

What I am about to write has been said or written about before. I wanted to write this for Black women. I am but one of many Black women who have written and spoken about their processes and experiences, who investigate and continue to be the voice of many. I am not the voice of healing, I am not the voice of Black women, but I am the voice of my own healing and my blackness, and, if my voice can echo others' voices, then my voice is part of the many voices of healing. That is where I can start.

Ubuntu – Healing rooms is a commissioned text by Duduzile Mathonsi about the necessity and possibility of healing rooms for Black women. At Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival 2020, she is presenting her performance *Bitch Where the Fuck is my Manifesto?!*

Duduzile Mathonsi is an actress, writer, voice artist and performance artist. She has extensive experience in television, film and radio production, which include producing, directing, screenwriting, and on-screen and on-air presence. Duduzile is also a certified journalist who has worked for some of South Africa's biggest media houses. Mathonsi has a National Diploma in Language practice from the Tshwane University of Technology in South Africa and recently graduated as the first Black woman at the Norwegian Theatre Academy with a BA in acting. As a Language practitioner and performance artist, the core of her work is storytelling. She explores different mediums and ways of telling stories through movement/dance and voice/sound using embodiment.

Chapter 1 – The start

I am a South African Black woman born in the late '80s of the tail-end chaotic uprising of Apartheid South Africa. Naturally, my birth came with no freedom. I was raised in the townships of the northern province of the country. In 1990, Nelson Mandela was released from prison, and that meant things were about to change.

In 1994, Black people were now allowed to move freely in their own country. That also meant that we could, as Black people, be part of 'White' society and move equally in White spaces; "whites only" areas including residential areas and schools. We could also stand in the same line at the grocery store and share something as simple as a bus. White people had to deal with us in spaces that were previously created to exclude us and to preserve their privilege – which meant that I then grew up in borrowed spaces, architectures and systems that were established. Forming resistances of an unparalleled equivalence of existence.

My parents sent me to "White schools" known as multi-racial schools. From the age of three, I was part of a handful of other Black children in my class. My parents thought if my siblings and I were sent to these schools, we would have a better chance at life. But that segregated me from the rest of the township children, granting me labels like *coconut* and *whitey*. Equally, at school, I was subjected to other racial curiosities, discrimination and identity confusion.

Moving to suburbia meant that the “White” neighbours didn’t like the idea of having the “kaffers” moving in next door (kaffer is a word equivalent to the word Nigger). We would go to the public swimming pool, and they would see us coming and would quickly get out of the pool as if we were bringing deadly diseases. Once my brothers and I got chased by a pedal-happy car full of White men, amused at the sight of Black kids running for their lives.

My hometown was a *Boere* (Afrikaaner farmers) town full of White farm owners who did not only own their farms, but also their workers. The workers would call them “*baas*” (master), and the mentality did not quite change much when Apartheid was over. Black people suffered from something I refer to as the “*masters syndrome*”. They were worshipping and seeing them and not daring to speak out.

On the other hand, my mother had no patience for the “*masters syndrome*”. From her, I learnt to fight back whether verbally or physically. Yes – it was a time where force was needed. Coming from the history of apartheid’s violence and that being one of the only ways to survive and fight the system, it was automatic. In this way, I became a problem child within whiteness. I was the “the troublemaker” at school; always political about race.

Those became my first understandings of what it meant for me to be Black, in a country where my freedom has been fought for with blood, sweat and tears. Yet, we were still fighting to be heard and seen, and the only thing that had changed was that we were allowed to move in the same spaces. For a child, that kind of psychology becomes an embedded archive. It has moulded its course through my being, creating a “hunter vs hunted” mentality of “Us vs Them”.

Chapter 2 – Privilege

There is an overwhelming amount of present pain and discrimination that Black people today still cannot escape from. From the racial inequalities to the westernised social constructs and cultural appropriation that still is overlooked or undermined.

When I became employed, two decades after democracy, I realized white privilege was still in play. Black people were earning less than their white counterparts and Black women even less. Meanwhile, my white counterparts, who had benefited from the past system, didn’t have to worry so much about money.

You see, when a Black person starts to work, most have no privileges of having parents who can help them out. The system doesn’t accommodate your disadvantages. Most Black people have “black tax” which is when you are taxed by your family. Families sacrifice almost everything to make sure their child gets an education, in hopes the child will get them out of poverty or help get your siblings through school.

I had to face the reality of being part of a majority in a country where you do not own land and where more than 80 percent of the country is still owned by the white minority. So I decided to try my luck elsewhere.

I then moved to Norway for a degree in acting at the Norwegian Theatre Academy in Fredrikstad, a small town in the South of Norway, with frequent neo-nazi activity. I was excited about this European life that is advertised to the world with such romanticism of a better life. What was omitted is that “terms and conditions apply”.

Here, I experienced a new form of discrimination, one I had only heard and read about through American pop culture. Being a minority here, one is told to conform, “*you can’t be African, you are not in Africa*” and having to forcefully take on the Scandinavian version of life, where you have a voice – but your voice is not to be heard. This is such a contrast to coming from a country where I am free today because of voices that *were* heard.

The first time I laughed in a public space in Norway, people turned around and looked at me with fear and disgust of how ill-mannered I was for not knowing how to hold my natural sound. The sheer shock of my laughter, which to me is a beautiful release. At times when I speak, I will see someone close their ears as if I were a megaphone, or *shh*ing me as if I were a child speaking out of turn. What the environment does not understand is that I too have sore ears from whispers of soft-spoken voices all day, and that it is about learning to respect each others in-prints.

I have now recently graduated as the first Black woman at the Norwegian Theatre Academy. I am grateful for the education, it was unique, fulfilling and has given me valuable tools in life.

In 2019, I question being the first Black, that in itself shows the problematics of western societies and the sad reality of navigating Norwegian institutions as a Black woman. I inhabited an art education for three years navigating and forcefully enforcing my existence in a Norwegian institution as an indifferent human.

My body as a Black woman was not allowed to exist or claim space. Battling your way through a degree in that way is inhumane. Yet, existing alone as a Black woman, this experience also helped pave the way for the next Black woman. But the mental and physical exhaustion it took, broke me. It was not my job to do so, yes, but we live in a world where it became my job.

Chapter 3 – un-Censored

The conversations of languages and body languages are different, and I refuse to mute my body and language. In most instances, my body is read as overbearing and aggressive when in fact I am as cool as a cucumber.

As an African woman, my voluptuous body is my pride. When I move, it has a rhythm and language, which is connected to my ancestral roots. In White spaces, my body reacts and is reacted to differently. When I am in a room, the room changes depending on what I need to accomplish in the room.

And then there is the hair, yes; the hair. Most White South Africans do not like our natural hair. They find it untidy, unpleasant to look at and disgusting to touch. In schools, Black children are told to tame their wild hair and are limited to how they can wear their hair.

In Norway, our hair is a walking spectacle. It is treated like a new scientific discovery, where everyone wants to touch or see up close, all excusing it on curiosity or the friendly answer “*but you can touch mine*” when you tell them: “Don’t touch my hair!” Black hair is about freedom of expression!

What’s puzzling is the lack of interest in blackness, lack of research and furthermore the lack of self-research before asking the question, that I don’t know how to answer; “*is your hair coiled because of the sun?*” and finding myself having to explain my existence. As though I was from a tribe that was recently discovered because we can discover people and claim their land and get statues in our honour.

The conversation about race is mostly met with “*why can’t we all be human and not see colour?*”. This is a complete disregard for what colour is. People of colour are disadvantaged and segregated. There are inequalities that have not changed for people of colour over the centuries, how slavery has found a new form in capitalism and bureaucracy.

Chapter 4 – Healing rooms

*The world unchanged
but moving forward
somehow giving me grace in being a Black woman
constantly striving through
but equally explosively and majestic
into a dim light shadowed to us
by its unchanging existence*

Before I can attempt to be part of the healing of a Black diaspora, I need to look at where my healing starts.

The attempted execution of *healing rooms* all began when I was recently part of a theatre play called *Black women rising*, played at the Nordic Black Theatre in Oslo, Norway. The play is about the American poet, singer, memoirist, and civil rights activist Dr Maya Angelo, and I played one of the two main characters portraying her. This was an all-women cast, and from this, I got the opportunity to understand the common traumas we all faced as women.

Almost every night after the show, I had young Black women asking me if there is a space where Black women can have safe spaces and if I could create one. When I was first asked I said to the particular young lady that I wouldn’t know how, but then the requests from other young women kept coming. I then approached some Black female friends of mine who are in the arts and asked them if they would be interested in helping me create a space where Black women in the diaspora could gather and heal. Turns out they were thinking about it too, wanting to create similar spaces.

It then leads me back to the *how* – how do we create a space of safety for Black women away from the White gaze, away from the male gaze. Raw, no shields, no masks, no explaining or censorship and obligation to whiteness or patriarchy, space of necessary release. Somewhere, where we could be with our healing and not doing it for anyone else but us. Creating processes where we can be whole in ways that nourish and empower Black women.

We would be doing it for our children, investing in some of the groundwork for our great-grandchildren and creating processes of healing for generations to come. Being in the unlearning process and finding new mechanisms, not coping mechanisms because coping mechanisms can fail. When I cope, it means I am not completely okay, I am just holding on to a line. If healing does not take place how can we find new ways of sustaining our mental health, sustaining ourselves and evolving as Black women? There is an evolutionary process that can not exist if the healing does not become continuous work; work that aspires to become the DNA of Black women. It needs to become a working muscle that is trained regularly.

Chapter 5 – Evolution

When I began my healing process, when finding my identity, some of the realisations were that I had to accept that I was born into generational archives of trauma, a trauma that was infringed upon generations of Black women and men across the board. Having been born in apartheid, and living through it and the transition, meant that the world I came from was based upon Black and White. I had separated slavery and apartheid, not fully comprehending the systematic engravement of how apartheid was merely the continuous systems of slavery.

In this day and age, I can still say that I was born a slave, born of a place that doesn't see me as a human or as an equal, but as an object born to serve the master, born to not look at myself as vulnerable because there is no space for that. Needing to suppress who I am, what I want, what I aspire, my presence shrunken and existing solely for the pleasure of my suppressor.

I was recently in South Africa for a visit. I decided to attend a panel discussion for Black women in leadership, lead by a panel of strong Black women in leadership roles with an audience of mixed races and genders. From what I had gathered, the event had aimed or aspired to create a safe environment for Black women. The panel discussion revolved a lot around men and particularly around the contribution of Black men to Black women's pain and them being the culprits to South African women's current trauma.

What we must understand is that South Africa is living in post-apartheid, but the ripple effects of apartheid are still present in the segregation and complete disregard for women. Over the years there has been a high number of abductions, trafficking, rape and murder cases especially of women and girls, some by their partners or family members, and others by complete strangers. It is a painful reality that all South African women are living in constant fear every day.

During the question section, I made a comment which looked at the root rather than the symptom of Black men being contributors: how the struggle of Black men's traumas contributed to the attacks against Black women. In my alternative voice of approach, I then became the villain who focused on men issues at a Black women's event, who took away space for Black women to air out their grievances in the space and centralised men. I was attacked by justified Black women and praised by Black men for allowing their traumas into the spatial conversation. I was embarrassed and felt singled out. I could not really sleep that night thinking about how I was completely disregarded by other Black women. I thought I had joined a space that was safe and familiar, not realising that it was only an attempt of a safe space where everyone was navigating and maybe not ready for my kind of approach.

Maybe I just no longer understood what being a Black woman in South Africa was, maybe I was westernized, or maybe I had just come from a safer environment with first world problems. After ping-ponging all scenarios and having chains of conversations with other people, I realised we were all dealing with our traumas, and somehow we were all triggering each other. And each of our trauma was over-clouding each other's ability to acknowledge each other's points of view, coping mechanisms and methods of problem-solving.

I started to question my quest to create *healing rooms*: How could I write about healing if I am not fully healed? How can I attempt to create safe spaces for healing? I had convinced myself that to address healing, I had to be healed, and I thought I was, I had been proud of investing the healing work. Then, again having to go back to some of the roots of my traumas and indoctrinations. It then hit me; that I had been swimming for as long as my memory serves me, because drowning was never an option.

I come from a family of strong women healers, and a generational inheritance of healing. My grandmother was a traditional healer (an equivalent to a medical doctor in western civilization) who was taught African medicine by her father and therefore passing on the healing gifts to her children and grandchildren.

I was taught by the women in my family:

"you can cry, but when you are done, you're done!"
"Wipe your tears and find a solution".

That is who I have been:

"never let them see you cry"
"I am a strong Black woman".

A woman who has to categorise which hurt she is allowed to deal with, not only because she needs to survive, but because there has never been space to just be.

Now, I understand where the women in my family were coming from, where other Black women are coming from. They were born in a system that dehumanized their existence that valued us as slaves. Not only as objects, but as slaves, because you can show affection and empathy for an object, but you can only have sympathy for a slave. And as history has shown us, objects can be valued more than humans.

That being said, when do we find healing? What does healing look like? Can we be healed? I spent the majority of my short life not being vulnerable, not allowing any form of emotions to cloud anything, but what I hadn't realised was that I was hurting more than I could comprehend, hurting not only for myself but for my ancestors.

Black people throughout the world over the centuries have had to survive through healing. We have to continue the healing process, and that's why there are practices. I think this is the next step of healing because each generation meets its own challenges and has to rediscover what they need in the environment they find themselves in. When navigating new forms of healing practises as the world evolves, so should the healing processes.

The diaspora now consists of people coming into western contexts, each of them with their own agency and backgrounds. Different people are meeting with different archives and having similar to the same experiences of discrimination, racism or dehumanisation.

The questions can be asked: what does that mean? Who are we in all of this? How do we now find space to exist outside of our own? It comes back to; what constitutes being Black?

Blackness has been about being chameleonic and kaleidoscopic, forever changing for surroundings and accepting different social roles, so we can be acknowledged by whiteness and be cut into the piece of the privileged pie. Thereby taking away the natural pureness of who we are, and giving us different societal roles.

I carry my archives. These archives have influenced how I move, how I react, how I exist. Now the bigger question is: who am I now after these experiences?

I am a Black female woman, which by birth I am at the bottom of the human chain, just before homosexual and transsexual Black women. The odds of society across the world, are against me. Basically, there is no escaping the archive which is constantly resonating in me. These are the realities and everyday truths of what blackness is for me.

I cannot give a blueprint or say what a healing room should look like because we all need to find what healing looks like to us.

My healing comes with my archive and therefore my recipe will have my own special ingredients that shape and mould my process. That said, we cannot heal alone; by virtue of being human, companionship is essential to our being.

One needs to find their healing first, and then, let's heal together however that may look like, because space is everywhere and anywhere, and no room can heal you; only you can heal yourself.

With that said, using our indifferences and realizing our indifferences are what make us unite as humans; what make us strong, the world may remove our individualism but that should not be our weakness. Everyone needs healing and to find space for healing.

UBUNTU 'I am because you are'. South African philosophy.