetting it, but acknowledging it in a sense of reliving all its pain. Performance of memory here is recuperative. "Rubbing salt into wounds" is juxtaposed with confronting trauma with the aim to reconcile with it.

On the other hand, symbolic salt echoes the history of salt mining and exportation in South Africa. A report from the UNESCO World Heritage Centre (1992-2007) records the production of salt and soda-ash in the vicinity of Pretoria from 1912 to 1956. This historical site of salt production is known as Tswaing, or "the Place of Salt" in the Setswana language, and it features a 220 000-year old meteorite impact crater. Tswaing is a township redolent of a history of invasion by colonial explorers and emigrating Boer settlers in 19<sup>th</sup> Century South Africa who established a factory for salt production from the Tswaing crater. Salt mining and exportation still forms part of South Africa's economic activity. Specifically, the salt pans of Northern Cape Province—the setting of *Tshepang*—is part of the region's economic investments. Ruth's embodied ritualized mnemotechnic act of salt-rubbing thus symbolically echoes this history and the Blacks' battle to come to terms with its continuing ramifications. Salt rubbing signifies colonial economies and the cumulative historical repercussions of South African models of territorial space demarcation and ownership along the lines of racial polarization, echoing European hegemonic geopolitical imagination. The act of salt-rubbing evokes the historical specificities of South Africa, particularly the human geography, issues of land ownership, the occupation of place according to race, and "formalized separation particularly in urban areas, not only where the interaction of human bodies was concerned but in terms of the spaces which those bodies would be permitted to occupy (Orkin, 1991, p. 62). The segregationist policies of space



occupation led to the creation of Black townships or ghettos such as Soweto—desolate landscapes where residents encountered conditions of poverty, unemployment, isolation and “black-on-black violence.” Such is the urban township landscape staged in *Tshepang*.

The expressive function of salt in *Tshepang* is also reminiscent of its deployment to echo the cultural system (Baudrillard, 1996) of South Africa in Fugard’s *Blood Knot* (1974). In *Blood Knot*, salt signifies place and the socio-historical specificities of apartheid South Africa. Two half-brothers named Morris and Zachariah live in a shack in Korsten, Port Elizabeth. Their deplorable living conditions are similar to the context depicted in *Tshepang*—places that exacerbate the denizens’ feelings of alienation and boredom. As a means of survival, Morris, the light-skinned brother has, on occasion, “passed for white” and has been saving money in the hope of purchasing a farm. His brother, Zachariah, who works as a gate keeper at a park is very lonely and thus dreams of having a woman. The two brothers are bound by ties of blood-brotherhood and by their experience of place. Morris frequently prepares hot water for Zachariah to bathe and soothe his feet after a hard day’s work at the park. The water contains various types of salt, which as Morris insists, Zachariah should use for its healing properties (4). Salt in the play is used by the characters “for all agonies of the joints” (4); and to soothe the “weary muscles of [his] heart” (36). Bathing with salt is part of the ritualized acts that the brothers use to reinforce their bond. In this play, salt thus signifies healing and collective identification.

### **The Political Economy of Silence**

Newton’s staging of the silence requires further investigation. Of particular importance is the interplay of place, sound and the performing body. Can a silent body claim space? How does Ruth’s silence envision a different South Africa, and indeed an alternative conceptualization of Africa and the world for women and children?

There are several ways of reading the theatrical re-presentation of silence in *Tshepang*. Particularly, the use of silence in relation to the character of Ruth is complex. Firstly, the playwright uses sound theatrical technologies to stage a female figure whose witnessing of violence is usurped by a male figure. Newton stages Ruth as a silent character whose propensity to reticence reinforces a reading of the dominated female subject. In *Tshepang*, the dispossessed female body gets re-articulated through muted aesthetics and evokes sexualized subjectivities within a patriarchal landscape. In this play, the story-teller figure is a patriarchal presence. In a historical moment when the practice of storytelling is central to narratives of national healing, reconciliation and renewal in post-apartheid South Africa, Simon becomes privileged as a man to tell Ruth’s story of loss. As the cultural practice of storytelling moves from the female body to the male one, the female is pushed to a place of complete muteness and relative invisibility. Ruth thus emerges as both silent and silenced. This dramatic

construction is contradictory because it enables a further conquering of Ruth's space, particularly in view of the fact that the playwright is female.

During apartheid, many people were silenced through a policing of their expressive and political acts, but they found their voices through the spaces of theatre and performance, especially through street performances such as "Toyi-toyi," a popular carnivalesque, political street demonstration. More significantly, the traversing of trauma and silencing has been potently expressed in the theatres of the Khulumani Support Group and eloquently conveyed in *The Story I am About To Tell* (2006) and Jane Taylor's *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (2007) both of which created a space for victims and witnesses of the atrocities of apartheid to narrate and stage their stories. As social performers, the victims noted the cathartic effect of staging witness narratives, an element that does not feature in Newton's play. In these TRC-inspired plays, the formal apparatus of reconciliation provides an emotional solidity which, despite the horrors they refer to, give the plays a sense of hope within the new dispensation. In comparison *Tshepang*, is much darker in that there seems to be no institutional or social shelter from the atrocities of post-apartheid criminality. In that sense, it has a feeling of referring to a later, younger and arguably less hopeful generation.

An alternative reading is that the aesthetic of silence is deployed to echo trauma as unutterable. *Tshepang* plots Ruth's traumatic experience as "a symptom of history", to recall theorist Cathy Caruth. "The traumatized", argues Caruth, "carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (Caruth, 1995, p. 5). Ruth returns again and again to the original site of trauma, the bed where the child was raped. Ruth's unspoken trauma manifests in two ritualistic acts of salt rubbing and baby crib carrying. These two acts draw attention to the conspicuously muted victim—the stuporous mother figure and her absent baby. Ruth's act of carrying the empty crib carries particularly salient connotations. It resonates with the way African mothers strap their babies on their backs. It also evokes the African formulation that *Ngwana o sa lelang o swela tharing* [a child that does not cry out dies in the crib]. This proverb evokes the essence of "thari"—a word from the Setswana language that designates two referential objects of 'a womb' and 'a baby sling'—two sites of baby comfort and bonding with the mother. A baby's cry from these two sites is characteristic and warrants attention. According to the proverbial formulation, the baby strapped to the mother's back must cry to signal distress; otherwise it will die because its silence will be misread as contentment. In like manner, a newly-born baby must cry to signal alive-ness. Ruth's absent baby can thus be read as muted. But, Ruth's act of carrying the baby crib poignantly echoes this proverb and reinforces her expressive action of seeking reparation for the crime committed against her and her child.

More pointedly, *Tshepang* plots the complex relation between space and sound to dramatize the complex significations of the silent crawling on stage. The play's potent staging of silence signals the complexity of sonic geographies and suggests various ways of reading the specificities of sound and silence, including their texture, perception and meaning. Ruth's proclivity for silence is linked to the larger historical context of isolation and depravity in South Africa. Her silence is however not nugatory, since it is a silence that speaks more expressively than voiced utterance (Gilbert & Tompkins, 1996, p. 190). "Silence," according to Michel Foucault, "is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them with over-all strategies" (Foucault, 1981, p. 27). "Silence," Gilbert & Tompkins concur, "can be more active than passive, especially on stage where a silent character still speaks the language of the body and of space. Here, silence enacts more than a problematic absence of voice; rather, it is a discourse in its own right and a form of communication with its own enunciative effects" (Gilbert & Tompkins, 1996, p. 190). In *Tshepang*, the performance of silence articulates the post-colonial subject that is historically silenced by apartheid. Ruth speaks through her body, as Foucault would have it, articulating the memories and power relations inscribed on the body of the post-apartheid subject. If silence speaks, and more eloquently than words, then Newton's dramatic strategy of muted-ness is efficacious because she gives the female protagonist the only mode of eloquence which the overwhelming and violent culture of South Africa allows her. To echo Foucault (1981, 1975) and Roach (1989), the play stages the power of corporeal expression by showing how silence and anguish are deeply and appropriately inscribed upon Ruth's body.

## Conclusion

Silence, noise and memory as performance, and their links to characters' articulations of contemporary predicaments of the post-colonial space are prevalent tropes in post-colonial drama. In South Africa, anti-apartheid and post-apartheid plays predominantly engage with the visualization of the body and the power of agency. In complex and very diverse ways, these plays utilize the body as a site that articulates apartheid existence and post-apartheid self-affirmation.

Newton's *Tshepang* offers a powerful dramatic response to the geopatology of post-apartheid South Africa. The negatives of apartheid did not necessarily go away with the demise of the system at a particular historical moment in time. Rather, these have continued to exert an insidious presence in the present moment. This play is not only a significant contribution to the canon of African women playwrights and their interventionist theatrics, but it also demonstrates the capacity of post-colonial drama to equip characters with embodied acts of self-determination. The playwright uses dramaturgical and theatrical strategies which utilize the performer's body as a cultural

site and/or artistic “text” that shows the links between violence and patriarchy, and how this connection has developed through apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. The play’s ending with Ruth’s poignant utterance of “tshepang” [have hope] offers an African-centred conceptualization of resistive acts. The secular-sacred traditional aesthetic and interpretation of the African notion of “tshepang”, goes beyond the prophecy to “have hope” towards a more assertive acoustic signal to “take charge of one’s destiny” and take resolute action. The vocal force of to “tshepa” in the Setswana language denotes the interplay of hope, trust and resistive action within a particular acoustic community. The gestic sonic signal of “tshepang” in Brechtian terms to suggest social critique invokes the performance of survival through strategic acts of agency. *Tshepang* recuperates this indigenous African aesthetic. Take resolute action to re-inscribe worthiness onto the body of the post-apartheid subject, is the implied message.

Even more pointedly, Newton offers *Tshepang* as a contemporary African drama which, in its complex articulation of the experience of place and sound, is a reconfiguration of the post-apartheid existence in South Africa. Deploying the body as a site of resistance (Grosz, 1990), the playwright scripts the silent character of Ruth—combining muted theatrics with cultural signifiers—to suggest alternative modes of signifying post-colonial, post-apartheid subjectivity and self-determination. The collective cultural memory of salt and its curative qualities, equivocations of the emblematic baby crib and the ritualized act of blood-letting through chopping off the breast intimate the playwright’s appropriation of embodied knowledge and embodied acts as strategies for reconstructing post-colonial subjectivity (Gilbert & Tompkins, 1996, p. 204). The mapping of silence onto the body, the re-memorialization of embodied cultural knowledge and the dramatic revisualization of the body in its articulation of precarity symbolically reinforce resistant inscription in the post-colonial space.

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