



**The metamorphosis of Sibande's hysterical
Sophie in *Long Live the Dead Queen*, *The
Purple Shall Govern*, *I Came Apart at the
Seams***

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The metamorphosis of Sibande's hysterical *Sophie* in *Long Live the Dead Queen*, *The Purple Shall Govern*, *I Came Apart at the Seams*

Keywords:

Mary Sibande, Sophie, hysteria, fantasy and mimicry, *Long Live the Dead Queen*, *The Purple Shall Govern*, *I Came Apart at the Seams*

Abstract

This dissertation explores the South African artist Mary Sibande's character *Sophie* and her transformation throughout the series *Long Live the Dead Queen* (2009), *The Purple Shall Govern* (2013, 2014) and *I Came Apart at the Seams* (2019-ongoing). In the three series in question, Sophie alters between what appears to be a stereotypical representation of a South African domestic worker, a Victorian woman resembling a *madam*, and a spiritual, divine figure. In this dissertation I investigate how Sophie transforms and declares her agency. More specifically, I probe how Sibande uses hysteria as a strategy to visualise this agency. Although previous work by Farber (2017) and Scheffer *et al.* (2017) has explored the link between Sibande's work and hysteria, this dissertation contributes to the existing research by including Sibande's most recent series *I Came Apart at the Seams* (2019-ongoing). This project also contributes to the literature by setting up a contextual framework for understanding Sibande's character by focusing on the nature of her disempowerment. This is done by examining domestic work in South Africa. This project further aims to explore the development of Sophie's agency in Sibande's oeuvre, by scrutinizing her transformation that plays out through visual strategies of hysteria.

In the past, hysteria was generally thought of as a pathological or psychological condition. However, in this dissertation, I take the feminist interpretation of hysteria as point of departure. From a feminist perspective, hysteria is regarded as a strategy or response against oppression that is caused by hierarchical social orders. Silenced by these structures, and in need of an alternative to linguistic means of expression, the hysteric reacts through fantasy and mimicry. In accordance with Farber (2017) and Scheffer *et al.* (2017), hysteria is realised and enacted by speaking through the body. In this sense, Sophie embodies and oscillates between three different alter egos: the domestic worker, the madam and what appears to be a spiritual figure. Through Sophie, Sibande engages with the stereotypical representations of domestic workers.

She depicts Sophie as continually engaged in fantasy while she articulates the entrapped and oppressive state of domestic work. Sophie transforms as she escapes and heals from this entrapment by means of talking through the body. I argue that Sophie's transformation from a domestic worker to a divine figure plays out by means of hysteria as a means to portray the progression of Sophie's agency. Through an analysis of hysteria and the persona of Sophie, I investigate how Sibande employs hysteria as a transformative strategy.

This project progresses as follows: In Chapter Two, I present a genealogy of hysteria and the development of the contemporary feminist interpretation of hysteria as a strategy against oppression. I demonstrate in Chapter Three that Sophie can be contextualised within the oppressive structures of black domestic work in South Africa. Then, in Chapter Four, I show with reference to Farber (2017) and Scheffer *et al.* (2017) how representations of Sophie coincide with hysteria. I specifically focus on *Long Live the Dead Queen* (2009-2011), in which Sophie gains agency by escaping domestic servitude by means of fantasy and mimicry. I also consider how Sibande uses these strategies of hysteria to give birth to an empowered identity that possesses agency in *The Purple Shall Govern* (2013, 2014) and transcends these strategies in *I Came Apart at the Seams* (2019-ongoing). By mimicking spiritual and mystical figures, Sophie confronts her past. Finally, I demonstrate Sophie's hysterical metamorphosis throughout the three series, by arguing that she is no longer silenced but has reclaimed her voice and her agency.

Die metamorfose van Sibande se histeriese *Sophie* in *Long Live the Dead Queen*, *The Purple Shall Govern* en *I Came Apart at the Seams*

Trefwoorde:

Mary Sibande, Sophie, histerie, fantasie en nabootsing, *Long Live the Dead Queen*, *The Purple Shall Govern*, *I Came Apart at the Seams*

Opsomming

Hierdie verhandeling ondersoek die transformasie van Mary Sibande se karakter *Sophie* in die reekse *Long Live the Dead Queen* (2009), *The Purple Shall Govern* (2013, 2014) en *I Came Apart at the Seams* (2019-). In hierdie reekse wissel die voorstelling van Sophie tussen 'n stereotipiese uitbeelding van 'n Suid-Afrikaanse huiswerker, 'n Victoriaanse vrou wat die vroulike werkgewer verteenwoordig en 'n spirituele, heilige figuur. Ek ondersoek hoe Sophie transformeer en haar agentskap verklaar en, meer spesifiek, hoe Sibande histerie as visuele strategie gebruik om Sophie se agentskapvorming te verbeeld. Die verband tussen Sibande se werk en histerie is reeds deur Farber (2017) en Scheffer *et al.* (2017) ondersoek. Hierdie studie bou op hierdie navorsing deur ook Sibande se jongste reeks *I Came Apart at the Seams* binne die raamwerk van histerie te bespreek. Die projek dra ook by tot die bestaande literatuur deur 'n kontekstuele raamwerk vir die verstaan van Sibande se karakter daar te stel wat berus op 'n verkenning van haar ontmagtiging. Dit word gedoen deur 'n ondersoek na die praktyk van betaalde huishoudelike werk in Suid-Afrika. Die doel van die projek is om die ontwikkeling van Sophie se agentskap in Sibande se oeuvre te verken en veral hoe haar transformasie vermag word met behulp van visuele strategieë wat met histerie verband hou.

In die verlede is histerie as 'n patologiese of sielkundige toestand beskou. Hierdie verhandeling gebruik egter die feministiese interpretasie van histerie as vertrekpunt. Uit 'n feministiese perspektief kan histerie as 'n strategie of reaksie teen onderdrukking wat spruit uit hiërargiese sosiale ordes beskou word. Wanneer die "histeriese vrou" stilgemaak word deur sosiale strukture en nie toegang het tot uitdrukking in taal nie, wend sy haarself tot fantasie en nabootsing. In ooreenstemming met Farber (2017) en Scheffer *et al.* (2017), kan histerie gesien word as 'n manier om met die liggaam te praat. In hierdie sin word Sophie se transformasie in drie verskillende alter ego's beliggaam: 'n huiswerker, 'n vroulike werkgewer en 'n spirituele leier. Sophie

funksioneer as 'n figuur waardeur Sibande stereotipiese uitbeeldings van huiswerkers kan aanspreek. Sy beeld Sophie in verskillende fantasierolle uit terwyl se terselfdertyd die verstrikking en onderdrukking van huishoudelike werk artikuleer. Sophie ondergaan 'n transformasie soos sy van hierdie verstrikking ontsnap deur met haar liggaam te praat. Ek argumenteer dat Sophie se transformasie van huiswerker na spirituele leier deur histerie bewerkstellig word en dat histerie as 'n strategie gebruik word om die ontwikkeling van haar agentskap uit te beeld. Deur 'n analise van histerie en Sophie se persona, ondersoek ek dus hoe Sibande histerie as 'n transformasiestrategie inspan.

Die projek verloop soos volg: In Hoofstuk Twee hou ek die genealogie van histerie voor en bespreek die ontwikkeling van die kontemporêre feministiese interpretasie van histerie as 'n strategie teen onderdrukking. Ek wys in Hoofstuk Drie dat Sophie binne die konteks van die onderdrukkende sosiale strukture van swart huishoudelike arbeid in Suid-Afrika verstaan kan word. In Hoofstuk Vier bespreek ek, met verwysing na Farber (2018) en Scheffer *et al.* (2017), hoe Sibande se uitbeelding van Sophie met histerie verband hou. Ek fokus spesifiek op *Long Live the Dead Queen* (2009-2011), waar Sophie haar agentskap uitdruk deur van haar huiswerker knegskap te ontsnap deur fantasie en nabootsing. Ek ondersoek ook hoe Sibande hierdie strategieë van histerie aanwend om 'n bemagtigde identiteit met agentskap tot stand te bring in *The Purple Shall Govern* (2013, 2014) en hoe sy hierdie strategieë transendeer in *I Came Apart at the Seams* (2019-). Sophie konfronteer haar verlede deur spirituele en mistiese figure na te boots. Ten laaste wys ek die verloop van Sophie se histeriese metamorfose in die drie reekse deur te argumenteer dat sy nie langer stilgemaak kan word nie, maar dat sy terugveg vir haar eie stem en agentskap.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This study examines how Mary Sibande employs female hysteria as an artistic strategy through her visualisation of her fictional doppelgänger Sophie Ntombikayise in *Long Live the Dead Queen* (2009-2011), *The Purple Shall Govern* (2013, 2014) and *I Came Apart at the Seams* (2019 - current). In the course of Sibande's representation of Sophie, she alters between "maid", "madam" and what appears to be a spiritual figure. In her visualisation of Sophie, Sibande, as I will argue, employs hysteria to reclaim agency.

Sibande, born in 1982 in Barberton, is a Johannesburg-based artist who primarily focuses on sculpture and photography. She obtained a Diploma in Fine Arts from the Witwatersrand Technikon in 2004. Sibande then received an Honours Degree from the University of Johannesburg in 2007. Sibande's artistic career gained prominence in 2013 with the creation of *Long Live the Dead Queen* for which she won the Standard Bank Young Artist Award (Dodd, 2010:467).

Sibande experienced the end of apartheid (1990), the first democratic elections (1994) as well as the post-apartheid era in South Africa, and her work is primarily concerned with the representation of black women in South Africa (Dodd, 2014:42; Corrigan, 2015:146; Bidouzo-Coudray, 2014). Through the character of Sophie, Sibande visualizes her maternal heritage that includes three generations of domestic workers – her mother (Velucia), grandmother (Merica), and great-grandmother (Sophie) (Mabandu, 2009; Dodd, 2010:467; Leibbrandt, 2015; Goniwe, 2013:4-8).¹

Sibande endeavours to empower Sophie by extending her presence in space – be it the domestic space, the physical space of the gallery, or the city space (Singer, 2012). The domestic worker figure that Sibande so rigorously engages with experiences a level of powerlessness in the private home, as Elk (2017:17) posits, because she is an object of her employer. This study takes as a point of departure, the subjection of the black domestic worker (the "maid" figure) by the authority of her (usually white)

¹ The date of birth and last names of these women are unknown. The anonymity and lack of information on these women might serve as illustration of the attitude that exists towards domestic workers (Tshabalala, 2016).

employer (the “madam” figure) (cf. Du Toit, 2010:206). At this point, it is necessary to investigate the hierarchical relationship between workers and employers, as well as the nature of domestic work in South Africa.

Employed within private households – the “madam’s” house and domain – “maids” are faced with the tensions associated with an individualised and strongly hierarchical employer-employee relationship (Cock, 1980:142; Ali & Kelly, 2012:69). As this study is interested in the visualisation of domestic work in Sibande’s oeuvre, this section is concerned with debates regarding domestic work and the consideration that the sector promotes the oppression of black women. The oppressive disposition of the domestic work sector has been studied, internationally and in South Africa, by the likes of Cock (1989), Ally (2006, 2009, 2015), and Haskin and Lowrie (2015). This oppressive relationship sadly remains intact in contemporary times: a working relationship that is of advantage to the (mostly white) employer but to the disadvantage of the (black) employee (cf. Du Toit, 2010:206; Cock, 1980).

Ann Stoler’s (1995; 2002) and Anne McClintock’s (1995) explorations of the interpenetrating relationships between colonialism and domestic work are particularly relevant. They (1995, 2002; 1995) discuss the influence colonialism had on the “origin” of the South African domestic work sector. Domestic service in South Africa began as a project of colonial servitude.² The use of indigenous and imported labour (as slaves before 1834 or underpaid workers) appears to be a constant throughout South Africa’s colonial history (Haskins & Lowrie, 2015:3; Potgieter, 1970:659). On account of the complex colonial history of South Africa, black women have been especially exploitable due to three-pronged marginalisation based on race, class, and gender (Gaitskell *et al.* in Turshen, 2010: 35). This, according to Haskins and Lowrie (2015:3) and Turshen (2010:35), gave rise to domestic employment in South Africa being mainly associated with black women.

According to Ntombela (2012:132), domestic labour developed into a black female-centred sector, associated with a “lower status” due to apartheid regulations that were influenced by the colonial period. During apartheid, laws, legal constraints and limited

² In this context, colonial servitude refers to the hegemonic relationship between coloniser and labourers. Colonial practices trained native as well as mixed-race young women for servitude to become potential domestic workers (cf. Stoler, 2002; Haskins, 2007; Haskins & Lowrie, 2015:3).

educational opportunities “trapped” black women in employment that is not subject to regulatory laws (Cock, 1980:37).³ This unregulated employment usually kept black women in jobs that are not secure. The vestiges of this unequal system are still evident today in processes and practices that influenced the exploitative and suppressive nature of contemporary domestic workers (*in* Turshen, 2010:40; Phillips & James, 2014:427).

Maids and Madams (1980), Cock’s exploration of domestic work in South Africa, offered a trenchant critique of the abuse and misuse of black domestic workers by their madams. Cock (1980) emphasised the divisions between *maids* and *madams*, on the basis of their gender, class and racial positions in society. She focused on the exploitation of maids specifically by their mostly white so-called madams and explored the exploitation of black women across many facets of domestic life, highlighting their low wages, long working hours, poor living and working conditions, disturbances of family structures, and class differences. This left workers vulnerable and powerless to exploitation and misuse (Cock, 1980:142, 152, 182).

That domestic work is viewed as an unimportant and undervalued sector of employment is apparent in Ueno’s (2010:82-97) description of the status of domestic workers as “discredited”. Ally (2005:185) states that people do not recognise “domestic work as *real* work”. As Ntombela (2012:141) notes, domestic workers “have had subordinate legal status with limited access to productive resources like education and training”. Therefore, despite regulatory efforts to improve the overall situation of domestic workers, the majority of society undervalues the invisible and underpaid domestic sector (Marais & Van Wyk, 2013).

Ally (2015:47) explains that domestic service has a long history as an unequal class relation. In domestic work, mainly white women used their class and racial advantages to obtain a better economic position through paid domestic labour⁴. Contrary to what

³ See *The Banto Consolidation Act, No 25 of 1945* and *The Banto Labour Act, No 67 of 1964* (Sash, 1974:2). During the apartheid era, the government enforced the 'Bantu' education policy. This policy meant that black children did not receive the same quality education as white children and as such ended up with an inadequate education. Black students were also limited with regards to universities they were allowed to attend (Evans, 2019). In the apartheid era, domestic workers had a struggle for their inclusion in the legislation of their work as official work. The lack of legislative rights leads to the work being unregulated due to there being no laws protecting the domestic worker (Tolla, 2013:14).

⁴ According to Ally (*in* Haskin & Lowrie, 2015:47), white women used their race and class to employ black women in their houses. According to her (*in* Haskin & Lowrie, 2015:48) white women had more opportunities due having access to domestic workers. In other words white women had the chance to

one might expect, issues of gender inequality were therefore not resolved when woman entered the labour market; rather, as Davis (1983) and Ally (2015:48) have noted, the issue of gender inequality is refracted through the stratification of race and class, and often intensifies in the process.

There is ample contemporary evidence that domestic workers experience their work as disempowering. This is evident from Ntombela's study (2012) in which she interviewed domestic workers on their personal opinions on wearing a domestic uniform. Ntombela (2012:143) quotes Mimmie – a domestic worker – who states that:

they [society] look down upon you if you wear the maid's uniform.
Even employers look down on you.

From Mimmie's quote it is clear that domestic workers may feel vulnerable because of their association due to the uniform that they wear. According to Ntombela (2012:140), domestic workers feel strongly that, although work clothes are necessary, the domestic work uniform acts as a material index for an underprivileged position (also compare Ally 2009: 87,133; Ally, 2015:47). From this perspective, Sibande's use of the maid's uniform is an appropriate strategy for visualizing the history and impact of domestic work within her own maternal heritage.

1.2 Sophie: dressed to tell her story

Sophie, as Corrigan (2009) emphasises, is a vital character through which Sibande negotiates not only her desires, ideas, identity and experiences but also those of others who share the mission of emancipation from social oppression. Sibande created Sophie by casting fiberglass and silicone as a mirror image to her own body as she poses for the artworks in her series. The results are human-sized mannequins (Dodd, 2010:467-468; Benson, 2017:44). The divergent appearances of the mannequins allow Sophie to narrate her autobiography (see Von Carnap, 2017:73 who argues that the medium of performance and installation can be thought of as visual biography).

gain economic freedom, by spending their time elsewhere (such as an education) while a black woman took care of all the house duties.



Figure 1.1: Mary Sibande, *The wait seems to go on forever* (from the series *Long Live the Dead Queen*), 2009. Digital print (Goniwe, 2013: 50).



Figure 1.2: Mary Sibande, *Admiration of the Purple Figure*, (from the series *The Purple shall Govern*), 2013. Digital print (Smac, 2019).



Figure 1.3: Mary Sibande, *There's a storm in my heart* (from the series *I Came Apart at the Seams*), 2019. Digital Print (Smac, 2019).

Sophie is a constant figure of fantasy in Sibande's oeuvre (*in* Goniwe, 2013:45; see Figure 1.1, 1.2 1.3). Throughout the series *Long Live the Dead Queen* (Figures 1.1; 1.4, 1.6- 1.9), *The Purple shall Govern* (Figures 1.2,1.5, 1.10) and *I Came Apart at the Seams* (1.3, 1.11, 1.12), Sophie's eyes are closed. According to Sibande (*in* von Carnap, 2017:23), this illustrates Sophie's journey into a dream state as a form of

escapism (also see Dodd, 2010:467). Sibande chose to represent Sophie as a mixed-media installation rather than a painting, due to what a life-size mannequin represents. Corrigan (2015) states that mannequins can be viewed as objects of desire. Sophie symbolises an impossibility, because the desire that mannequins represent can only become a reality through a dream and fantasy (cf. Schneider, 1997:5-6; Von Carnap, 2017:69). In other words, one could argue that mannequins represent something inaccessible as in a dream or fantasy.

This dream state is further emphasised by Sophie's garments resembling mimetic gestures that symbolically signify a "maid"⁵, a Victorian "madam" and what appears to be a spiritual figure or a priest (Corrigan, 2015:146; Gupta, 2019; Goniwe, 2013:8; Bidouzo-Coudray, 2014). Sophie is dressed in colours that transform throughout the three series: her costumes change from blue to purple to red.



Figure 1.4: Mary Sibande, *Queen Sophie* (from the series *Long Live the Dead Queen*), 2010. Digital print (Artsy, 2018).

As seen in Figure 1.4. in *Long Live the Dead Queen* (2009-2011), the gown combines elements from both the stereotypical uniform of South African domestic workers and

⁵ Sibande rarely uses the term "domestic worker" opting instead for the word "maid" (Stielau, 2013). I presume Sibande does this to emphasise the oppressive nature of domestic work as inferior to the madam. Accordingly, I will also make use of the term *maid* throughout parts of the study in order to emphasise the subordinate and uncomfortable position that domestic workers face.

the attire of a Victorian madam (Goniwe, 2013:8; Bidouzo-Coudray, 2014). Benson (2017:45) states that such Victorian dresses reference the “madam”. In early depictions, Sophie wears a domestic worker’s uniform with a *broderie anglaise*⁶ trim on the collar and apron. Other features stereotypical of the domestic worker’s uniform in Sophie’s dresses are a button-down overall, white apron, and *doek*.⁷ The *broderie anglaise* elements typically found in the collar and apron details of contemporary South African domestic workers also reference the Victorian era, as do Sophie’s dresses which consist largely of stripped off frills (cf. Smith, 2016:125). References to the Victorian madam can also be seen in the elaborate skirt and petticoat, the voluminous sleeves and bodice (Smith, 2016:125; Dodd, 2010: 468,473; Dodd, 2014:87,88; Farber, 2017:433).



Figure 1.5: Mary Sibande, *Sophie Ntombikayise* (from the series *Long Live the Dead Queen*), 2009. Mixed media installation (Scope, 2014).

Throughout *Long Live the Dead Queen*, Sophie’s blue dresses therefor contain elements of both the domestic worker’s uniform and a Victorian dress. As Sophie transforms, the domestic uniform signifiers are reduced, while the Victorian attributes are increased. This may be read as a shift from “maid” to “madam”. The shift is also emphasised by the expanding size of the Victorian dress. This maid-to-madam

⁶ *Broderie anglaise* also known as white open embroidery originated in 16th century in the Czech Republic and was widely distributed all over Europe (Smith, 2016:125). This type of detail was used in clothing and uniform since it was introduced to Southern Africa during British colonisation (Hansen, 2006).

⁷ Within the context of domestic work, the *doek* is regarded as a symbol of servitude (Sibande in Motene, 2019). The *doek*, however, has been reclaimed as a form of black agency as seen in the #feesmustfall 2016 movement in South Africa, where students spoke out about the struggles of free education. Mbokodo, a black feminist group, emerged during this movement to address gender issues and the marginalisation of women in the #feesmustfall movement. Mbokodo used *doeks* as a symbol of protest and rejection of being silenced (Mabasa, 2019:45). Thus reinterpreting the subordinating context of the *doek*.

transformation is specifically visible in Sophie's clothing which becomes increasingly more elaborate (see, for example, the dress in *Sophie Ntombikayise* (2010) (Figure 1.5)), where the blue fabric of the skirt expands in a circle around Sophie. The same can be seen in *I decline. I refuse to recline* (2010) (Figure 1.6), and *Of Prosperity* (2011) (Figure 1.7) where voluminous folds of blue fabric spread out onto the floor, and spools into a large circle. The same is seen in *Silent Symphony* (2010) where her skirt puffs out, expands and rises. The skirt then starts to form a veil behind Sophie.

Similarly, Farber (2017: 429, 433) describes how in *Long Live the Dead Queen*, the madam's dress takes over as indicated by Sophie's petticoat which expands out into the room, as well as her exaggerated poses and her extravagant dress. Also, in *Sophie Mercia* (2009) (Figure 1.9), Sophie's skirt splits open at the front and a mass of blue voile folds out in front of her. These dresses correlate with representations of Victorian fashion⁸ (cf. Alison, 1963:26). As such, Sophie becomes an exaggerated version of a Victorian madam.



Figure 1.6: Mary Sibande, *I decline. I refuse to recline* (from the series *Long Live the Dead Queen*), 2010. Mixed media installation (Gey van Pittius, 2018:128).

Figure 1.7: Mary Sibande, *Of Prosperity* (from the series *Long Live the Dead Queen*), 2011. Mixed media installation (Ntombela, 2015: 79).



⁸ According to Montz (2008:1,2) with regards to Victorian fashion, dress was linked to a “social influence” as a means to distinguish people based on their class. She (2008:13) describes how the dress inscribes a notion of “us” and “them” (coloniser and colonised; white and black; rich and poor). The colour of dress, such as blue, red, purple and gold, was specifically used to distinguish, as these pigments were expensive and rare, and thus only available to the high class (Condra, 2008:17).



Figure 1.8: Mary Sibande, *They Don't Make Them Like They Used To* (from the series *Long Live the Dead Queen*), 2008. Digital print (Ntombela, 2015:75).



Figure 1.9: Mary Sibande, *Sophie Mercia* (from the series *Long Live the Dead Queen*), 2008. Digital print (Ntombela, 2015:75).



Figure 1.10: Mary Sibande, *A terrible beauty is born* (from the series *The Purple Shall Govern*), 2013. Digital print (Goniwe, 2013: 51).

A further development of Sophie can be noted in *The Purple Shall Govern* series (Figures 1.2, 1.5, 1.10), where the blue dress gives way to a purple dress. In comparison to blue Sophie, purple Sophie is a seemingly different figure. The new purple dress still contains Victorian references such as puff sleeves, elaborate skirts and a laced bodice, but Farber (2017:437) describes how in *A Terrible Beauty is Born* (2013) (Figure 1.10) “viscera-like lumps” surround Sophie’s body. These shapes are created from cotton and polyester and seemingly pour out of Sophie’s “womb” like internal bodily matter (Farber, 2017:437). These forms tangle together and take over the whole installation space. The apron and *doek* of the domestic worker’s uniform hang loosely from the uniform-dress. The intestinal-like shapes seem to remove the domestic elements of Sophie’s uniform, suggesting her escape from servitude (Farber, 2017:437).

Criticising stereotypical depictions of black women, Sibande uses Sophie to examine the nature of domestic workers’ identity in post-colonial South Africa. The dress symbolises South Africa’s past/present (Smith, 2016:124, 125). Due to Sophie’s uniform being a hybrid design of a Victorian madam’s dress and a domestic worker’s uniform, it recalls the colonial history of South Africa, specifically evoking colonial privilege and racial hierarchies (Dodd, 2010:470-471).

Sophie’s uniform undergoes an alteration as her uniform morphs into a Victorian madam’s dress (Corrigall 2015:147). Hereby Sibande evokes the role of the madam and the power associated with it (Corrigall 2015:151, 152; Dodd 2010:470-471). Both *Long Live the Dead Queen* and *The Purple Shall Govern* raise questions of gender, race, and class within the home. These series’ portrayals stand in conflict with the stereotypical depiction of a domestic worker. By being represented in a Victorian dress referencing a “madam” (Benson, 2017:45), Sophie enters a fantasy state where she takes over control and holds the power.



Figure 1. 11: Mary Sibande, *Come, you Spirits of the land and skies* (from the series *I Came Apart at the Seams*), 2019. Digital print (Smac, 2019).

I Came Apart at the Seams (Figures 1.3, 1.11, 1.12) is concerned with the third stage of Sophie's transformation. This series is the pinnacle of Sophie's transformative journey. According to Sibande (2019) Sophie now becomes a new figure who is liberated from servitude. Therefore, in this series, Sophie is presented as an empowered figure wearing red and shows no remnant of being either a *maid* or a *madam* (Gupta, 2019; Figure 1.11). According to Simpson (2019), Sibande here explores the collective anger about inequality still prevalent in post-apartheid South Africa. In *I Came Apart at the Seams* Sibande uses a recurring motif of red dogs (see Figure 1.12). According to Sibande (2019), these dogs refer to the isiZulu expression, "*ie ukwatile uphendukeinja embovu*," that roughly translates to: "he is angry, he turned into a red dog" (translated by Sibande).

Although Sibande describes Sophie as angry, Zehra (2019) describes her as "much more than a destructive force". According to Sibande (*in* Zehra, 2019), Sophie acts as the "healing space needed between the past and present". Zehra (2019) describes Sophie's visual transformation as a sight of freedom. Visually, through Sophie's garments, Sibande inscribes her personal stories, historical realities and social concerns onto their visual surfaces.



Figure 1.12: Mary Sibande, *Domba Dance* (from the series *I Came Apart at the Seams*), 2019. Mixed media installation (Smac, 2019).

Throughout the series *Long Live the Dead Queen*, *The Purple Shall Govern* and *I Came Apart at the Seams*, Sophie's garments of fantasy become signifiers of agency that explore a variety of positions whilst simultaneously commenting on socio-economic issues and hierarchical systems in South African society. Sibande thereby employs Sophie to create a platform for agency through the performance of fantasy (cf. Goniwe, 2013:8,15; Leibbrandt, 2015).

1.4 (Her)story of hysteria

From the introductory discussion, it can be argued that Sophie represents a protest figure that acts against the silencing of servitude. Through Sophie, Sibande speaks (not through words) but through the body. This mimetic visual contestation becomes, following the arguments of Farber (2017) and Scheffer, Du Preez and Stevenson (2017), a female language that coincides with a feminist understanding of hysteria. This section introduces the concept of hysteria.

In classical terms, hysteria is preoccupied with women's reproductive system (Yarom, 2005:153; McVean, 2017), in particular the "wandering womb" theory, which posited that the womb travelled around within the female body. This interpretation dominated medical discourse for many years, since Hippocrates first defined "hysteria", which derives from the Greek term for uterus, ὕστέρα (Madva *et al.*, 2019:3; Micale, 1995:20; Yarom 2005; Peters, 2005:124). Micale (1995:20) argues that from the fifth to the thirteenth century, with the rise of Christianity, hysteria was seen as a symptom of sin

or witchcraft (see also Bernheimer & Kahane 1985:2,3; Archer, 2008:3). During the Middle Ages, it was believed that hysteria had supernatural causes, whereas interpretations of hysteria that developed in the Renaissance period regarded it as a physiological instead of mystical illness or condition. During the Enlightenment, hysteria was seen as a condition of the nervous system as opposed to the uterus. This interpretation remained constant during the nineteenth century (Langland, 1999:322; Logan, 1997; Micale, 1995:21).

The best-documented “outbreak” of hysteria occurred during the late nineteenth century (Bernheimer & Kahane, 1985:4; Madva *et al.*, 2019:3). Although perspectives of cause and effect developed in this time, hysteria was still regarded as a physiological condition, despite the lack of evidence to that effect (Langland, 1999:322). Then, around the end of the nineteenth century, the French neuropathologist Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893) as well as the Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1865-1939) made vital contributions to the study of how hysterical reactions are elicited (Madva *et al.* 2019:3).

In the 1870s, Charcot famously conducted several case studies regarding hysteria which he titled *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (De Marneffe, 1991:72-8). He is best-known for his lectures delivered in the amphitheatre at the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris (Du Preez, 2004:48). His *Iconography* includes drawings as well as photographs representative of mostly female “hysterics” in numerous enigmatic, exaggerated, and suggestive poses that were considered “characteristic” during the hysterical outbreak (Scheffer *et al.*, 2017:5). De Marneffe (1991:90) argues that Charcot's purpose was to determine the physiological origin of hysteria. Charcot employed an ocular-centric approach while trying to determine the underlying physiological cause of hysteria. The ocular-centric emphasises the external above the internal and is based on the close observation of external appearance (De Marneffe, 1991:76-78). However, Charcot did not gain much clarity on hysteria. He was preoccupied with the imaginary and simulated symptoms of hysteria, as opposed to verifying the physiological cause (De Marneffe, 1991:76). Charcot (*in* Showalter, 1985:147) claimed that hysteria had a psychological origin instead of a physiological one.

Freud (2015:187) also determined that hysteria was an exclusively psychological phenomenon caused and associated by a traumatic experience or impression.⁹ Freud (1910:206) claimed that symptoms were encrypted representations of suppressed traumatic knowledge, and may arise from repressed sexual desire or a "premature sexual experience" (Freud, 2015:174). According to Freud (*in* Scheffer *et al.*, 2017:6), the hysteric cannot verbalise her complaint in linguistic terms, and repressed traumatic memories may, as a result, be projected onto the body instead. Between 1880-1915, Freud, working with his partner Breuer in Austria, conducted numerous studies on hysteria (McVean, 2017).¹⁰

According to Freud (2015:837), a classical symptom of hysteria is the "hysterical attack", which includes the display of fantasies at the site of the body. According to Freud (1958:262; 2015:817, 818), fantasy is a fundamental symptom of hysteria. Therefore, Freud (2015:817) claimed that hysterics often try to escape everyday life by engaging in fantasy. The main focus of the hysteric during her hysterical performances is to transform herself (Lacan *et al.*, 2007:34; Verhaeghe, 1999:174). However, since she is "voiceless", the hysteric responds by means of non-linguistic symptomatology that takes the form of fantasy (Freud, 2015:817; Lacan 1981:1; Bronfen, 1998:149). That this fantasy is realised through mimicry is addressed by Du Preez (2004:47) who asserts that hysteria is a "mimed" disease wherein women acts hysterical by mimicking the hysterical symptom. Showalter, in her *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media* (1997), argues that these "hysterical epidemics" proliferate due to their extensive media exposure and the mimetic quality of hysteria's symptoms (Klement, 2011:23, 24).

During the nineteenth century, it was considered insufficient to regard hysteria as either a symptom or as the dynamics of a specific personality structure. The demise of hysteria was due primarily to the fact that the term came to be used in a variety of ways that was only tenuously related (Yarom, 2005:143). Although "hysteria" lost its

⁹ As my interpretation of hysteria is based on the feminist interpretation thereof, it is important to note that Freud's view on hysteria does not take centre stage in my study but is used as the point of departure for the fantastical base of hysteria, as used by the relevant feminist writers (see Showalter, 1985;1997 and Hunter, 1983) in this study.

¹⁰ Freud Joseph Breuer published their findings on hysteria in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895). See, in particular *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (the "Dora" case).

clinical status in 1980, it has a long discursive history in which the meaning of the term has often changed (Wald, 2007:2; Devereaux, 2014:19).

Micale (2019:29) claims that the most significant development of hysteria in the twentieth century was the assertion that it has declined. During this time, the medical component of hysteria was questioned. The medical practice was divided between the physiological and psychological causes thereof, and the assumption was made that hysteria disappeared (Merskey, 1983:428-433; Porter *in* Gilman *et al*, 1993:231). However, Showalter (1997:9, 20) states that the idea of hysteria is not "dead", but that the disorder itself has transformed into contemporary forms with symptoms reflecting our modern lives. As such, Mukherjee (2007:6) claims that hysteria provides a symbolic means to express what cannot be verbally articulated.

Showalter and Micale (*in* Yarom, 2005:16) explain that, since the early 1990s, there has been a renewed interest in hysteria outside the scope of psychoanalysis. It is here where psychoanalytic theory intersects with the physiological component and the feminist perspective. Micale (1995) calls this the "new hysteria studies" wherein different disciplines acknowledged definitions and approaches to hysteria (Langland, 1999:322). According to Micale (1995:7, 8) in this alternative interpretation of hysteria studies, feminists related to hysteria as "a kind of metaphor both for women's position in past patriarchal societies and for the image of the feminine in the history of scientific discourses". Showalter (1997:6) states that "hysteria has moved from the clinic to the library, from the case study to the novel, from bodies to books, from page to stage and screen" (and, as suggested in this study, contemporary art i.e. Sibande's Sophie). As such the interpretation of hysteria has developed throughout history (cf. Showalter, 1997:6).

According to Du Preez (2004:53), hysteria, however, continues to spark disagreement and debate. More recently, it is still understood that women experience "hysterical" symptoms more frequently than men¹¹ and that the origin of the hysterical symptom is still of great uncertainty (cf. Madva *et al.*, 2019:4). In contemporary times, the complexity of the symptomology of hysteria, as pointed out by Segalla and Segalla

¹¹ There are many controversial arguments regarding the possibility of male hysterics as well as black hysterics that challenge the concept of hysteria as a white female condition (see *The Race of Hysteria: "Overcivilization" and the "Savage" Woman in Late Nineteenth-Century Obstetrics and Gynecology* (Briggs, 2000). This debate, however, is unfortunately beyond the scope of this dissertation.

(2017:126), is matched by the complexity of the contextual variables. Moreover, on the question of the cause of hysteria – and in conjunction with the feminist perspective in this regard – Hunter (1983: 485-486) suggests that hysteria comprises a response to controlling social circumstances. Therefore, she (1983:486) relates the cause of hysteria to patriarchal repression. That is, hysteria has manifested differently within changing cultural contexts. In the context of this study, hysteria positions Sophie within the context of domestic worker's vulnerable and exploitative circumstances. Though there are a variety of theoretical differences, this study highlights the particular theoretical position that hysteria may well be symptomatic of patriarchal silencing and the oppressive social structures in which black women are often trapped. From this perspective, Sibande employs a hysterical reaction through Sophie to fight for a voice, and to reclaim agency. Hysteria thus becomes a form of agency and an embodied response to regulatory social conditions manifesting at the site of the body through mimicry and fantasy (cf. Scheffer *et al.*, 2017:7).

Mimicry and fantasy are thus seen as a form of speaking through the body in order to gain agency. Black feminist scholar Gloria Jean Watkins (b. 1952), more commonly known as bell hooks (1989:5), writes of a strategy that she describes as *talking back*. She emphasises the need and importance for black women to *talk back* as a way to transform from object to subject. For hooks (1989:5), talking back refers to “speaking as an equal” while silence becomes “an act of submission”. This can be associated with the feminist interpretation of hysteria in the sense that talking back becomes, like hysteria, a way to “emerge from silence into speech” (hooks,1989:6). However, instead of talking back with a voice, hysterics talk back through their bodies. Sophie talks back and declares agency by escaping her domestic oppression through the body. This escape is necessary due to Sophie being represented as a signifier of entrapment within a social hierarchy that triggers oppression and exploitation – that of a domestic worker. Sophie, therefore, experiences hysteria as an alternative verbalisation or oppositional expression in response to oppression and entrapment. This is visualised through her flights of fantasy and her transformation from maid, to madam to transcendental figure.

1.5 Problem statement, research questions and objectives

The question guiding this project is: How does Mary Sibande's character Sophie transform throughout the series *Long Live the Dead Queen* (2009-2011), *The Purple Shall Govern* (2013-2014) and *I Came Apart at the Seams* (2019-ongoing), and how is hysteria used as a visual strategy for declaring her agency?

- 1.5.1 How is Sophie represented and visually encoded as a "silenced" black domestic worker confronting hierarchical social structures in ways that can be correlated with an experience of hysteria? *The first sub-objective of this study is to investigate how Sophie can be contextualised as a representation of a domestic worker within the hierarchical social structures of race, gender and class and how these correlate with female hysteria. This is done by means of a literature study.*
- 1.5.2 How does Sophie signify female hysterical strategies such as fantasy and mimicry in ways that escapes her subordinate identity and how do these strategies guide her metamorphosis? *The second sub-objective of this study is to explore how Sibande utilises Sophie to depict female hysteria to escape the social positioning of black female domestic work.*
- 1.5.3 How does the transformation of Sophie's agency play out through hysterical representation in *Long Live the Dead Queen* (2009-2011), *The Purple Shall Govern* (2013-2014) and *I Came Apart at the Seams* (2019- ongoing)? *The third sub-objective of this study is to examine how Sibande employs hysteria throughout her oeuvre, in order to gradually give Sophie a greater sense of agency.*

1.6 Central theoretical statement

I argue that Mary Sibande employs female hysteria as an artistic strategy for depicting the character of Sophie and for reclaiming her agency. From a feminist perspective, hysteria becomes a bodily response to oppression. I argue that Sophie's agency gradually transforms throughout Sibande's oeuvre as reflected in the series *Long Live the Dead Queen* (2009), *The Purple Shall Govern* (2013, 2014) and reaches a pinnacle in her latest and continuing series *I Came Apart at the Seams* (2019-ongoing). Throughout the three series Sophie mainly alters between what appears to be a domestic worker, a Victorian *madam* and a transcendent, spiritual figure. Sophie

the domestic worker, however, appears to play the leading role. Sophie is portrayed as engaged in the performance of several illusory roles, including those of a “lady”, a religious devotee, a queen, an equestrian figure, and a soldier. Sophie, as Farber (2017) and Scheffer, Du Preez and Stevenson (2017) have argued, becomes engaged with fantasy and mimicry that can be associated with hysteria.

As hysteria is viewed as a bodily reaction towards being silenced or oppressed, this study further considers signifiers of hysteria in the representation of Sophie and in the context of oppression. I maintain, in accordance with Sibande, that Sophie signifies a black domestic worker who is confronted and initially silenced. I argue that this confrontation and oppression occurs through the hierarchical social structures of race, gender and class. As black women, domestic workers are antagonized by a three-pronged marginalisation. Sophie serves as a reference to the oppression that domestic workers are subjected to by their mostly white employers or *madams*.

Simultaneously, Sibande immediately destabilises Sophie’s chronicle of subjugation by casting Sophie as the protagonist of all three of these series and by confronting her oppression through fantasy - the latter being a key element in the feminist interpretation of hysteria. Sophie’s domestic uniform acts as a signifier of servitude, oppression and confinement (see *Caught it the Rapture*; Figure 1.13) and synchronously as the freeing agent as it transforms into a powerful “hysterical” hybrid (see *The Admiration of the Purple Figure*; Figure 1.14). In this sense, Sophie reclaims agency not predicated on a position of marginality. This is especially prevalent in Sibande’s latest series *I Came Apart at the Seams*. In this series, Sophie’s “uniform” becomes a symbolic pronouncement of agency as the original references to a silenced Sophie begin to fade (see *Come, you Spirits of the land and skies*; Figure 1.15). We are, in contrast, presented with an angry, empowered and spiritual Sophie who is talking back at her oppressors. By being portrayed as a powerful spiritual figure, that according to Sibande (2019) acts as a healer, Sophie is no longer silenced but has reclaimed her agency.



Figure 1.13: Mary Sibande, *Caught in The Rapture*, 2009. Digital print (Bidouzo-Coudray, 2014).

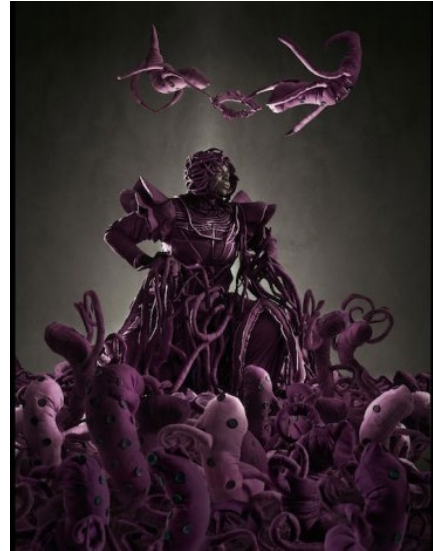


Figure 1.14: Mary Sibande, *Admiration for The Purple Figure*, 2013. Digital print (ArtAfrica, 2014).



Figure 1.15: Mary Sibande, *Come, you Spirits of the Land and Skies*, 2019. Digital print (Smac, 2019).

1.7 Methodology

This is a qualitative, image-based study that is framed by a theoretical and an interpretative close reading of Sibande's Sophie in *Long Live the Dead Queen*, *The Purple Shall Govern* and *I Came Apart at the Seams*. This dissertation consists of two main parts: a literature review which includes a theoretical and contextual framework considering hysteria and black female domestic work in South Africa, and a reading and interpretation of Sophie based on this theoretical and contextual work.

1.7.1 Literature review

For the literature review, I consulted relevant publications regarding the key concepts and objectives of this study. The historical understanding of hysteria was informed by

Gilman's *Hysteria Beyond Freud* (1993) and the contemporary understanding of hysteria, as employed in this dissertation, is based on Lacan's (1977, 1981, 2007) interpretation of hysteria as a social discourse. Equally important is the work of feminist writers such as Hunter (1983) and Showalter (1997) who interpret hysteria as a social condition. Concerning bodily hysterical strategies, Irigaray (1985) is the primary source.

Black female domestic work in South Africa and the social structure in which it is confined to, was mainly investigated by studying Cock (1989), Ally (2006, 2009, 2015), Gaitskel (2010) and Haskin and Lowrie's (2015) writings about the social condition of domestic work in South Africa.

The most important sources on Mary Sibande, Sophie and hysteria in the series *Long Live The Dead Queen*, *The Purple Shall Govern* are Corrigan (2009, 2010, 2015) Dodd (2010), Bronner (2016), Scheffer, Du Preez and Stevenson (2017) and Farber (2017). On Sibande's latest series *I Came Apart at the Seams*, Angbeletchy and Affricot (2019), Zehra (2019), Jaggi (2019) and Gupta (2019) were helpful.

1.7.2 Interpretation of selected artworks from the series *Long Live the Dead Queen*, *The Purple Shall Govern* and *I Came Apart at the Seams*

My reading and interpretation of Sophie involves a critical engagement with Sibande's *Long Live the Dead Queen*, *The Purple Shall Govern* and *I Came Apart at the Seams*. This interpretation is framed by a feminist interpretation of hysteria, specifically the hysterical strategies of fantasy and mimicry. My interpretation is also guided by a contextual analysis of domestic workers in South Africa and the hierarchical oppressive social structures of race, class and gender. My interpretation considers how Sibande challenges the seemingly limited social positioning of Sophie through hysteria, thereby reclaiming her agency.

1.8 Chapter outline

The next chapter of this project (Chapter Two) considers the feminist view of hysteria and how oppressive regulatory structures may give consistency to hysteria as a social condition. This chapter further focuses on fantasy and mimicry in hysteria, as well as how the hysteric articulates this fantasy through the body.

Chapter Three is a contextual study regarding black domestic work. This chapter investigates the hierarchical social structures of race, gender and class. This chapter

places Sibande's Sophie within the context of domestic work and the exploitation associated with it, resulting in Sophie representing a seemingly silenced body. I also examine Sophie's uniform as a signifier of oppression and confinement that correlates with the feminist interpretation of hysteria.

Accordingly, Chapter Four contextualises Sophie as a "hysteric" by means of the fantasies she performs and explores how Sibande utilises hysterical representation to transform her identity and escape subjection. This transforming technique is understood as Sophie's fight for a voice.

Chapter Five, as a concluding chapter, offers a summary of this research by offering an exposition of how Sophie's agency transforms throughout the three series. I investigate how Sophie's agency transforms in her fight for a voice. Furthermore, I examine the apex of Sophie's agency when she expresses her anger.

CHAPTER TWO

HYSTERIA: SPEAKING THROUGH THE BODY

Hysteria, it is often said, has disappeared this century, its problems solved by Freud, or its investigation discredited by the antics of Charcot (Gilman, *et al.*, 1993:vii).

Historically linked with femininity for hundreds of years, hysteria's involuntary, uncontrollable, somatic symptoms were coming to be understood in the emerging critical feminist discourse not as a medical condition but a cultural one, an embodied index of forms of oppression (Devereux, 2014:20).

2.1 Introduction

In *Hysteria beyond Freud*, Gilman *et al.* (1993: vii, xvii) emphasise what they describe as the modern myth that hysteria has vanished or had never existed in the first place. They (1993:vii, xvii) argue that this is due to the opposing and somewhat controversial viewpoints as originally put forth by Charcot (1889) and Freud (1895) – two key 19th-century figures in the conceptualisation of hysteria – who framed hysteria, respectively, as a pathological and a psychological condition (Hunter, 1983:485-486).¹² Although reinterpretations of hysteria are diverse and conflicting, the idea of hysteria gained renewed interest when the French philosopher Jacques Lacan (1901-1981; 2007:23) claimed hysteria to be a social condition caused by regulatory Orders. In this sense, hysteria, according to Devereux (2014:20) it can be regarded as a “feminist discourse” that is caused by social (cultural) oppression.

Feminists such as Devereux (2014) understand hysteria as a strategy against oppressive social conditions. Feminist scholars, in particular Dianne Hunter (1983), Elaine Showalter (1985, 1997) and Luce Irigaray (1985), suggest that hysteria is a form of non-verbal communication. Communicating without words allows women, who have been silenced by this social order, to speak through their bodies. It is from this perspective that hysteria – as the epigraph of this chapter attests – can be regarded as a tool for women to gain agency through the mechanism of *speaking through the*

¹² As explained in his book *Clinical Lectures on the Diseases of the Nervous System*, Charcot was eager to describe hysteria as a physiological condition. His student, Freud, contradicted his view by claiming that hysteria had a psychological cause as outlined in *Studies on Hysteria* (1889) that he co-published with Joseph Breuer (1842-1925) (Webster, 2004).

body. This bodily communication manifests itself in performance of fantasy and mimicry.

In this chapter, I accept the feminist interpretation of hysteria of Hunter (1983), Irigaray (1985) and Showalter (1985, 1997) who advocate that hysteria can function as a strategy against oppression. This strategy leads to agency as it offers the victim a way to speak symbolically. To maintain this argument, the first aim is to investigate how hysteria developed as a social condition. This is done, first, by contextualizing and investigating opposing and controversial views in the history of hysteria. The second aim of this chapter refers to the embodiment of hierarchical and regulatory social circumstances within Social Orders. Women are trapped in these Social Orders and as such hysteria can be defined as a social condition. In this chapter, I argue via Hunter (1983), Irigaray (1985), Showalter (1985,1997), Evans (1991), McAfee (2004), Du Preez (2004), Jones (2012) and Devereux (2014) that women are silenced within these Social Orders, and need to fight for a voice and gain agency as a way to escape an oppressive Social Order. Hysteria manifests at the site of the body and through fantasy and mimicry, and therefore as a strategy of speaking through the body (see Lacan (1999), Irigaray (1985) and Bronfen (1998)).

2.2 Hysteria: a brief introduction

When confronted with images of hysteria (see figures 2.1 and 2.2), one is often presented with a fainting and “overly emotional” woman. *Being hysterical* has problematically become part of informal vocabulary. The image of an overwhelmed, distraught and tearful woman is a misconception. But where does this misconception come from?

This warped perception of hysteria took shape mainly through the work of Charcot (1889) and Freud (1895). As mentioned before, they respectively regarded hysteria as a pathological and psychological condition, thereby giving rise to the clichéd image of hysterical women. Hysteria is, however, not what is commonly thought to be. It is not a pathological or psychological condition (as suggested by Freud and Charcot) but rather a social condition. Before I explore hysteria as a social condition, it is important to look at how the pathological and psychological takes on hysteria have been discredited.

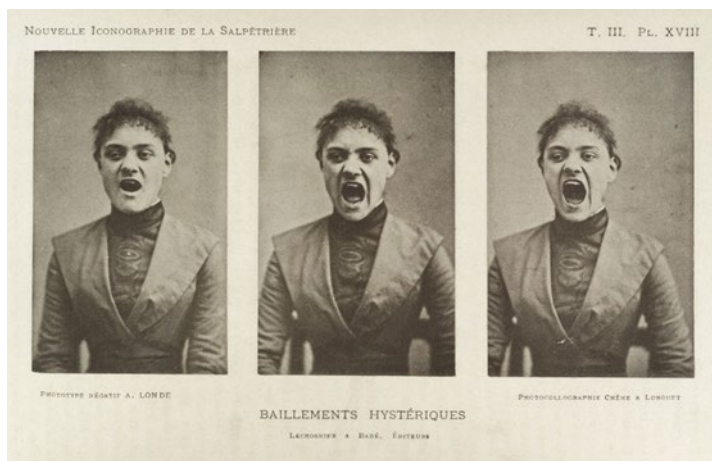


Figure 2.1: Charcot, J.M. *Baillements Hystériques*, Plate 18, vol. 3, *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (Freeman, 2017).



Figure 2.2: Charcot, J.M. *Lethargie*, Plate 13 & 14, *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (Berfrois, 2011).

Historically, the pathological¹³ origins of hysteria already found expression in ancient Greece, as is evident from the Greek term ὑστέρα (uterus). According to De Marneffe (1991:72) it was believed that the “emotional instability” of women was the cause of hysteria. She (1991:72) describes how hysteria was caused by the movement that takes place in the uterus, leading to frustrated emotions. This started the trend to regard *all* women’s “frustrations” as hysterical (Micale, 1995:19, 20). “Frustrations” in this context refers to feelings associated with being upset or annoyed. Many of these “frustrations” and, by extension, all “female complaints” were simply defined as hysteria – and therefore as a medical illness (cf. Satow, 1980:463). Satow (1980:463-477) asserts that the term hysteria was used as a label for many different ailments associated with women. From reading the history of hysteria, it appears that it was common practice to regard *any* complaint of women as biological in origin.

During the 17th century, English physician Thomas Sydenham (*in* Tasca *et al.*, 2012:111) claimed that the cause of hysteria was not the uterus (as believed by the Greeks) and therefore not physical. In 1692, Sydenham (*in* Latham, 1705:85) theorized that hysteria was, instead, brought on by strong emotions. This, he said (*in* Tasca *et al.*, 2012:113), caused an imbalance between the body and the mind.

¹³ When referring to pathology, this project specifically refers to the medical concept, namely the study of a biological disease. It refers to diagnostic testing and treatment of the biological composition of a human being which is seen in this study as an antithesis of the psychological aspect (Kumar, *et al.*, 2010).

Although he attributed hysteria to a disparity between the body and mind, he took the understanding of hysteria “from the womb to the brain” (Boss, 1979:221). In this sense, he questioned the pathological definition of hysteria.

The so-called golden age of the study of hysteria during the 19th century commenced with Charcot’s case studies of “hysterics” in the 1870s, titled *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (see De Marneffe, 1991:72-78; Porter in Gilman *et al.*, 1993:227). Charcot, in agreement with Sydenham (1692), was determined to uncover a pathological cause for the so-called *hysterical condition*. He (in De Marneffe, 1991:90) combined psychological and pathological explanations for hysteria in his belief that hysteria was caused by a degenerative neurological dysfunction triggered by physical or emotional trauma. Symptoms included a loss of sensation, blindness, difficulty walking, and paralysis. Apart from these symptoms, the patients often seemed apathetic (cf. Sarason & Sarason, 1993).

Du Preez (2004:47,48) states that Charcot’s treatment of the disease was ocular-centric, meaning that he gave precedence to the visual faculty. This led to his famous and controversial iconography of hysteria. Charcot’s *iconographie* series consisting of drawings and photographs (see Figure 2.3, 2.4 and 2.5) represents hysterics in several poses. According to De Marneffe (1991:72), these poses are “characteristic” of hysterical attacks and of exaggerated, erotic and enigmatic nature. Charcot would become notorious for his lectures delivered in the amphitheater at the Salpetriere hospital in Paris where he would induce hysterical attacks in his patients (Link-Heer, 1990:210; De Marneffe, 1991:72, 728; Showalter, 1997:33; Du Preez, 2004:47, 48; Scheffer *et al*, 2017:5).



Figure 2.3: Charcot, J.M. A patient during a hysterical attack, *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (Scheffer, 2017:62).

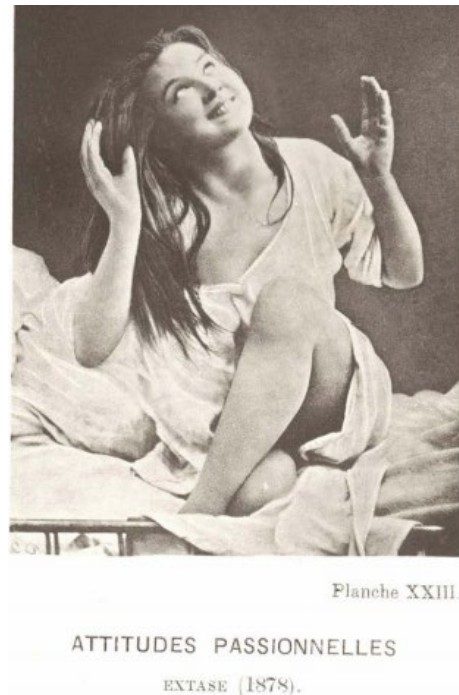


Figure 2.4: Charcot, J.M. Attitudes passionnelles – extase, Plate 23, vol. 2, Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière, 1878 (De Marneffe, 1991:80).



Figure 2.5: Charcot, J.M. Photography of Augustine, Iconographie, vol 11 (Didi-Haberman, 2003:123).

Charcot's experiment involves him taking photographs of women while they posed "hysterically". While searching for a pathological origin of hysteria, Charcot believed, according to De Marneffe (1991:76-78), that the symptomatology of these women could be understood by viewing their external appearance. Charcot even went as far as to study these women by viewing their naked bodies – behind closed doors and

even in public “theatrical” spaces. (Du Preez, 2004:48). Evans (*in* Du Preez, 2004:48) describes how “he would have the patients brought to his office and stripped naked; he would observe them, ask them to perform certain movements, stare, meditate, and then have them led out...he rarely exchanged words with the patients”. This was not the only controversial aspect of Charcot’s practice.

Charcot noticed that his patients soon reacted as if they were on display and that they produced “appropriate” bodily collapses and convulsions that were in line with the physical characteristics of hysteria. It was, according to Veith (1965:239,) almost as if their performances were rehearsed and their movements carefully choreographed.¹⁴

Du Preez (2004:49, 53) explains that Charcot needed to provide evidence of these exaggerated symptoms. Noticing this, his patients, unbeknownst to him, strategically faked their poses. By this means, Charcot’s studies resulted in hysterical representations that could not be ascribed to any medical ailment (see De Marneffe, 1991:73; Archer, 2008:5; Du Preez 2004:49). The dismissal of Charcot’s studies was because the “symptoms” they described were simulated, instead of being proof of physiological causes (De Marneffe, 1991:79). Charcot noticed, in other words, that patients were deliberately posing for the photographs, to the extent that he could no longer use their bodily expressions as pathological explanations for their reactions (Du Preez, 2004:48).

According to De Marneffe (1991:90), Charcot’s ideas failed because, although he obsessively sought it, hysteria had no pathological origin. Charcot ultimately abandoned his studies and denied the pathological cause of hysteria. Shortly before his death Charcot, according to Gilson (2010:821), had acknowledged that hysteria was, in fact, a psychological phenomenon as well as the product of his manipulation of sensitive and vulnerable women (Gilson, 2010: 822). This led to the demise of his clinical theory of hysteria (Du Preez, 2009:18).

The main figure who wrote about hysteria as a psychological phenomenon during the golden age of hysteria was Freud. Freud (1856-1939) was a student of Charcot at the Salpêtrière. In contrast with Charcot, he argued for a psychological interpretation of hysteria (Tasca *et.al.*, 2012:115; Showalter, 1997:37). His take on hysteria is

¹⁴ According to Veith (1965:239), Charcot’s assistants “trained” patients to perform during lectures in front of audiences.

fundamental to the discrediting of the pathological understanding of hysteria (Pierce, 2010:257). Freud (2015:187) emphasized the psychological aspects of hysteria and claimed that it was associated with traumatic experiences. He (1963:258; 1910:198, 207) regarded hysterical symptoms as cryptic depictions of suppressed trauma and traumatic memories. Since traumatic memories are suppressed, they are, according to Freud (*in* Micale, 1995:27) subconsciously negotiated in a somatic manner, employing hysteria. In other words, Freud (*in* Micale, 1995:28) argued that hysteria is a complex representation of repressed psychological occurrences.

Freud (2015:187) understood hysteria as well as its symptomatology as the acting out of traumatic memories. Nonetheless, he later discovered that the memories of his hysterical patients were mainly fictional. He then attributed the psychological cause of hysteria to repressed desires (Yarom, 2005:14; McVean, 2017; Toews, 1991:511).

However, in *Studies on Hysteria* (1889) Freud and his partner Josef Breuer (1842-1925), a German physician, argued that social conditions gave rise to hysteria. According to Pierce (2010:265), they studied hysteria along with its symptoms and causes. The most famous case of hysteria was Anna O (Pierce, 2010:265).¹⁵ Showalter (*in* Gilman *et al.*, 1993:315) points out that most of the women in their studies were trapped in conventional gender roles and that, according to Pierce (2010:265), their needs were suppressed.

According to Showalter (*in* Gilman *et al.*, 1993:315) and Pierce (2010:265), the suppression of women's needs can be interpreted as the foundation for a cultural awareness of hysteria¹⁶. Because of the limiting prescribed gender roles that inhibit women's expression, hysteria may be understood as a social condition. Women are inhibited because they are controlled by patriarchal authority. It is in this sense that

¹⁵Anna O, the pseudonym of Bertha Pappenheim (1859-1936), was one of Freud and Breuer's best-known hysterical patients. Freud (1909) argued that her hysteria could be ascribed to her father's death. According to Riniolo (2008), the treatment Anna O received from Freud gave rise to psychoanalysis.

¹⁶ Kerbo (1996:10-14) argues that individuals within social structures "reproduce" inequalities interrelated to "differences" as, amongst other, gender, race, class. According to Johnson (1997:176), individuals' privilege are determined according to the social gender positioning they occupy. Becker (1999:23) for example reiterates that according to the patriarchal perception "only white men are fully human" and society is organized around their needs and perspectives. As such, they dominate activities within society. Therefore, according to Becker (1999:25) patriarchy, as a social structure, values masculinity over femininity and encouraged men to regard women as beings suited to fulfil male needs. Consequently, patriarchy and gender roles in society contribute to women's lack of equality in society, and subsequently their hysteria.

men “silence” women. To counter this silencing, they expressed themselves symbolically in hysterical symptoms (Pierce, 2010:265, 266). According to Hunter (1983:811), hysterical symptoms therefore serve as a “language” for suppressed women. From a feminist perspective, then, the roots of hysteria are sociological, rather than pathological or psychological.

In the late 19th century, there was still a difference between the pathological, psychological and social components of hysteria as can be seen in the work of figures such as Charcot, Freud, and Breuer. Yet, their respective theories led to the contemporary understanding of hysteria because they ultimately rejected the pathological and psychological origin of hysteria (Du Preez, 2004; De Marneffe, 1991:90).

The “decline” of the study of hysteria in the 20th century led to queries about whether hysteria had disappeared or disguised itself as something new (Showalter, 1997:4; Merskey, 1983: 428-433; Porter *in* Gilman *et al.*, 1993: 231). Shorter (1992:549-582; 1990:4) noted that the emancipated 1920s “New Woman”¹⁷ played a role in the decline of hysteria. In other words, hysteria declined because the “social rules” that begot it were no longer effective. Trillat (1986) in his historical investigation of hysteria, *Histoire de l'hystérie*, declared that hysteria was dead, but Showalter (*in* Gilman *et al.*, 1993:336) argues that this claim fails to acknowledge the cultural and symbolic meanings of hysteria. She argues that hysteria is not limited to the social prescriptions of a specific time and place.

Showalter (1997:5) holds that hysteria has been relabelled for a new era. According to her (1997:5) it becomes a way of achieving an understanding of ourselves and our social world in which symptoms reflect the time and thus become a social condition. Showalter (1997:6) states that hysteria provides an alternative communicative medium where what cannot be verbalised can be expressed through other means. As such, hysteria acts as an intervention or contestation between the hysteric and her social environment (Mukherjee, 2002:6).

Smith-Rosenberg (1986:197-216; Showalter *in* Gilman *et al.*, 1993:303) attributes the prevalence of hysteria in the late 19th century to women who, as a result of gender-

¹⁷ According to Buzwell (2014) the 1920’s “New woman” referred to educated and independent women, who had no intention of getting married or bearing children.

role conflicts and stress, used hysteria as a kind of sanctuary. It came down to a strategy for dealing with social conditions or as Smith-Rosenberg (1986:197-216; Showalter in Gilman *et al.*, 1993:303) attests that hysteria provides a social alternative to women who feel deprived of their social role. She (1986:197-216) suggests that being trapped in social circumstances may cause hysteria.

In summary, this section introduced historical perspectives on hysteria as a pathological, psychological or a social condition. Although there is no clarity on the basic origin of hysterical symptoms, it is ultimately according to Madva *et al.* (2019:4) considered to be a “female” condition that has functioned as a language, spoken through the body (Hunter, 1983:467;485; Irigaray, 1985:72, Showalter, 1997:7). This language is utilised by women whose voices have been taken from them and have been silenced. The feminist take on hysteria that views it as a product of women's social circumstances enables new interpretations of hysteria, which I will explore later in this dissertation.

In the next section, I discuss how Lacan's theory of the social structure as a *Symbolic Order* may contribute towards an understanding of hysteria as a social construct.

2.3 Hysteria: a symptom of silencing

Hysteria, as a social condition, occurs as a symptom of social relationships and conditions in which women are oppressed and silenced. Women are silenced by inherited systems that are built by the dominant (patriarchal) discourse. These structures are controlling and hierarchical, which lead to women being oppressed and silenced. Lacan (1977) writes about how women are silenced by a Social Order.

Lacan (1977:5) asserts that hysteria as a social construct is the result of women's marginalization that forces them to conform to the authority of regulatory (patriarchal) structures. Lacan, therefore, views hysteria as more than a medical condition (Gherovici, 2014:62; Lacan, 2007:23). He (*in* Evans, 1996:45) rather refers to hysteria as a certain kind of social state that is related to the particular social condition and *zeitgeist* (see also Gherovici, 2014:58). Gherovici (2014:63, 64) points out that Lacan (1977:5) refers to historical “hysterical” figures such as Anna O, Dora, and Emmy von

N¹⁸ in order to emphasise the role that the social environment played in the manifestation of their hysterical symptoms (Gherovici, 2014:64). Klement (2011:52) specifically refers to the case of Dora. Dora, one of Freud's patients who was diagnosed with hysteria, became famous for losing her voice. Klement (2011:52) regards Dora as "a victim of her society" in which she was forced into a feminine role, characteristic of her time (1882-1945), that she did not want to conform to. According to Lacan (*in* Gherovici, 2014:64) hysteria has not disappeared but has merely changed shape in line with historical changes to the contextual timeframe in which women operate.

Lacan (*in* Gherovici, 2014:58) emphasises this point by referring to what he describes as the big Other¹⁹ (big referring to the capital O). Here Lacan (*in* Gherovici, 2014:58) calls attention to the authority position of the big *Other*, arguing that Hysteria is initiated between two figures in which the big *Other* has more power than the small *other*. The hysteric's identity is then determined according to the big *Other's* prescriptions.

The big Other is seemingly in a position of power, while the hysteric assumes a lesser position within the relationship (Gherovici, 2014:57). Using the feedback, she receives from the *Other*, she assumes her prescribed position within the Social Order. Bronfen (1998:333), Verhaeghe (1999:110) and Gherovici (2014:64) point out that due to social relationships, hysteric manifestations pose questions about women's identity or position within social structures. The hysterical woman, therefore, needs a framework to interpret her identity.

Lacan identified *Three Orders* in which he differentiated three registers of identification, namely: The Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real. He uses these Orders to explain the state of hysteria.²⁰ Lacan's *Symbolic Order* refers to controlling

¹⁸ Dora and Emmy von N, the pseudonyms of Ida Bauer and Fanny Moser, were two of Freud and Breuer's most well-known hysterical cases (Gay, 1989:246). Dora's hysteria was ascribed to her losing her voice. Emmy von N was Freud's first hysteria patient, also lost her voice after being accused, despite a lack of proof, of murdering her husband (Micale, 1993:273-275; Webster, 2004).

¹⁹ It is important to note that the *Other* refers to regulatory party or the one with power. This should not be confused with the exotic Other as formulated by Said (1978), Mason (1990;1998), Bhabha (1994), Spivak (1985) and Huggan (2001) from a postcolonial critical perspective.

²⁰ Although the relevance of the Real and the Imaginary is recognized in the presentation of hysteria, the concept of the *Symbolic Order* and specifically its regulatory function (Lacan, 1977:141), forms the core of his study of hysteria. For this study I subsequently only focus on the Symbolic Order.

social structures (Lacan, 1977:141). The *Symbolic Order* implies a hierarchy with a regulatory influence; moderating the hysteric's identity and place in social formations (Lacan, 1977:141; 1988:68, 326). According to Lacan (1977:148), it refers to the Order relating to "shared codes" as sustained by society and cultures. The *Symbolic Order* describes the socio-cultural aspects of power, including social conventions, regulations, institutions and norms. For this reason, it is associated with repression, hierarchy and regulation. The *Symbolic Order* refers to the practice in which people, subject to this Social Order identify themselves in connection with other individuals within this structure (Lacan, 1977:152, 153). In this Lacanian discourse, women become an indicator of distinction, in which they are defined in relation to what they are not; men (Lacan, 1977:153). Willette (2013) states that women are then simply "the relation of difference"; by becoming objectified, they are prevented from having "subjecthood". According to Bronfen (1998:8,19,20) and Verhaeghe (1999:25, 41), this aspect of the *Symbolic Order* or a regulatory social structure, in which women are inhibited stimulates the hysterical reaction.

The impact of the *Symbolic Order* in realising the socio-cultural position of power is also highlighted by Rose (1985:36) as well as Taylor (1987:89,98) who explain that the *Symbolic Order* is linked to identity interpretation. This identity will be established through conforming to the patriarchy, which constantly functions to exclude differences and to silence them (Rose, 1985:36; Taylor, 1987:89,98,163; Jay, 1994:351-2). It is important to note that "Other" should not necessarily only be understood as "men", but rather as the *Symbolic*. The *Symbolic Order* refers to any regulatory Order, not only to patriarchy.

In this *Order*, the hysteric is suppressed and trapped in a specific hierarchical position, where she no longer has a voice. This correlates with Lacan's (1977) theory which recognises contemporary forms of hysteria as socially constructed. It has been pointed out that his theory holds regulatory social structures under the theoretical concept of the *Symbolic Order* in which women are placed in a marginalized position in which they are suppressed and silenced. It has been found, based on Lacan (1977), that hysteria proposes a model of social position in which the question of identity formation is important to the behaviour of the hysteric. Lacan's concept of the *Symbolic Order* as a social realm is central to this chapter's argument regarding hysteria as a social condition that finds embodiment within regulatory social structures wherein the

hysteric has been silenced.

In the following sections, I investigate hysteria as a social condition. Following feminist scholars Hunter (1983), Irigaray (1985), Showalter (1985,1997), Evans (1991), McAfee (2004), Du Preez (2004), Jones (2012) and Devereux (2014), Scheffer (2017) and Farber (2017), hysteria is concerned with expanding limits and disrupting an oppressive Social Order. This serves as a means to disrupt the binaries that are realized within social structures, with the aim to fight for agency.

2.4 Hysteria: fighting for agency

In claiming agency, it is necessary for the hysteric to fight for her voice. This “fighting” manifests through her body and through nonverbal language, since the (silenced) hysteric’s complaints, frustrations and oppression cannot be verbalised (Hunter, 1983:467). This hysterical symptom is a protest against hierarchical orders in which claiming a symbolic voice acts as a tool against oppression.

Showalter (*in Gilman et al.*, 1993:315) states that the well-known Anna O’s (Figure 2.6) hysterical symptoms have been read by feminist critics as the embodiment of a female language. Anna O was treated for hearing problems, hallucinations as well as seizures. Although Orr-Andrewes (1987) speculates that Anna O’s symptoms could have been related to epilepsy brought on by drug dependence, her “symptoms” can also be interpreted, as Hunter (*in Gilman et al.*, 1993:316) argues, as a “discourse of femininity addressed to patriarchal thought.”

Figure 2.6: Photograph of Bertha Pappenheim known as Anna O. Photo taken around 1882. Photographer unknown, photograph from the archive of Sanatorium Bellevue (Cherry, 2019).



Farber (2017:5) points out that the hysteric communicates through the body. In this view, the hysteric adopts a position whence regulatory systems can be disrupted. Accordingly, feminists like Hunter (1983), Evans (1991), Showalter (1997), McAfee (2004), Du Preez (2004), Jones (2012) and Devereux (2014) view hysteria as a particular female language. In this alternative form of communication, the body is mainly used as the means to express what cannot be verbalised in conventional language or what cannot be properly stated. Irigaray (1985:142) also defines hysteria as a way of expression of women who are excluded from participation in culture. Therefore, hysteria becomes a way of speaking through the body and of declaring a form of agency.

Interpreted in this way, hysteria serves as a strategy against oppression and silencing. It also offers a necessary social alternative to women who feel deprived of social roles that comply with their desires (Smith-Rosenberg, 1986:197-216; Showalter *in* Gilman, 1993:303). Such a response to regulatory structures can reframe the hysteric as empowered. Irigaray (1985) claims that hysteria is a potentially empowering feminist strategy, because it gives the hysteric some degree of control versus accepting regulatory prescriptions. I agree with Hunter (1983), Evans (1991), Showalter (1997), McAfee (2004), Du Preez (2004), Jones (2012) and Devereux (2014) that the hysteric is compelled to make use of a subtle oppositional expression that takes the form of a body language of women as a purposeful strategy to give the hysteric a voice. This strategy against oppression is expressed by fighting for a voice.

This to me resonates with Black feminist scholars Shardé Davis (2018; 2014) and bell hooks's (2015; 1993; 1989) consideration of women's resistance strategies. hooks (1989:5) writes of a strategy that she describes as *talking back*. According to hooks (1989:5, 2015:27), "talking back" is a strategy that is triggered by oppression and subjugation to which black women, in particular, according to hooks (2015, 1993, 1989) "talk back" to break the cycle of silence and as a means to be heard and assert their agency (Davis, 2014, 2018). Davis (2018:301) writes:

Black women speak in the most appropriate voice to transform their ordinary lives into a space for survival. Black feminist literature has established that Black women have the agency to enact strategies of resistance by speaking with a powerful voice.

These Black feminist theorists maintain that speaking up in whichever way possible is an important strategy through which women seek to resist and overcome oppressive structures. Davis (2018:301) points out that black women specifically seek effective means of talking back in an attempt to convert their subordinated position or circumstances into a reality where they can gain agency.

Davis' notion of "talking back" relates to hysteria in the sense that women who are oppressed by social orders need to find alternative ways of speaking and being heard. For, as hooks (1992:116) writes, "...the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency." In this sense, the ideas of Davis (2018:303) and hooks (1992:116) correlate with the feminist interpretation of hysteria in which hysterical women talk back through their bodies to break the silence of oppression.

2.5 Fantasy and mimicry: The language of the hysteric

The body language of the hysteric can be associated with what Irigaray (1985:142) and Lacan (1999:85) describe as hysterical mimicry and fantasy. The hysteric fantasizes and mimics her desires, as the body is the only available outlet for those who are silenced by regulatory structures.

The hysteric's perception of herself and her own bodily awareness are important aspects of her way of talking. Lacan (1977:1,2) uses the term *Imaginary anatomy* to describe the imaginary image people form of their own bodies. This refers to the perception every woman has of herself and of how she fits into formations in society; the "space" she inhabits. Lacan (1977:4) defines the purpose of the *Imaginary anatomy* as connecting social reality with the hysteric's perception of herself. Her perception differs from how she is defined within social structures (Lacan, 1981:164-165). This difference serves to substantiate why she, in speaking through her body, needs to transform herself and she does this by employing fantasy and mimicry. The hysteric hereby develops her relationship with society and the social formations within it.

Seeing that she must use a language of the body, Lacan (1977:1-5) also refers to the hysteric's desire for compatibility between the imaginary and physical body. According to him (1999:85), the question arises as to which strategy the hysteric can use to achieve autonomy. Hysterical fantasy is produced due to the hysteric's desired

position in the social formation, one that differs from her actual position in a social structure (Lacan, 1999:85; 1991:146, 147). In other words, it is as if the hysteric is experiencing some form of dualism between the acceptance and questioning of the *Other's* desire, and "copes with it" using hysterical fantasy.

As any efforts by the hysteric to respond to the suppressive Order are inherently doomed, Zupančič (2006:163) declares that the hysteric chooses fantasy as an option to meet the requirements of the *Symbolic Order*, even while resisting them. Hereby the hysteric assumes responsibility for her own identity, rather than passively accepting the desire of the *Symbolic Order* (Van den Berg, 2016: 693-709; Fink, 1995:62,63; Žižek, 1997:147). For the hysteric, fantasy thereby serves as a strategy to preserve a subjective grasp of herself. In this way, as McGowan (2000:52) holds, fantasy can be seen as a tool to support an alternative social reality. It becomes a form of expression that compensates for what social reality denies and where desires remain unfulfilled (Gardiner, 2014:24; Scruton, 1986:22). This is how the hysteric, speaking through her body, challenges her social position.

This form of fantasy is realised through the ambivalences of mimicry. The main focus of the hysteric during her hysterical performances is to transform herself (Verhaeghe, 1999:174; Lacan, 2007:34). The hysteric mimes the roles attributed to her by the *Symbolic Order*. Accordingly, Bronfen (1998:40) states that when acting out these roles through mimicry, the hysteric seems to conform to the desire of the *Other* while retaining a position of agency. Irigaray (1985:76) explains the mimetic performance as follows:

One must assume the feminine role deliberately. To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to locate the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it.

Irigaray (1985:76) means that within the social structure in which the hysteric is silenced, she must fight for a voice. The hysteric does not give in to being reduced to how she is silenced, but uses mimicry as a way to speak out through the body. In his earliest formulation, Lacan (1977:450) defined hysterical acting out as a pantomime that stages a scene of desire.²¹ Szasz (1973:19), in agreement, views hysteria as a

²¹ This theme is developed in the Seminar L'Angoisse (Lacan, 2004:145-146) in which he treats hysterical behaviour and defines *acting out* as a symptom. *Acting out* can be seen as a pantomime played where questions of desire are acted out in the manner of a comedy.

social performance, interpreting the history of the condition as a pantomime – a dramatic entertainment in which performers express meaning through gestures of fantasy and mimicry.

I argue, in line with Irigaray (1985), Bronfen (1998) and Lacan (1999), that fighting for a voice after being silenced leads the hysteric to fantasy or mimicry, which, ironically, become strategies against oppression. This section aims to demonstrate that in the hysteric's response to or cope with reality, her perception of her desired position in the social formation differs her actual position in a social structure. This leads to hysterical fantasy where her main focus is to transform herself through symptomatology of the body. I argue, in agreement with Bronfen (1998), Lacan (1999) and Irigaray (1985), that in response to regulatory social structures, the hysteric uses the strategies of fantasy and mimicry as a voice to speak through the body.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter presented hysteria as an embodied reaction against oppression and as a means of speaking through the body in order to reclaim agency. It has been pointed out that hysteria does not conform to the popular perception and stereotypical images of distraught women. These representations are based on outdated theories of hysteria. Initially, there was strong support for the view that it was a pathological and thereafter a psychological condition. Regarding the pathological understanding, theories of hysteria were essentially centred on the uterus hypothesis that placed hysteria in direct relation to female reproductive organs. In the centuries that followed, this perspective was questioned and an alternative view of the pathological understanding was adapted by Charcot. He understood hysteria as a neurological problem and used photographs of female patients to diagnose them with the condition. He later noticed that they deliberately posed during so-called hysterical attacks, where after he abandoned his studies and disregarded the neurological etiology of hysteria. Just before his death, he recognized that hysteria was a psychological ailment. Freud, following Charcot, supported the psychological understanding of hysteria. He viewed hysteria as a product of repressed desires and trauma and interpreted hysterical symptoms as performances of traumatic memories. Freud and his partner Breuer's controversial views on hysteria were rejected and they later concluded that social conditions caused hysteria.

Since hysterical symptoms can be attributed to social circumstances, hysteria is no longer seen as a pathological or psychological condition but a social one. In this view, hysteria provides a social alternative to women who are oppressed by the *Symbolic Order*. The inability or lack of a voice to verbalise their desires necessitates alternative forms of communication that takes the form of hysteria. In this thesis, I followed Lacan's (1977) argument that the oppressive social circumstances that can contribute to hysteria are embodied within social structures. Within these regulatory social structures, there is a hierarchical order within which women are marginalized, oppressed and silenced.

I argued, following Hunter (1983), Evans (1991), Showalter (1997), McAfee (2004), Du Preez (2004), Jones (2012) and Devereux (2014), that in fighting for a voice, hysteria serves as a strategy against oppression. It has been pointed out that rejected desires, conflicts about gender roles, denied manners of expression and lack of support from the *Symbolic* system, justify the hysteric's need to fight for a voice. The purpose of hysterical symptoms is, therefore, to create equilibrium between the *Symbolic* signifier and the hysteric as signified. This is done using a subtle oppositional expression, a bodily language that does not conform to the social structure's conventional "language". This alternative language is embodied in the hysterical strategies of fantasy and mimicry, by which the hysteric performs fantasies and mimics desired roles. Using hysterical strategies, the hysteric has the opportunity to transform herself. Hysteria thus becomes a voice for the voiceless and a bodily strategy against oppression.

I conclude that the response to the subversive social structure is by means of non-verbal communication. This is because the hysteric's perception about how she presents her body differs from how she is defined within social structures.

Hysteria, initially considered a disease, hereby becomes an instrument of agency. It is used deliberately or instinctively as a coping mechanism or strategy to assert oneself in challenging circumstances and as an alternative means of communication. Since hysteria arises as a strategy against oppressive and social hierarchies, the next chapter of this dissertation presents an investigation into how Sophie as a visual representation of a domestic worker can be contextualised within a hierarchical and

oppressive social structure. I also investigate the symbolism of the domestic worker's uniform that serves as visual signifier of the exploitation that domestic workers experience in South Africa.

CHAPTER THREE

SOPHIE: THE MAID

I'm looking at disempowerment of black women. My work is shaped by our historical past ... My work deals with the section of women in society that is often off-centre stage, namely maids (Sibande *in* Stielau, 2013).

3.1 Introduction

Sibande created the fictional character Sophie visually to address the disempowerment of domestic workers in South Africa. Sibande's work is informed by unequal power relationships in South Africa and she uses Sophie as the symbolic representation of inequality due to hierarchies imposed upon domestic workers (Sibande *in* Sesay, 2017). According to Sibande (*in* Smith, 2016:121), this inequality is linked to systems of domination that render the racialized, gendered and classed bodies of black women voiceless. To contextualize Sophie as the symbolic representation of voiceless domestic workers, I follow the arguments of Gaitskell *et al.* (1983) in *Class, Race and Gender: Domestic Workers in South Africa* who outline the class, race and gendered position of domestic work in South Africa.

In this chapter, I argue that Sophie, as a symbolic representation of a domestic worker, visually symbolises the oppression that is brought about by racial, class and gender structures. I do this, first, by focussing on how Sibande envisions this entrapment in the digital print piece *Caught in the Rapture* (2009). In this artwork, Sophie is portrayed as "trapped" in a web she cannot escape. This web consists of different threads that are bound together to entangle her. Oppressive race, gender and class structures can be regarded as threads working together to symbolically restrict Sophie within a hierarchical structure. In this sense, Sophie is "caught in the structure".

Second, I consider the domestic worker's uniform. I argue in accordance with Sibande (*in* Stielau, 2013) that Sophie's uniform functions as a powerful signifier of the legacies of inequality and subjection that persist in the field of domestic labour. In this chapter, I point out how the domestic worker's uniform becomes a visual manifestation of the madam/maid dichotomy in which the one wearing the uniform has a subordinate status. The uniform serves as a marker of distinction and difference locating the worker

into the persona of “domestic worker”. The dress code of the domestic worker, therefore, signifies her entrapment.

3.2 *Caught in the Rapture*; caught in the structure

How a domestic worker is subjugated by imposed constraints is very literally visualised in the installation *Caught in the Rapture* (2009) (Figure 3.1). Herein, a black spider web stretches out on a white background. Sophie is positioned in the centre with outstretched arms pushing against the web. *Caught in the Rapture* highlights Sophie as being trapped (caught) within a social structure. The spider web signals this fact by both catching and keeping her in that one position. Sophie represents helplessness and powerlessness as she is caught in the spider web and pushes against it, aiming to escape but unable to do so. Benson (2017) describes how the web entraps her, while Sophie’s head is turned away from the web in a defiant attitude. According to him (2017), the web acts as a trap that holds her hostage whilst “casting shadows onto the white wall”. Sophie is dressed in a blue Victorian-like gown. The Victorian reference can be seen in the blue puffed sleeves, length and frills of the dress. The domestic uniform reference can be seen in the apron around her waist. The digital print of *Caught in the Rapture* forms part of the *Long Live the Dead Queen* series, in which Sibande explores the predicament of black women in South Africa and their struggle against a limiting social reality. According to Benson (2017), this work represents the immobility that domestic workers face in South Africa.



Figure 3.1: Mary Sibande, *Caught in the Rapture*, 2009. Digital print (Bidouzo-Coudray, 2014).

The uncomfortable relationship that South Africans have with domestic work is described in South African scholar Ena Jansen’s (2019) book, *Like Family: Domestic*

Workers in South African History and Literature. Jansen (2019) comments on the disempowered position in which domestic workers find themselves in the restricted space of the white household. She (2019) argues that black women have worked in white women's houses throughout South Africa's history, and that the white domestic space can therefore be seen as a landscape of inequality. In her book, Jansen (2019) asserts that practically all South Africans are familiar with domestic labour: either by the presence of the worker in the house or by having a mother, or family member, who works in a household for others. According to her (2019), the white (privileged) household usually includes a black worker doing domestic work. Domestic work can be regarded as common practice in South Africa that also enforces a (racial) hierarchy between the domestic worker and the employer. Jansen (2019) states that domestic work occurs in a space that she describes as a "frontier" zone. By frontier she means that the white household is a stressful and unsettling space where the maid and madam interact. The term "frontier" expresses the negotiation that flows from power imbalances within this unsettling space (Coetzee, 2020; Van Zyl, 2019).²² According to Cock (1980), who as mentioned in Chapter One is a prominent scholar of domestic work in South Africa, domestic work occurs in what could be considered a private space. This space becomes the backdrop for the exploitative employment relationship that often exists between the madam and the maid. The spider web in *Caught in the Rapture* is symbolic of this "space" where domestic work occurs. "Rapture", meaning pleasure or happiness, possibly refers to the madam's house in which the employer enjoys the leisure of having a domestic worker. Sophie is, in this sense, seemingly caught in the madam's rapture. To understand the complexity of Sophie's predicament, as being caught in this space, Von Carnap (2017:17) argues that it is important to consider the construction of social structures as parameters for the way that Sophie, as a visual representation of a domestic worker, has been marginalized within society.

To Corrigan (2010, 2015), *Caught in the Rapture* is much more than a piece that highlights and exposes the experiences of domestic workers in South Africa. It also

²² In *Like Family*, Jansen (2019:267), as a demonstration of the negotiation between madam and maid, introduces domestic workers as "go-between figures between white and black, rich and poor, coloniser and colonised, urban and rural; as connectors, intermediaries, pivotal points of contact, "outsiders within" operating "at the crossroads of everything that has to do with difference in South Africa".

represents Sophie's attempt to escape from current realities of domestic work. According to Sibande (2010) "Sophie exists within this created environment, her identity is intrinsically bound by these markers that she is a maid, that her imagination is her escape". For Sophie, this fictive "reality" is centred around her job as a domestic worker and the space in which she has been bounded and from which she wants to escape. The web is one that Sibande constructs both physically and symbolically: physically as a spider's web in which Sophie is represented as caught, but which also symbolically implies the oppression of a domestic worker. The captivating style of Sibande's work along with her views on race, gender and class, serve as a foundation for the analysis of *Caught in the Rapture*. According to Benson (2017) even though it appears as a piece focusing solely on Sophie's position in a spider's web, there is more beneath the surface. This artwork represents the limited options available to domestic workers in a hierarchical social structure.

Most South African domestic workers experience exploitation by their generally (white) female employers.²³ Cock (1981, 2011), Cohen (1991), Bozzoli (1991) Clark (2002) and Mkandawaire-Valhmu *et al.* (2009, 2010) write of domestic work as an exploitative occupation, noting the racial, class and gender inequalities amongst employers and domestic workers. Gaitskell and her co-authors' (1983) in *Class, Race and Gender: Domestic Workers in South Africa* provide an overview of how race, class and gender distinctions have shaped the character of domestic work in South Africa. They (1983:89) conclude that domestic work intensifies the oppressive and unequal reality of many black women. Cock (1980:5) highlights the classist, racist and sexist hegemonies in South Africa when she states that:

Domestic workers are among the most exploited groups in a society marked by extreme inequality. They are situated at the convergence of three lines along which social inequality is generated – class, race and sex.

According to Haskin and Lowrie (2015:2), the oppression that domestic workers experience happens in the white household – the workplace – in a dual manner: first, it is in the space of the white household where the hierarchy of black *maids* versus

²³ According to Ally (*in* Turshen, 2010:37, 38), the domestic work relationship does not only exist between a black worker and a white employer, but also between, for example, black workers and black employers. This study mainly focuses on the black/white relationship within domestic work.

white *madams*²⁴ is maintained and, second, these workers are exploited by the nature of the work they do. In this sense, the nature of domestic work comes down to the cooking and cleaning by a black woman in a predominantly white household. By this means, the hierarchy between white employers and black employees is maintained (Haskin & Lowrie, 2015:2).

According to Cock (1989), the unequal power relationship within the home, encapsulates the characteristics of social inequality in South Africa (cf. Singer, 2012:13; Saffery-Rowe, 2014:3). In other words, the employer-worker relationship acts as the vessel for class, race and gender issues in society. Ally (*in* Jansen, 2019) points out that several systems have been put in place to improve the situation of domestic workers, but that this is contradicted in practice. She (*in* Jansen, 2019) refers to a range of regulations, including a compulsory contract of employment, a national minimum wage and unemployment insurance (Act, No 75 of 1997).²⁵ Jansen's (2019) research has exposed, however, that these actions have failed to transform the institution of domestic work as they are rarely practiced. As such, domestic workers remain exposed to and oppressed by often unfair labour practices.

In South Africa, according to Cock (1989), Ally (2006:12; 2009:90), Donald and Mahlatji (2012), Haskin and Lowrie (2015:46), Gaitskell *et al.* (1983:86-89) and Jansen (2019), domestic workers experience their work as intertwined with historical hierarchies that are still maintained in society. In the 1980s, Gaitskell *et al.* (1983) analysed domestic work to understand how domestic workers (especially black women) are oppressed in three ways: as black, as women, and as workers (see also Turshen, 2010:35). This threefold oppression does not occur individually, but in an "overlapping" or intersectional manner (Hull *et al.*, 1982:7; Belkhir & Barnett, 2001; Sasha, 2018; Gaitskell *et al.*, 1983:86). Hull, Scott and Smith (1982:6) refer to this as the "simultaneity of oppression". For this reason, the subjugation of black female

²⁴ The unequal power relationship between the madam and the maid also occurs within employers' use of maternalism to control domestic workers (King, 2007; Ally, 2010; Galvaan *et al.*, 2015). According to King (2007:1), the maid/madam relationship of domestic work, is a relationship where one woman has material authority over another woman (see Moras, 2013:248). Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007:207-209) argues that the exploitive nature of maternalism is also seen in the employer who treats the employee as a child, by giving advice and charity, and in return the employer expects favours (such as unpaid work) in exchange from the employee.

²⁵ The Basic Conditions of Employment (Act 75 of 1997) regulates the rights and responsibilities of both the employer and employee.

domestic workers materialises intersectionally²⁶ between the social structures of race, gender and class. In this section, I take such intersectionality as point of departure. However, as Gaitskell *et al.* (1983:86) warn in the consideration of the impact of gender, race and class on the domestic worker, one needs to avoid both the tendency to fix these categories and to collapse them into each other so that their unique realities go unnoticed. Therefore, although intersectionality is acknowledged, I consider race, class and gender separately.

3.2.1 The class character of domestic work

Tolla (2013) in his study *Black Women's Experiences of Domestic Work* interviewed several domestic workers on their experience of the nature of their work. One domestic worker, Sylvia (*in* Tolla, 2013:28) highlights the class²⁷ character of domestic work: "All my life I have been a domestic worker, I will never leave this job because I am not educated." Domestic workers like Sylvia often regard their limited educational opportunities as the grounds for why they became and remain domestic workers. Tolla (2013:4) notes that domestic work is regarded as informal employment that is usually done by previously disadvantaged women who did not have the privilege of sufficient education. Bosch and McLeod (2015:135) further state that domestic work is mostly done by uneducated black women from impoverished backgrounds and who have a lack of opportunities to escape their current reality and increase their social position. It is because domestic work is considered unskilled labour done by uneducated people, that domestic workers has been unfairly stigmatised as people with a "lower" social status (Gaitskell *et al.*, 1983:86; Dinat & Pederby, 2007:13; Ally, 2008; Du Toit, 2010; Seepamore, 2016:3).

²⁶ Black feminist, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) argues that the oppression that black women experience cannot be encapsulated only based on their race or gender. She (1989:139) formulated the term "intersectionality" to describe how black women are oppressed, simultaneously based on the race, gender and class. According to her (1989:139) race, gender and class are co-dependent on each other and intersect, to truly determine the identity of black women, as well as the discrimination that they experience. Crenshaw (1989:140) coin different types of intersectionality, of which one is structural intersectionality. Crenshaw (1989:140) describes how structural intersectionality refers to how social structures of race, class and gender "interlock" to oppress black women.

²⁷ According to Giddens (2000), class refers to a social status in which a group of people share the same status. He (2000) describes how shared economic resources determine the specific class a group would belong to. This is particularly seen in the lifestyle of an individual or group, such as the level of education, type of career or house one lives in (Giddens, 2000). In this sense, class can be interpreted as people who share the same social rank and have common lifestyle characteristics.

Gaitskell *et al.* (1983:86) address the social structure of class within domestic work (cf. *in* Turshen, 2010:36; Dinat & Pederby, 2007). They (1983:86) argue that domestic service is the means by which many black women in South Africa obtain their wages and therefore class is an important “nexus” of the triple oppression within domestic work. Sibande (*in* Von Carnap, 2017) expresses this idea when she talks about her matrilineage:

[my] mother, she could not become whatever she wanted to be, because of her colour and her background. My grandmother wanted to be a nurse, but she could not.

Sibande continues to link her maternal line’s limited opportunities to systems of oppression and inequality in South Africa. As mentioned in Chapter One, both her mother and grandmother became domestic workers - not out of choice, but out of necessity.

Turshen (2010:36) argues that social relations, especially the class and power differentials between the “madam and maid”, promote the class character of domestic work. Jansen (2019) asserts that domestic workers are the observers of both privilege and poverty. Domestic workers are, according to her (2019), “connectors between the city, townships and rural areas and between richer and poorer South Africans”. Jansen argues that domestic workers work in what could be considered privileged circumstances, since they are routinely confronted with what they do not have. In line with Jansen (2019), Ally (2006:11) and Fish (2009:124-125) I state that female domestic workers are exposed to different – often opposite – class privileges because of the inequalities they are confronted with.

However, paid domestic service does not only reflect social and class inequalities. According to Sanjek and Colen (1990:4), the domestic work sector also acts as an important factor in creating the class difference within race hierarchies and distinctions. Paid domestic workers make it possible for their employers to accumulate other forms of capital which in turn contributes to race and class distinctions (Ally, 2006:38, 40; *in* Haskins & Lowrie, 2015:48; Sanjek & Colen, 1990:5).

3.2.2 Domestic work as a gendered institution

The structure in which domestic workers are trapped in is further strengthened by the gendered character of domestic work. Sibande (*in* Parson, 2016) points out that domestic work often is often the only employment option for many black women.

When you look at the history of South Africa, women didn't have a choice. They were discriminated against, firstly because they were women, and secondly because they were black.

Because domestic work “have been assumed to be part of the women’s sphere”, domestic work is highly gendered (Gaitskell *in* Turshen, 2010:36, 37). Moreover, domestic workers are supervised and managed by white women. Gaitskell *et al.* (1983:88) argues that, since both parties are women, the assumptions that domestic work is “women’s work” and the household is “women's domain” are somehow justified (see also Cock 1980:266; Gaitskell *in* Turshen, 2010:36, 37; McClintock, 2013:35). As Gaitskell *et al.* (1983:88) note, “when African [black] women perform domestic work, it resonates completely with the kind of work they “ought” to be doing as women”. In other words, Gaitskell *et al.* (1983:88) suggest that domestic work is unfairly identified as “appropriate” work for black women.

Sibande (*in* Parson, 2016) emphasises the historical influence of the gender component that perpetuates the contemporary understanding of domestic workers' current circumstances within the social structures of society. When investigating how black women ultimately became the people working in this sector, the number of black women working in white households during apartheid, must be considered. In the mid-20th century, according to Cock (1980:37) and Turshen (2010:38), apartheid laws²⁸ limited black women to work in the domestic sector. The domestic work sector can accordingly be regarded as a gendered institution. According to Ntombela (2012:132), domestic work “became the feminised sector that it remains” in present-day South Africa. Ntombela's (2012:132) view is in line with the stereotypical view that women's work is relegated to the household and, as such, is emblematic of women's gendered subordination (Friedan, 1963:47; Tolla, 2013:4). By the 20st century, according to Ally (*in* Haskins & Lowrie, 2015:48), white women in South Africa had gained access to paid work outside the home giving them more freedom in the public sphere. Ally

²⁸ Laws such as *The Bantu Labour Act*, No 67 of 1964 (Sash, 1974:2). Worden (1995:109) states that such laws, “prohibited Africans from seeking work in towns or employers from taking them on unless they were channelled through the state labour bureaux”.

(2015:47) argues that white women had more opportunities, specifically in the workspace, due to racial and class privileges. However, paid black domestic workers did not have this advantage, because as Ally (*in* Haskin & Lowrie, 2015:48) argues, while white women had opportunities to move beyond the household, black female domestic workers replaced them in the home. As such, the lack of opportunities for black women maintained the gendered character of domestic work. The gender inequality between black and white women, as Haskin and Lowrie (2015:48) and Settles *et al.* (2008: 454) describe, was further intensified by race and class. As a result, gender inequality, as an integral component of domestic work, promotes the oppressiveness of this occupation.

3.2.3 The race character of domestic work

The importance of racial difference in the already asymmetrical relationship between domestic workers and their employers is evident when studying Stiell and England's *Domestic Distinctions: constructing difference among paid domestic workers* (1997). One of their research participants, Felicity (*in* Stiell & England, 1997:352), spoke out about the racism that haunts domestic work in South Africa:

Sometimes when they treat you badly, it's because you're black, and they really just don't have any respect for you as a human being. But it's also because they pay you to be in their house that makes it even worse, you become nothing in their eyes.

Felicity (*in* Stiell & England, 1997:352) highlights that racism is part of her daily experience at her job. Gaitskell *et al.* (1983:88) also see the domestic sector as raced. "Under colonialism generally," they write, "servile status is the exclusive preserve of the colonised, and where masters are white, servants are black." They (1983:88) regard domestic work as the "result of the colonised being seen as servile to the needs of the colonial power(s)". Domestic work is performed by previously disadvantaged or underprivileged groups: migrants, ethnic minorities and black people. As Bosch and McLeod (2015:135) note, the raced "maid/madam" relationship acts as a domain for confrontation that encapsulates race issues in contemporary South Africa. In this sense, the white madam exercises power over the black worker and so the sector of domestic work began to wrongly prioritize white people. As Jansen (2019) states, domestic work can impose a (racial) hierarchy between the black domestic worker and

the white employer (cf. Cock, 1981; Hrabovsky, 2013:65, 85; McClintock, 2015:5; Bosch & McLeod, 2015:135; Smith, 2019).

Seen within the framework of structural racism, Turshen (2010:39, 40) describes how the demand for domestic workers amongst white people is due to the assumption that domestic work is a vital component of white households across the socio-economic spectrum. Domestic work thus serves as a “consumer entity” to serve the white household (Turshen, 2010:40). Ally (2006:10) adds that in present-day South Africa the domestic work sector has remained largely continuous after the end of apartheid. Domestic service, for Ally (*in* Haskins & Lowrie, 2015:58), is a “contact zone” of racialized intimacy.²⁹ Jansen (2019) maintains that white families employing black women uphold unequal power relationships that enforce a master/slave narrative. This leads to the assumption “by even the youngest white child that black hands do the dirty work”. She (2019) adds that black women working for white families is “a reminder of the ongoing predicament of black women in South Africa”.

From the above discussion of domestic work as an institution that serves to trap domestic workers, it is clear that domestic workers embody unresolved classed, gendered and racialized intimacies in South Africa (*in* Haskins and Lowrie, 2015:59, 60). This entrapped situation of domestic workers is represented in *Caught in the Rapture* (Figure 3.1), which highlights aspects of being caught within the predicament of social structures. According to Benson (2017), the web in *Caught in the Rapture* represents the immobility that domestic workers face in South Africa. The web also metaphorical positions Sophie as a victim of societal views based on her gender, race and class. As such, Benson (2017) argues that *Caught in the Rapture* ultimately expresses the confined position of Sophie as a representation of a domestic worker.

Following Gaitskell *et al.* (1983), Cock (1980), Ally (2006, 2009, 2015) and Haskin and Lowrie (2015), I investigated how domestic workers are caught in a social structure of class, gender and race in which they are marginalized to an extent where they become vulnerable. Sophie's uniform is also a direct indication of the subjugation experienced

²⁹ Ally's (*in* Haskins & Lowrie, 2015:58) argument is based on Pratt (1992). For Pratt (1992:4) the “contact zone” refers to a social space where domestic workers and their employers interact such as the white household.

by domestic workers. In the next section I consider how Sophie's blue uniform acts as a symbol of her vulnerability.

3.3 Dressing the maid: "the one in the uniform"

South African domestic workers are often recognisable by the uniform they wear. In a privileged space, as de Casanova (2013:575) writes, "she's the one wearing the uniform." Sibande (*in* Mabandu, 2009) reiterates that Sophie wears a blue gown and apron to denote her social positioning as a domestic worker.

According to Ally (2015:45), however, Sophie is not portrayed wearing a stereotypical maid's uniform. She is wearing a uniform that is hybridised with a Victorian-inspired dress. Given that Sophie's uniform is merged with a Victorian dress that symbolically refers to a madam, Von Carnap (2017:77) describes how Sophie is presented as a "maid-cum-madam". The iconography of her attire is contradictory, referencing the merging of inferiority and superiority between the employee and employer. She (2017:77) states that the "maid versus the madam" negotiation, even if only within the employee-employer relationship, is in a hegemonic relationship between subservience and authority. Her dress referencing the negotiation between maid and madam as a "space of contestation" is also where the distinctiveness and entrapment of domestic workers within structures are embodied. Although Sophie is "the one wearing the uniform" and also *not* wearing the uniform (in the sense that the ambivalence of her dresses signals both the maid and the madam), this section explores how Sophie's uniform-dress signifies her lack of autonomy, but is also used as a tool to assert her agency.

Sophie's attire will first be considered in line with the general association and use of the maid's uniform in South Africa. Hereafter, the meaning that Sibande attaches to the uniform, through Sophie, will be highlighted. Specific reference will be made to the hybrid nature of Sophie's attire.

Domestic workers in South Africa often wear a distinctive uniform which, although serving to protect the worker's clothing, also suppresses workers' individuality and establishes a hierarchy between an employer and an employee (Crane, 2000:87-88). The uniform thus aligns the domestic worker with a certain social position, while excluding her from another. As discussed by Ngqakayi (1991) in *Subjectivity in the*

“Maid/Madam” relationship and its effects on the occupational child care-giving functions of the domestic worker, clothing is a status symbol. Accordingly, Craik (2007:37) states that the uniform entails a combination of signifiers that establishes the perimeters of acceptable social performance within a certain context. These perimeters exert a form of social control over those wearing the uniform, who have to comply with certain expectations. When wearing domestic uniforms in public, Allman (2004:1) argues that the workers are faced with social inscriptions wherein their positions within hierarchical relationships become evident. Also, Gaitskell *et al.* (1983:60) and Craik (2007:41) state that the domestic worker’s uniform serves as a material manifestation of her position within the social order. The uniform thereby becomes a visual demonstration of the master/servant, black/white, underprivileged/privileged dichotomy. Therefore, by wearing the uniform, Crous (2018) argues, the maid is defined by the uniform’s symbolic limits. The uniform not only identifies a domestic worker as part of a particular group, but also acts a marker of distinction and difference. Following de Casanova (2013:563), the dress reproduces “class inequalities in, on, and through bodies and becoming a source of conflict or approbation in interactions between people of different classes”. Uniforms thus serve as references to inequality embodied in the regulatory social structures in which domestic workers are bounded. De Casanova (2013:562, 575) argues that the uniform can reproduce or challenge class inequality by exposing the social differences between the worker and employer. To enter the persona of being the maid, it is expected of a domestic worker to remove indicators of her individuality (Malatjie, 2011:24-27). As Mokoena (2010) notes:

[for] the maid to do her work she has to strip herself of all accessories and clothes that make her unique. She has to become nondescript, inconspicuous, non-threatening. For her to perform her duties, she has to submit to the discipline of sameness.

Her uniqueness has to be “hidden” under the uniform of a domestic worker. By dressing in a domestic worker’s uniform and removing her identity, Von Carnap (2017:61) states that she becomes suitable for working in the madam’s house. Accordingly, the uniform acts as a medium that transforms black women into maids.

The stigma attached to the domestic worker’s uniform is confirmed by study done by Ntombela in 2012. In this study, domestic workers were outspoken about the

disempowering impact of the uniform. To Ntombela (2012:154), it seems clear that the domestic worker's uniform has a significant impact on a domestic worker's identity within society. In her article *Do clothes make a wo(man)?*, Ntombela (2012) emphasizes the significance of the domestic worker's dress on the oppressed body and how the body relates to the social world. Domestic workers have preconceived ideas about the wearing of a uniform (Ntombela, 2012:141). The uniform puts them in an "other place" than that of the employer, where they are looked down upon, as evidenced by interviews with domestic workers in Ntombela's study (2012). They regard the uniform as confirming their low social positioning by embodying the role of "the help" (Craik, 2007:39). De Casanova (2013:575) observes that one domestic worker calls the uniform a "humiliation and a piece of trash" while another labels uniforms as "sad dresses". Ntombela's (2012:143) interviews reveal the domestic worker's sentiments that their uniforms alter people's perception of them because they are "maids" working in other people's households.

In line with Corrigan's (2015) statement that Sibande uses Sophie's dress as a signifier of a social environment, Kawamura (2006:25) stresses that clothing can also give consumers the opportunity to gain a social status that surpasses their actual status (cf. Goncalves, 2010:10). Sibande uses Sophie's dress both to indicate her position/identity in relation to the maid-madam dichotomy, but she also questions or challenges her social positioning within society.

Von Carnap (2017:65) asserts that Sophie's blue uniform places her within the norm of domestic work. Maurice and Dodd (2014:5) notice that Sibande seems to use blue symbolically to reference domestic servitude, as she (2010) associates blue with domestic labour (see Figure 3.2). This specific blue is associated with labourers and domestic workers in South Africa (Corrigan, 2015:151). Sibande (*in* Von Carnap, 2017:77) confirms the blue uniform as a signifier for tangible social fault lines of binaries around race and power.



Figure 3.2: Mary Sibande, *They Don't Make Them Like They Used To*, 2008. Digital print (Shinners, 2016).

Sophie's outfit is used to introduce her – dressed in her Victorian “madam” dress cum “maids” uniform - in a social positioning that, as Goncalves (2010:10) and Von Carnap (2017:77) state, surpasses her social positioning as a domestic worker. This, to me, instantaneously becomes a sort of confrontation with the privileged madam. However, before this sartorial confrontation can be addressed, it is necessary to emphasize the hybrid nature of Sophie's attire.

As mentioned earlier, Sophie's multi-layered dress is seen as a hybrid of a maid's uniform (see Figure 3.3) and Victorian clothing (see Figure 3.4). Through the unconventional dressing of the maid, by merging a domestic worker and the madam in a hybrid representation, the difference between them is confronted and exposed. By means of the hybrid dress, Sibande visualises Sophie in a privileged circumstance, usually associated with the madam (see Figure 3.5).



Figure 3.3: Mbokazi, S. *Domestic worker* Nomathemba Daka doing chores (Joss, 2019).



Figure 3.4: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. *Victorian dress from the "Fine Art of Costume" exhibition. 1955* (The Met, 2019).

When presenting Sophie as a madam-maid hybrid, she uses different visual techniques such as colour, stylistic details, extravagant depictions and a combination of symbols of aristocracy and servitude. Sibande uses the royal blue dress which is ironically associated with royal colours as well as domestic servitude. However, this royal blue³⁰ colour also has a social elevating motif. Royal blue represents superiority (Taggart, 2018). She thus uses the colour as a signifier of servitude, while in an English context it refers to superiority and power. The use of royal blue for Sophie's uniform refers to her domestic attributes as well as her elevation as a symbolic madam. Sibande also uses stylistic details such as the elaborateness and decadence of the dress itself, to give Sophie a sense of power. First, to epitomise this power through Sophie's dress, Sibande references Victorian aristocracy. This is visible in the tulle, puffed and capped sleeves, brocade lace, and immense protruding skirts (Figure 3.5). Simultaneously, Sibande exaggerates the domestic worker elements. Corrigan (2010) states that this is supported by the larger and longer apron throughout *Long Live the Dead Queen*. She (2015) argues that these elements all play a part to transform

³⁰ The "royal" in royal blue refers to the origin of the colour. This colour was created in England for a dress to be worn by Queen Charlotte (1744-1818). The colour is also used in the British Union Jack (Taggart, 2018).

Sophie from a maid to a symbolic madam. In the hybrid outfit, Sibande combines symbols of “nobility” and “servitude”. Hereby Sibande challenges, according to Corrigan (2015:155), the social norms that maintain the hierarchy between the maid and madam.

Mabandu (2009) points to the social significance of Sophie’s hybrid dress. The historical perspective regarding the use of Victorian elements is used to comment on social power, privilege and racial hierarchies. According to Dodd (2014:89; 2010:470-471) the dress realizes as a reminder of Victorianism, with the result that “Sophie’s dress serves to evoke the racial hierarchies which originated during the colonial period”. Merewether (2006:10) explains how the Victorian costume acts as a means to place the colonizer, white dominance, or madam on the one side, versus the colonized, subordinate black, maid on the other. Dodd (2010:470,471) also confirms that in Sophie’s various iterations, the elaborate appearance of Victorian costumes suggests privilege. Corrigan (2015:151,152) affirms that the Victorian dress, in calling to mind the colonial authority, signifies the madam of the house. Brown (2011:77) states it appropriately when she says: “Sibande inverts the social power indexed by a Victorian costume by reconfiguring it as a domestic worker’s uniform.” Corrigan’s (2015:151,152) viewpoint is based on those of Dodd (2010:470) and Brown (2011:77) who argue that the merging of Sophie’s dress evokes the colonial history of South Africa in which domestic work originated from. Within these racial hierarchies, the black woman is marginalized in an unprivileged position towards the white employer (hooks, 1992:167; Hrabovsky, 2013:65,85; Smith, 2019). Regarding Dodd’s point, Sophie’s dress signifies the inequalities between the madam and maid.

Sibande (*in* Von Carnap, 2017) states that when she decided on the “kind of garment” for the character Sophie, she used Victorian colonialism as a visual trigger because “this is the reason why these people became maids. The white people who came to Africa and colonised the natives turned them into slaves”. Sibande thus works from the perspective that colonialism created racial and social hierarchies within its framing of privilege and authority.³¹ Sophie’s dress thus references colonial racial hierarchies as well as the maid-madam-negotiation within which domestic workers are at present still caught in. Dodd (2014:176) reaffirms the continuous impact of the colonial legacy

³¹ According to McKaiser (2011:5) *whiteness* prescribes a position of power brought about by privilege.

in South African social realities. By employing a Victorian dress, Sophie's hybridized dress references racial and power binaries from the Victorian legacy that still surface today.

The hybrid nature of Sophie's uniform serves to elevate Sophie from the subordinate position she holds to the madam (Ginsberg, 2011:143). The black domestic worker, as pointed out, is marginalized in a power relation to her white madam. Brown (2011:77) states that the reconfiguration of the domestic worker's uniform problematizes the relationship between "maid and madam". Sophie's "uplifted" uniform works against the stereotypical view of the uniform as a symbol of subordination to the madam. By transforming the maid's uniform into the madam's dress, Sibande elevates Sophie, not to place her in the madam's position, but to challenge the madam's privileged position. She does this, not to *be* the madam, but rather to become the symbolic madam – a figure who is not subjected. As such, she challenges and confronts the narrative of whiteness.³²

Sibande uses the uniform as a tool to transform the domestic worker and as Corrigan (2015) argues, to *(re)define* and *(re)claim* a higher social positioning for domestic workers (see also Gondola 1999:26). Therefore, the hybrid dress is a form of *sartorial* excess, as Corrigan (2015) calls it, to offer Sophie, as a black domestic worker the capacity to "redefine" her position. In other words, through the uniform, Sibande offers Sophie as a black domestic worker the opportunity to "reclaim" her social mobility from a white dominating class. At the same time Sophie still wears an apron and *doek*. Sophie becomes the madam of her own domain.

Another perspective is that of Veblen (2013:167), who argues that the design of Sophie's uniform is not only unpractical for domestic work, but also for living in general. Sophie's exaggerated dress, because of its length and large sleeves, would certainly prevent her from doing housework. The uniform consists of an "elaborate show of unnecessary expensiveness" such as the lace used in the dress. As such, Sophie's uniform references a leisure class characteristic of the madam's position. Adding to this, Magubane (2004:162) and Corrigan (2015:150) state that the pursuit of leisure

³² In this context, the white madam is in a position of privilege. The *whiteness* of the madam, as McKaiser (2011:5) refers to it, connotes a social status in which she occupies a position associated with privilege (cf. Lopez, 2005:2,5; McKaiser, 2011:5).

implies that the worker is not defined within a hegemonic relationship as the worker becomes the madam.

Sibande (*in* von Carnap, 2017:45) comments on how Sophie's modified uniform blurs the boundaries between her and the madam ensuring that she – like the madam – cannot do housework:

Imagine if a helper would to wear that kind of big dress, no one would be able to do anything. So she [Sophie] is rejecting what she is supposed to do but at the same time she is doing what she is supposed to be doing because the headscarf is there, the apron is there.

Yet the components of the domestic uniform are still there to show that she does not necessarily want to be the madam, but merely wants to challenge the disempowered position of the maid.

Despite Sophie becoming a symbolic madam, Sibande (*in* von Carnap, 2017:29) explains that Sophie “knows” her boundaries and that is why the maid's uniform with the apron and headscarf is part of her attire. The aim is to not only to remind the viewer that they are still looking at a domestic worker but also to proclaim Sophie's heritage as something to be proud of. In this way, Sibande addresses the voicelessness of black bodies shaped by South Africa's unequal past and present.

3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I considered how Sibande's Sophie visually and symbolically represents inequality due to power hierarchies imposed upon domestic workers. These hierarchies manifest in the hegemonic power systems in which Sophie is caught. This power system is quite literally visualised in the digital print *Caught in the Rapture*. In this artwork, Sibande comments on the entrapment of black women by portraying Sophie as trapped in a spider web, trying to escape. By placing Sophie as caught in a spider web, she becomes a representation of a trapped domestic worker.

The aim of the analyses of *Caught in the Rapture* was to consider Sibande's visualisation of domestic workers as marginalised within a social structure of race, class and gender. Sophie becomes a visual representation of the race, class and gender hierarchies between “madams and maids” in which domestic workers are placed in the subordinate position. As a result of this triple marginalization, I argue,

following Gaitskell *et al.* (1983) Cock (1980), Ally (2006,2009,2015) and Haskin and Lowrie (2015) that domestic workers are especially vulnerable.

The class differences between “madam and maid” lead to domestic work being regarded as work done by women who are associated with a lower social class. The gendered aspect of domestic work is attributed to it by being mostly done by women and is usually done in the household that is stereotypically regarded as a “woman’s domain”. Therefore, domestic work comes down to what women “ought to be doing”. The racial aspect of domestic work entails that this line of work, in South Africa at least, is usually done by black women in white households. This is due to South Africa’s troubled history of inequality.

Domestic workers are socially defined by their uniforms. The uniform is situated in a social hierarchy, where both domestic workers and employers identify the wearer of the uniform at the hands of the social meaning attributed to the uniform. It becomes a visual manifestation of the master/ slave dichotomy. The uniform signifies the power position between the “madam and maid” in which the one wearing the uniform has a subordinate status. It also serves as a marker of difference locating the domestic worker in a certain role, place and performance. As such, the uniform reproduces and enforces inequality and hierarchy. It becomes a feature of a domestic worker’s identity, it impacts how she is perceived by the public and treated by her employer, and exposes her already subordinate position in society. The uniform also signals that a domestic worker is ready to do domestic labour and limits her to a subservient identity wherein she has to strip herself of everything that makes her unique.

Sibande (2013) explains that the reference to Sophie as “maid” resides in the uniform she wears. Sibande uses the uniform as a tool to expose the limited social positioning of domestic workers by the juxtaposition of the “maid and madam” in the same dress. By hybridising the “maid and madam”, I suggest that Sibande aims to transform Sophie to the position of the madam. The aim is not to become the madam *per se*, but rather to give Sophie the power of the madam. Sophie does not aim to escape “being the maid”, but to expose and challenge her disempowerment.

Sibande’s representation of Sophie highlights her disempowerment as a silenced and trapped black woman. Although Sophie is vulnerable and disempowered, there is a different side to Sophie in which she uses fantasy to escape her reality. By means of

fantasy, Sophie escapes the symbolic spider web and the domestic uniform that limits her socially. This fantasy acts as a means to transcend her disempowered reality. In the next chapter of this dissertation, I explore this alternative side of Sophie that disrupts the entrapment through hysterical strategies, specifically through fantasy and mimicry.

CHAPTER 4

SOPHIE'S HYSTERICAL TRANSCENDENCE

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back,” that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject – the liberated voice (hooks, 2015:29).

4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that Sophie becomes a visual embodiment of a silenced and disempowered worker. As a representation of a silenced domestic worker, Sophie cannot address her marginalised position verbally. She rather expresses and questions her position in an alternative manner of talking back – through the hysterical strategies of fantasy and mimicry (cf. Irigaray, 1985:142). bell hooks (2015:29) describes “talking back” as a feminist strategy through which the oppressed can move from object to subject. Moving from being a silenced object to a “liberated voice” becomes a form of agency. As discussed in Chapter Two, when women are oppressed or silenced, this may trigger a hysterical reaction through which these women have to speak through their bodies through alternative means than a linguistic voice. Talking back through the body can then be regarded as a form of agency. In *Long Live the Dead Queen* (2009-2011), *The Purple Shall Govern* (2013,2014) and *I Came Apart at the Seams* (2019-ongoing), talking back serves as a means for Sophie to transform. I argue that Sophie *talks back* through hysterical strategies. By adopting postures and gestures that differ from her everyday reality as a domestic worker, Sophie uses strategies commonly associated with hysteria to transform herself in an attempt to challenge her subordinate position and gains agency. This engagement is realised through the use of clothing, the style and colour, as well as the fantasy and mimicry of roles and identities. This strategy to employ fantasy and mimicry, used to transform from object to subject, which is typical of hysteria, is also supported by Bahadur (2020) who describes how Sophie's clothing transforms in style. Sophie's attire changes from and flows between a uniform signifying servitude and suppression, elaborate Victorian gowns symbolizing a higher status or authority figure like the madam, and the clothing of a Samurai warrior, a

sangoma, and a priestess that signify transcendence, godliness and power. In addition, Sophie transforms from domestic worker to a Victorian madam to an angry figure, and to a priestess. Here, her fantastical mimetic voice serves as a means to escape servitude and gain agency. In this chapter, I consider how Sophie transforms and challenges her subordinate position by using strategies specific to hysteria.

4.2 Sophie's fantastical and mimetic voice

In order to transform from object to subject, Sophie needs to respond through her body. Throughout Sibande's oeuvre, Sophie is situated in different roles that project different "identities" (such as royalty and aristocracy) through the use of fantasy and mimicry³³ in order to reposition herself and claim a space that was not prescribed to her. She achieves this, as I will show, by speaking through her body, employing a fantastical and mimetic voice.

Fantasy is omnipresent in the representation of Sophie, specifically in the reinvention of herself as she continuously transforms into various roles. Therefore, when Sophie "speaks" through fantasy and mimicry, this corresponds to Lacan's (*in* Gardiner, 2014:2-3) argument that the hysteric responds by means of fantasy (cf. Chapter 2.5). According to Lacan (*in* Gardiner, 2014:2-3), through fantasy, the hysteric (in this present case, Sophie) may find relief from her prescribed identity or position within society. Fantasy serves as the vehicle through which Sophie can escape her defined position within society and occupy and ultimately claim a position that was not previously hers, for example to be a Queen.

According to Scheffer *et al.* (2017:17) Sophie is not only phantasmagorical, but also mimetically engaged. Scheffer *et al.* (2017:17,18) confirm that the mimetic performances allow the hysteric "to perform various roles and assume various identities". The narrative in which Sophie is portrayed is realised through numerous fantasy roles. In these imagined narratives Sophie is always in a transformed state, she is presented in roles that she was not capable of fulfilling. Sophie is presented in roles such as a soldier (*Living Memory*, 2011; Figure 4.1), a queen (*Her Majesty*

³³ Bhabha (1994:86) refers to mimicry in a colonial discourse and argues that it refers to when a group of colonised people, copy or imitate the lifestyle or culture of those who colonise them. Bhabha (1994:86) argues that when colonised mimic colonisers, they reproduce an image of "almost the same, but not quite". According to Bhabha (1994:86) this mimicry is indented as a type of "mockery". This finds connection with the representation of Sophie, as she mimics her colonial madam, however, she is "not quite the same" as the madam. In this sense, Sophie "mocks" the madam, but does not necessarily become the madam.

Queen Sophie, 2010; Figure 4.2), a Victorian lady (*I'm a Lady*, 2009; Figure 4.3) and even an equestrian (*The Reign*, 2010; Figure 4.4).



Figure 4.1: Mary Sibande. *Living Memory*, 2011. Digital print (Jaggi, 2019).



Figure 4.2: Mary Sibande, *Queen Sophie*, 2010. Digital print (Artsy, 2018).



Figure 4.3: Mary Sibande, *I'm a Lady*, 2009. Digital print (Smacgallery, 2019)



Figure 4.4: Mary Sibande, *The Reign*, 2010. Mixed media installation (Artthrob, 2018).

Sibande places Sophie in roles that oppose her reality as a domestic worker, where she mimics the grandiosity and royalty of a queen and a Victorian lady. She also mimics the power and so-called masculinity associated with a soldier. This excessiveness through fantasy and mimicry is, according to Irigaray (1985:142), Bronfen (1998:149), Farber (2017) and Scheffer *et al.* (2017), typical of a hysterical reaction. This fantastic mimetic voice is particular to a hysterical reaction to transform

into roles, positions, or circumstances that are not particular to those by which she is defined and as such an attempt to create a new desired identity.

In Sophie's transformation, the dress is the main element in which she mimics her desires. The significance of the dress as a signifier is supported by Corrigan (2015:156) who argues that "it appears as if desires for freeing from servitude can only be realised through dress, which allows Sophie to imagine herself as occupying the antithetical state". Sophie's dress consists of details that Sibande has taken from the Victorian era. As Corrigan (2015:150) states, by combining the uniform with a Victorian dress, it is transformed to the status of the madam. Corrigan (2015:147) argues that her dress mimetically articulates her ascendant mobility in society. By this she (2015:147) means that Sophie, through her attire, is offered a higher status with regard to her position in society. In this sense, Sophie's attire projects her desires that surpasses her reality as a domestic worker. The dress makes it possible for Sophie to achieve this transformation via fantasy and mimicry, as de Kock (2017:16) states, and thus Sophie finds sanctuary in dreams (fantasies) to transform herself from her oppressive reality. As such, fantasy becomes the platform from which Sophie is capable to claim positions that were previously withheld from her. When submerged in fantasy Sophie denies the oppression that society inflicts on her, and by doing so, it enables her to challenge – and question – the social realities of the social structures within which she feels trapped (cf. Chapter 2.5 & Chapter 3.2). These strategies that are used as a fantastical and mimetic voice, relate to hysteria as it is the means by which the hysteric speaks. To be heard or fulfil her desires, she transforms herself into other roles through means of fantasy and mimicry (cf. Farber, 2017; Scheffer *et al.* 2017).

4.2.1 Blue Sophie escapes

Sibande (2013) states that she wants to show that Sophie is not limited to "being the maid". In this section, an analysis is presented of Sibande's art to demonstrate Sophie's fantasies as realized by means of hysterical representation in order to transform herself from being a domestic worker. In other words, she mimics roles, by means of her dress that transcends her limitation or entrapment position. For example, Scheffer *et al.* (2017:18) describes how in *They Don't Make Them Like They Used To* (2008), *Wish You Were Here* (2010) and *Conversations with Madam CJ Walker* (2009) Sophie is represented as busy knitting, embroidering and as being occupied with the

grooming of hair. In the artworks mentioned, the “maid” mimics activities which would normally not be associated with domestic work. This escape of a typical domestic worker narrative is seen in *The Wait Seems to Go on Forever* (Figure 4.5), depicting Sophie as waiting at the bus stop. Scheffer *et al.* (2017:9) argue that although this narrative portrays the daily commute of domestic workers between townships and their place of employment, Sophie is submerged in a fantasy depicting extravagance, seen among others in the bright red chandelier above her.

Sophie’s transformation is also seen in *I’m a Lady* (2009) (Figure 4.6), in which Sophie sits in, interpreted from a Victorian perspective, a “ladylike” position. In this artwork, according to Henderson (2018:178), Sophie mirrors a woman of leisure and privilege. The chiffon and lace of the parasol shows that Sophie has a privileged status.



Figure 4.5: Mary Sibande, *The wait seems to go on forever*, 2009. Digital print (Sibande, 2009).



Figure 4.6: Mary Sibande, *I'm a Lady*, 2009. Digital print (Smacgallery, 2019)

Furthermore, in *I'm a Lady* (2009), Sibande uses fantasy to visually mimic the “lady” to the point where she actually proclaims Sophie as a madam. Sophie’s outfit includes materials of wealth and status, associated with the madam and also assumes the leisurely nature of the madam. It is overlaid with delicate chiffon so that she appears to disrupt the vulnerable Sophie image. Khan (2015: 98) states that what could be

simple mimicry of the desire for a higher-class position, is actually Sophie being placed in a madam's position. Singer (2012:16) states that in *I'm a Lady* (2009) Sophie's image contrasts sharply with historic bourgeois associations of domestic work as unsophisticated and unstylish, and therefore only suitable to the working classes (also see Veblen, 1981:36). Through fantasy and mimicry, Sophie assimilates the madam and becomes the madam, escaping her sole association as a domestic worker. This implies that she not only escapes being a domestic worker, but also the prescriptiveness that accompanies it as seen within class, race and gender restrictions associated with domestic work (cf. Chapter 3.2).



Figure 4.7: Mary Sibande, *Wish You Were Here*, 2010. Mixed media installation (Ruxandra, 2011).

This transformation of identity that correlates with royalty – by means of mimicry – is particularly evident in the series *Long Live the Dead Queen* (2009-2011). In *Wish You Were Here* (2010) (Figure 4.7) Sibande also merges the domestic worker's uniform with elements of royalty and status. According to Cope (2020), representations of a high social status can be seen in the detail of the dress such as the ruffles, sleeves and full skirt. Also, the rich royal blue colour of Sophie's dress, as Taggart (2018) and Condra (2008:17) observe, suggests royalty and that Sophie enjoys a high status.³⁴ It is a dress fit for a queen or a Victorian lady. Elk (2017:4) describes how Sophie's splendour is not achieved merely through the colour of the dress but also through its elaborateness and decadence. Sophie mimes the sartorial tradition of Victorian

³⁴ This association originates from the Renaissance period when the pigments for red, purple and blue were the most expensive and only accessible to aristocracy and the highest social class (Condra, 2008:17).

aristocracy by means of tulle, puffed and capped sleeves, brocade lace, and wide skirts. These elements all signify Sophie's escape from servitude by means of a fantastic and mimetic voice.

This is confirmed by the coat of arms in *Wish You Were Here* (2010; Figure 4.7) which, according to Cope (2020), connotes aspirations towards a higher social status. According to Hogarth and Pine (2019), a coat of arms is a form of heraldry which refers to the use of bold symbols that is used to easily identify a group of people. During the middle ages, these symbols were usually associated with people who had high social status. In this installation, Sophie is depicted in a sitting position weaving a coat of arms out of red wool that spells an "S" (presumably for "Sophie" or "Super Sophie") (Sibande *in* Foli, 2010; Foli, 2012:2). She crafts a personal heraldic emblem and, in the process, creates her own identity. Furthermore, the ball of yarn is much larger than a normal ball of yarn and suggests Sophie's empowerment and her ability to infinitely create and re-create her own identity. Sophie's activity which relates to the critical dealing with identity assignment correlates with the hysterics need to transform her own identity. This is in accordance with Van den Berg's (2016:693-709), Fink's (1995:62-63) and Žižek's (1997:147) view that the hysteric takes responsibility for her own identity, rather than merely allowing her identity to be shaped passively by social structures. This symbol signifies Sophie's escape from the confinement of servitude. A different interpretation of the image is that Sophie is not yarning, but unravelling the heraldic shield. In this sense, her transformation unravels the traditional power structures within society while undoing her subversion to the white madam.



Figure 4.8: Mary Sibande, *Sophie-Elsie*, 2009. Mixed media installation (Sibande, 2009)

Sophie's escape from servitude through fantasy and mimicry can also be seen in *Sophie-Elsie* (2009; Figure 4.8) where she appropriates the notion of domesticity and transforms it into an empowering image by means of mimicry. Here, according to Corrigan (2015:149), an image of the domestic worker's uniform is combined with the clothing used in British coronations – especially the red mantle (Condra, 2008:17). In this sense, according to Foli (2012:2), Sophie can be interpreted as a royal figure and Sophie becomes more than a domestic worker. By means of fantasy and mimicry, Sophie transforms her prescribed identity within the social prescriptiveness of domestic work, into an empowering image that correlates with royalty.

However, Sophie not only escapes from her subjugation as a domestic worker. She also proclaims her voice by speaking through her body in such an elaborate way that her presence, as something more than a *maid*, cannot be ignored. For example, Sophie increasingly mimics queenly postures and personae in works such as in *Her Majesty, Queen Sophie* (2010) (Figure 4.9). The dress, spread out on the floor, gives a sense of elaborateness, or as Crane (2000:29) refers to it, "aristocratic idleness". As part of Sophie's mimicry of Victorian references, her dress references the gowns worn during the 18th and 19th centuries, when the women who wore them did not engage in physical labour (Crane 2000:50-51). Dodd (2010:469) explains that the dress disrupts associations of the madam and the maid. Sophie's dress is lavish, elaborate and extravagant and this references the madam. However, it is also equipped with details, such as the *doek* and apron, characteristic of the domestic worker's uniform. Therefore, Sophie's style of dress protests the distinction between maid and madam and, as such, disrupts it. According to Dodd (2010:469) they become one persona: Sophie ceases to be a domestic worker, and becomes a figure who transcends both the maid and madam.

Figure 4.9: Mary Sibande, *Queen Sophie*, 2010. Digital print (Artsy, 2018).



Sophie is also presented in white heteronormative male narratives. This is evident in the installation piece *The Reign* (Figure 4.13). Here Sophie is depicted on a rearing horse. Imagery like this is typically associated with men and war (Gey van Pittius, 2018:113; cf. Figure 4.10- 4.12). Sibande (2013) states that she wanted to destabilise white narratives and claim white male power.



Figure 4.10: Jacques-Louis David, *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, 1801. Oil on canvas (Ben, 2013).



Figure 4.11: Balfour Evans, *Photograph of statue of General Louis Botha at the Union Buildings*, 2015 (Evans, 2015).



Figure 4.12: *Photograph of statue of General Jan Smuts at Kedar Heritage Lodge*. Photographer unknown (Kedar Heritage Lodge website, 2019).



Figure 4.13: Mary Sibande, *The Reign*, 2010. Mixed media installation (Artthrob, 2018).

According to Sibande (2013), equestrian statues³⁵ are representations of white dominance and supremacy. Sibande (2013) states that by means of fantasy, she “thought of twisting and subverting that image by inserting a black woman, not just any woman, but a maid, on a rearing horse”. Sibande thus placed an unexpected figure in a symbolically dominant white position.

Despite the apparent wildness of the horse, the rider seems in control as Sophie holds royal blue reins in her right hand. Here, according to Sibande (*in Zvomuya*, 2010) Sophie is presented as a fearless black woman rider to whom the horse is a symbol of power and strength. As Dodd (2010:473) says, this relationship between Sophie and the horse represents “the fantasy of a self-directed individual who is holding the reins of her life”. Bronner (2016:236) interprets this artwork as an act of taking control and escaping a reality of being trapped.

This is also evident in the title of the installation. “Reign” implies a desire for sovereignty and supremacy. Sophie, as Elk (2017:17) says, reigns through the control or power she has over the horse. Through this she engages her own autonomy and identity instead of being subjected. Sophie’s reign can be seen as a fantasy in which she takes responsibility for her own identity, rather than merely being the passive product of the desire of the *Symbolic Order* (Van den Berg, 2016: 693-709; Fink, 1995:62,63; Žižek, 1997:147).

Regarding *The Reign*, Sibande (*in Zvomuya*, 2010) says: “It’s not about Sophie working for the madam anymore.” By means of fantasy, Sophie communicates an alternative reality of not being suppressed. Accordingly, Sophie finds relief in her hysterical fantasies (see Lacan *in* Gardiner, 2014:2-3).

Sibande (2013) explains that because Sophie’s eyes are closed, she creates her own reality by being emerged in fantasy and by this means surpasses her actual reality. Dressed in a blue domestic uniform merged with a Victorian dress, Sophie mimics activities which would normally not be associated with domestic work: waiting under a bright red chandelier at a bus stop, mimicking a woman of leisure and privilege, mimicking the “lady” or a queen, designing her own heraldic shield suggesting own identity, or mounting a rearing horse. This representation of Sophie can be linked to

³⁵ Sibande (2013) refers to equestrian statues such as the statue of Boere General Louis Botha (1862-1919) in Cape Town and British General Jan Smuts (1870-1950) in Tshwane.

Lacan (*in* Gardiner, 2014:2-3) who states that through fantasy, the hysteric is able to escape her subordinate reality.

4.2.2 Purple Sophie: giving birth to a new identity

In the next series, *The Purple Shall Govern*³⁶ (2013, 2014), Bronner (2016:239-240) points out that “Sophie the domestic worker” disappears and contests her “limited role” as a domestic worker. The title of the series references the “Purple Rain Protest” that was held on the 12th of September 1989 in Cape Town. During this event, protesters marched to the Parliament buildings to take part in anti-apartheid protests against elections. Police sprayed protesters with purple dye so that they could later be identified and arrested. This event gave rise to anti-apartheid slogans like “Forward to Purple People's Power” and “The Purple Shall Govern”. Bronner (2016:239-240) states that the colour purple, as inspired by this event, has led Sibande into exploring a black woman who “shall govern”. Eschewing the domestic elements present in *Long Live the Dead Queen* (2009-2011), there are no signifiers that define Sophie as a domestic worker in *The Purple Shall Govern* (2013, 2014).

According to Corrigan (2015:161), Sophie's liberation from being a powerless figure is linked to the purple figure in *The Purple Shall Govern* series. Sibande (2013) claims that this figure is a new Sophie that forms part of a new generation. Although her eyes are still closed – indicating that she is still fantasizing – Sophie is depicted in a rebellious posture. Sophie's head is lifted, and she confidently proclaims her presence. In addition, the elaborateness of her dress indicates an ever-growing awareness of Sophie's presence. Later in this section, I demonstrate how Sophie has seemingly broken free from her domestic servitude and the domestic legacy of Sibande's family and gives birth to a new identity. In *A Terrible Beauty* (2013; Figure 4.14) she has been stripped of her identifiable domestic worker's white apron and *doek* (Art Africa magazine, 2014). These signifiers of servitude dangle loosely from Sophie's lap and head, moving away from her waist and head, and her posture signifies power and strength. These signifiers of servitude no longer define Sophie. To me, in this series, Sibande employs fantasy and mimicry in a hysterical manner, in order for Sophie to escape the marginalized status of a domestic worker.

³⁶ In *The Purple Shall Govern* (2013,2014), Sibande makes use of a new palette, purple, which she attributes to inspiration she took from the film *The Color Purple* (1985) and the Cape Town's Purple Rain Protest (Caradonio, 2019).



Figure 4.14: Mary Sibande, *A Terrible Beauty*, 2013. Digital print (Scheffer *et al.*, 2013).

In *A Reversed Retrogress*, Scene 1 (2013) (Figure 4.15) Sophie confronts her old self (Sibande *in* Mabandu, 2013). Here, the difference between the domestic worker Sophie and the new purple Sophie is, as Corrigan (2015:161) states, “enacted through a face-off between the two characters”. The two Sophies are differentiated by their clothing. With the two Sophie figures placed opposite each other, the impression may be created, as Goniwe (2013:32) notices, that they may fight and compete for space. Sibande (*in* Mabandu 2013) clarifies that in this artwork, “the ideas of violence are insinuated and yet the violated and the violator are connected. The figures' gestures are ambiguous in being neither violent nor defensive”. Corrigan (2015:161) interprets the scene as Sophie who seems to be battling her past self and with that also her role as a domestic worker. In *ArtAfrica magazine* (2014), *A Reversed Retrogress* Scene 1 (2013) is interpreted as “the struggle to let go of the old, and welcome the liberation it brings, in which we see the old Sophie and the new in an encounter that is unequivocally tense but veiled in ambiguity”. In my view, Sophie is not only involved in a struggle or confrontation for the sake of her family (who were domestic workers) but for all domestic workers who are treated unfairly.



Figure 4.15: Mary Sibande, *A Reversed Retrogress, Scene 1*, (2013). Mixed media installation (Parson, 2016).

In *A Terrible Beauty is Born* (2013) (Figure 4.16), Farber (2017:437) states that intestine-shaped forms appear to erupt from Sophie's womb. The shapes seemingly take over around Sophie. Sophie's *doek* and apron seem to fall off the dress. According to Farber (2017:437), the purple intestine shapes are busy removing Sophie's *doek* and apron, and as such, symbolize her escape from subjection as a domestic worker. Sibande (2013:26) confirms that this transformation is achieved because the apron and *doek* "are being removed by the creatures". Farber (2017:437) states that Sophie is birthing a new identity, since the purple creatures emerging from her womb can be associated with the generation of new life. This new identity, which Sophie symbolically "gives birth to" is not subjugated by oppressive social structures. Rather, Sophie's new identity is one of mastery over her situation as she is the one giving birth to it.



Figure 4.16: Mary Sibande, *A terrible beauty is born*, 2013. Digital print (Perold, 2016).

In *A Terrible Beauty is Born* (2013), a very strong element of mimicry, consistent with the mimetic process of hysteria (Lacan, 2007:34; Verhaeghe, 1999:174) is present. The main focus of the hysteric during her hysterical performances is to transform herself. Similarly, Sophie's hysterical transformation is achieved through mimicry of a figure who is not confined by the blue dress and its legacy of domestic servitude, but rather breaks free from it.

According to the *ArtAfrica* magazine (2014), *The Admiration of the Purple Figure* (2013) (Figure 4.17) illustrates Sibande's decision "to let Sophie [the domestic worker] go and allow new ideas to take root and grow". In this work, Sophie seems to take charge and inhabits a position of control. She is surrounded by "non-winged ceiling beings" who seem to be admiring Sophie, celebrating her new free and empowered identity. Angel-like creatures seem to be placing a halo on Sophie's head, crowning her as an admirable, godly figure. In *The Admiration for the Purple Figure* (2013) (Figure 4.17) Sophie wears an extravagant gown reminiscent of the earlier Victorian references to power and privilege. The purple colour of her dress also alludes to the references to royalty and power in the earlier series. This interpretation is made on the basis of Sibande's (2013) statements about colour as a signifier of power and dominance. Sibande (*in* Krouse 2013) connotes royalty to purple when she says that "the clergy and the royalty of England wear purple if they were meeting an important person. Purple dye was expensive so only the rich were able to wear it". In this sense, *The Admiration for the Purple Figure* (2013) intimates a new, powerful identity for Sophie.



Figure 4.17: Mary Sibande, *Admiration for The Purple Figure*, 2013. Digital print (ArtAfrica, 2014).

As noted in my discussion of *Long Live the Dead Queen* (2009-2011) and *The Purple Shall Govern* (2013,2014), Sibande strategically places Sophie within a context where she escapes an identity of servitude. She does this by creating a new fantastical identity by means of a hysterical representation. Hereby, Sophie obtains a voice.

In *Long Live the Dead Queen* (2009-2011), for example, Sophie fantasizes about narratives wherein she plays alternative roles, other than the stereotype of the black domestic worker. This symbolises her need to escape her reality as a marginalized black domestic worker. This notion can be linked to Lacan (*in* Gardiner, 2014:2-3) who states that fantasy may fulfil unfulfilled desires and therefore may serve as a strategy used by women – and in my opinion women artists in particular – to counter women’s disempowerment. Herein, Sophie, according to Farber (2017: 432) gains a means to express her desire to escape her position of servitude.

4.3 Sophie transcends

In the previous sections, I investigated how Sophie the hysteric escapes her reality through mimicry and fantasy and how she uses her body as a voice. This, as I argue, becomes a form of agency. The final aim of this chapter is to consider how Sophie transforms into a figure not predicated on a subservient position. In both *Long Live the Dead Queen* (2009-2011) and *The Purple Shall Govern* (2013,2014) Sophie is negotiating her position from the margin. In her latest series *I Came Apart at the Seams* (2019-ongoing) this appears to change as Sibande portrays Sophie, in red, as a powerful spiritual figure who confronts her past. By confronting these memories Sophie, according to Sibande (2019), acts as a healer and gains agency by means of hysteria. With her eyes still closed as in a dream state, and using a means to speak through her body as she mimics and fantasises various roles, as will be pointed out, Sophie transcends and gains agency as a hysterical figure.

In *I Came Apart at the Seams* (2019-ongoing) Sibande creates works which explore anger in South Africa. Angbelethchy and Affricot (2019) note how the red used in *I Came Apart at the Seams* symbolises the anger that South Africans, and especially black South Africans and the working class, experience due to the ongoing legacy of inequality. Sibande (2019; *in* Fisher, 2018) notes:

With red, I question everything South African, from politics to post-apartheid SA. In Barberton, there’s a statue of Jock of the Bushveld

outside the town hall. I put that in the work. The dogs are red – the Zulu expression “ukwatile uphendukeinja Ebomvu” translates as “she turned into a red dog”. If someone is angry, they turn into a red dog – it’s the epitome of anger (Sibande *in* Fisher, 2018).

By creating red Sophie, Sibande (2019) states that she wanted to focus on emotions and especially anger because it is a way to confront and deal with rage. Based on this, the first argument of this subsection relates to how Sibande addresses emotions such as anger. This is symbolised, above all, by the red dogs that accompany Sophie throughout the series. Karibo (2019) describes these ferocious dogs as having their eyes set on their prey, ready to attack. Sibande’s (*in* Karibo 2019) explanation that the use of the red dogs as a visual language correlates with the isiZulu language in which someone who is angry becomes a red dog posits anger as something animalistic. Sibande (*in* Karibo 2019) further refers to the expression that someone who is angry, “sees red”.

The imagery of dogs also reminds one of the famous work *Dogs of War* (1997) from the play *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (directed by artist William Kentridge). The three headed dog named Brutus (see Figure 4.18) is a puppet with flexible necks connected to a suitcase. The puppet is controlled by a lever connected to the handle of the suitcase. Brutus is the main character in the play (Taylor, 2009). The play comments on the Truth and Reconciliation Committee. As set forth by Sarkin-Hunghes (2004:2019), the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was initiated by the Government of National Unity to deal with the conflict which resulted from apartheid.



Figure 4.18: Handspring Puppet Company, *Dogs of War*, 1997. Mixed media (Taylor, 2009).

Sibande not only uses the red dogs, but also the heart that Sophie holds in her right hand, (see *Domba Dance*, Figure 4.19) as a symbol of anger. The heart, according to Gupta (2019), is iconically seen as the centre of emotions. In the isiZulu, the word for heart *inhliziyo* is especially associated with various emotions. Gupta (2019) suggests that the heart is specifically associated with anger. He (2019) states that it is usually the heart that is full of anger.

In *I Came Apart at the Seams* Sophie is freed from oppression, but is still angered by inequality. The second argument in this subsection is that the memories of the past are still present, and this is what makes her angry. Sophie is looking back at the history and the impact thereof that still surfaces. This anger culminates in a point where Sophie realises that in order to have agency, and to heal, she will have to confront the past. Although she no longer carries overt signs of disempowerment in the purple series, in the red series, she experiences that she is still angry about the disempowerment she had been left with. Sibande (*in* Karibo, 2019) states: "I was looking at anger as a subject and why this anger existed". Sibande's anger exists due to the ongoing legacy of black disempowerment in South Africa. According to Karibo (2019), Sibande is questioning or looking back at the end of apartheid and the legacy future generations have been left with. This can specifically be seen in the domestic work practice (cf. Chapter Three) that persists to the present day. In the red series, Sophie's aim to gain agency transforms into the need to deal with memories in order to experience the "healing space" that Sibande is referring to. However, she is dealing with the memories and anger in an alternative way, through the mimicking of figures to whom she associates power and healing, such as a *sangoma* and priest. This strategy relates to the feminist interpretation of hysteria, as Showalter (1993:286) asserts that hysteria serves as a language for women to speak through their bodies when they are silenced and cannot speak verbally. By means of hysteria, Sophie uses an alternative means to talk, thereby fostering a bodily voice that speaks through a spiritual figure.



Figure 4.19: Mary Sibande, *Domba Dance*, 2019. Mixed media installation (Smac, 2019).

Sophie's response to anger and healing is imagined in *The Domba Dance* (2019) (Figure 4.19). The *Domba Dance* visually portrays the progress and metamorphoses of Sophie from blue to purple to red. Gupta (2019) notes that the Domba dance (also called the "python" or "snake" dance"³⁷) is performed by young Venda women during an initiation ceremony symbolizing their transition into adulthood. If adulthood is assumed to be a metaphor for independence and empowerment, then the *Domba Dance* (2019) can possibly be interpreted as Sophie's initiation ceremony towards empowerment and agency. Herein Sophie transforms from a girl (disempowered and vulnerable) to a woman or even a prophetess (thus, empowered and superior).

In the *Domba Dance* (Figure 4.19), the dogs may also be a reference to another multi-headed dog, Cerberus. Cerberus is the dog of the Greek god Hades³⁸ who protects the gates of the underworld (Hill, 2019). According to Hill (2019), Cerberus prevents the dead from leaving the underworld. This underlines the ferociousness of the dogs, because even the dead who are no longer exposed to dangers are afraid of them. Sophie can symbolically be interpreted as having the same power as Hades who is the king of the underworld. Hereby, Sophie becomes the queen of the dead – the oppressed or those who have been silenced. By means of fantasy and mimicry, she represents those without a voice. Therefore, Sophie stands up not only for herself, but also for those who are/were in her position of former subordination.

³⁷ The Snake Dance performed by members of the Venda people is danced at a "Domba", which is a pre-marital initiation ceremony. During the dance girls dance fluidly, mimicking a snake, to the beat of a drum, while forming a chain by holding the forearm of the person in front (Masemola, 2018).

³⁸ According to Greek mythology, Hades, the son of the Greek god Cronus – god of the harvest – is the god of the underworld. In ancient Greece, Hades had the responsibility to protect the underworld (Cartwright, 2012).

In this installation, Sophie wears a silver rib cage over her body. The rib cage is supposed to protect her heart, but instead she holds her heart in her hand. The rib cage on the exterior of her body shows us the absence of her heart. Furthermore, the rib cage is also worn as a breastplate used for protection. It is as if she is getting ready for a fight or a war. As the queen of the underworld, she may be preparing for a war against those in power. It is also interesting that there is an open space next to Sophie. It is as if she is leaving room for a potential, as if something is coming; perhaps a war or a fight.



Figure 4.20: Mary Sibande, *The Locus*, 2020. Digital print (Artsy, 2020).

This expectation that something is coming, is reinforced by a blood moon that can be seen in the background of *The Locus* (2020) (Figure 4.20). According to Howell (2019), a blood moon is a natural phenomenon in which the moon is in total lunar eclipse or has a red glow due to haze, dust or smoke. When this happens, the moon appears red. However, it is also seen as an event with symbolic significance. In the Book of Joel (2:31), it is prophesied that “the sun will turn into darkness and the moon into blood before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes” (Bible, 2004: 528). In other words, the blood moon can be seen or interpreted as a sign of the end times. Sibande thus uses the blood moon as a sign of the beginning of the war that will result in a decisive end, I assume possibly the end of her subjugation. By removing her heart from her ribcage and holding it in her hand, she harnesses the power of her anger. She is clearly not scared of the fight that is to come.

In this artwork, her veins are still connected to her heart. The fact that her heart is still connected to her body through the veins indicates that she quite possibly does not intend to get rid of the heart. If the heart is seen as the centre, or the locus, of her anger, then the fact that she does not want to lose the heart signifies that she is relying on her anger as the driving force to continue and to win this fight.

In *The Locus* it is also interesting to note that her clothes are reminiscent of a Japanese kimono or Japanese Samurai. These Japanese elements are also included in *Come You Spirits of the Land and Skies* and, as specifically referred to on the Turbine Art Fair website (2020), in *Good is Bad and Bad is Good*, in which Sophie's attire is related to that of a Samurai warrior.³⁹ Here it is noteworthy that in an interview with Sibande, she (2019) states that she read Thomas Lockley's *African Samurai: The True Story of Yasuke, a Legendary Black Warrior in Feudal Japan* (2019) during the conceptualisation of this series. Furthermore, she (2019) states that she watched the anime "*Afro Samurai* a few years ago" and was "really interested in the topic". This book and anime possibly inspired the Japanese elements in this series.

In *Come You Spirits of the Land and Skies* (2019; Figure 4.21), the Japanese symbolism continues. Here she too resembles a Japanese Samurai, a further indication that in the red series, Sophie is readying herself for an impending battle. Her posture and body movements are also reminiscent of a Samurai during a fight (see Figure 4.22), particularly the movement of the fabric which seems to fly around her as if she is moving through a series of battle poses. The dark background may also indicate that Sophie is creeping up on her opponent like a Samurai in the dark. No part of her body is visible. It is as if the emphasis is not on Sophie herself, but rather on the fight that is taking place.

³⁹ Wilson (1982:17) states that a samurai is a Japanese warrior that comes from noble descent. According to him (1982:17) these warriors had military nobility during of medieval and early-modern *Japan* from the 12th century to their abolition in the 1870s.



Figure 4.21: Mary Sibande, *Come You Spirits of the Land and Skies*, 2019. Digital print (Smac, 2019).



Figure 4.22: Achim Runnebaum, *Representation of Samurais fighting* (Runnebaum, 2015).

In the work *Come You Spirits of the Land and Skies* there is also a very strong contrast between the red and black. This possibly emphasises the contrast between Sophie and her opponent (if the black space is assumed to be the opponent). In this contrast, the focus is on Sophie, the juxtaposition between Sophie and the pitch blackness also portrays Sophie's power.



Figure 4.23: Mary Sibande, *Good is Bad and Bad is Good*, 2020. Bronze (Artsy, 2020).

In *Good is Bad and Bad is Good* (2020; Figure 4.23), Sophie wears the battle suit of a samurai warrior (Turbine Art Fair website, 2020). In addition, she holds a shepherd's

hook in one hand and dangles her heart in the other. The Turbine Art Fair website (2020) states that Sibande's inspiration for this work was Yasuke, the first black and African samurai.⁴⁰ As mentioned on the Turbine Art Fair website (2020) "there is a congruence of ideas between Yasuke and Sophie. Both are warriors and champion change, becoming the embodiment of a violent change". In this depiction, Sophie's anger is more controlled. As pointed out earlier, Sibande uses the colour red to symbolise anger and to deal with memories of her past. The shepherd's hook in Sophie's one hand, might signify that she is attempting to "shepherd" or direct her anger (Turbine Art Fair website, 2020). Her attempt to control her anger is also metaphorically depicted in the way she holds on to her heart – the locus of her anger. Sophie's ribcage now bears a clearer resemblance to a conventional breastplate; she is now better "equipped" to deal with anger.

In contrast to *The Locus* (2019), Sophie no longer hides her heart under a long sleeve in *Good is Bad and Bad is Good* (2020). Her heart dangles freely from her hands, which might imply that she is not afraid to showcase her emotions. If her heart signifies her anger, then this might mean that post-fight Sophie is still angry, even if her anger is now better contained.

Sibande addresses this anger in *There is a Storm in my Heart* (2019) (Figure 4.24), where Sophie is dressed in red and surrounded by red dogs. There are red shapes that entangle Sophie's head, which may indicate that, although she is no longer disempowered, Sophie's thoughts are filled with anger towards her previous social positioning. This anger seems to progress in this work as if anger has completely consumed Sophie to an extent where her head is covered in red.

⁴⁰Yasuke, born in Mozambique, was a samurai in Japan during the 1500s (Mohamud, 2019).



Figure 4.24: Mary Sibande, *There is a Storm in my Heart*, 2019. Digital print (Smac, 2019).

In this work Sophie is represented as a *sangoma*, priest or some kind of transcendent figure (Jaggi, 2019). Sibande (2019) states that this spiritual figure acts as a healer and that she “is the space between two realms; between the past and future, between what has been and what could be”. This means that after the oppression and after the fight, Sophie aims to heal in order to gain a greater sense of agency.

Sibande creates this symbolic healing space by visually referring to night and day, which she links to past and present. First, daytime (future) is presented in the right scene and night-time (past) in the left scene. This is done by showcasing natural light entering by the windows on the right and by the lack of natural light and the presence of a lit streetlamp on the left. Second, life (future) and death (past) are also presented in this space. The representation of life is on the right-hand side where Sophie takes a stance of authority while feeding the dogs pieces of her heart. She is in control. To the left, the presence of vultures intimates a death scene. According to Sibande (*in* Jaggi, 2019) the red vultures in this work represent those who “clean up”. Death is also present in the figure of the dead lamb and the vultures pecking at it. According to the magazine *Medium* (2020), the sacrificial lamb and vultures in *There’s a Storm in my Heart* symbolise the fall of apartheid and its collective trauma. The vultures pecking at the dead lamb creates, as the magazine *Medium* (2020) states, “a parallel to the black population as the ultimate sacrifice, through death and platitudes that had good intention but lacked substance”. Here the red colour might refer not to disappointment and anger but to a desire to heal, with Sophie performing a traditional practice associated with a Zulu *sangoma*.⁴¹

⁴¹ Sangoma is a Zulu term, used for Southern African traditional healers who mainly rely on divination for healing (Makhubu, 2013). Sangomas’ healing powers are based on ancestors from the spirit world who guide and counsel illness, social discordance and spiritual problems (Campbell, 1998:5-7).

Together with the *sangoma* reference, there is also a clear nod to Christian motifs. The space is church-like. Furthermore, the vultures and the lamb suggest a sacrifice at an altar. Red vultures are encircling a presumably dead purple lamb. The lamb possibly implies innocence or vulnerability. This would mean that the vulnerability or disempowerment of the purple figure is dead now that the angry vultures are eating at it.

The dark space in the middle could refer to a time that has passed between the two scenes. Zehra (2019) states that Sophie is “imagined as the healing space needed between the past and present”. Sophie acts as the figure who creates a healing space – a space where peace between past and present can be established – by being connected via veins to both scenes: present (right) and past (left).

Sophie’s connection to her past is also seen in her history that is stained into the glass behind Sophie in *There is a Storm in my Heart* (2020) (Figure 5.24). This glass window is the same as the window in *Turn, Turn, Turn, Turn* (2019) (Figure 4.25) and *To Everything there is a Season* (2019) (Figure 4.26). This stained-glass window is typical of windows used in churches and cathedrals (cf. Figure 4.27). Instead of Christ, however, the purple figure from *The Purple Shall Govern* is represented as the Holy Redeemer. As such, Sophie is, as suggested by Badhadur (2020), “a personification of mystery and spirit which is unknown to the rational world”. Sophie has godly agency and offers awareness of the past, present and future. In these two prints Sophie, is dressed in white, rather than blue, purple or red. This indicates a role for Sophie as a priestess and healer. In *Turn, Turn, Turn, Turn* (2019; Figure 4.25) and *To Everything there is a Season* (2019; Figure 4.26) Sophie is represented in a religious context and in what could be considered a church. She is in a kneeling position, possibly in a state of worship.



Figure 4.27: *Virgin and Child and Angels*, Stained-glass window in Chartres Cathedral, France, ca. 1170 (Kleiner, 2013:376).



Figure 4.25: Mary Sibande, *Stained-glass window in Turn, Turn, Turn, Turn*, 2019. Digital print (Smac, 2019).



Figure 4.25: Mary Sibande, *Turn, Turn, Turn, Turn*, 2019. Digital print (Smac, 2019)



Figure 4.26: Mary Sibande, *To Everything there is a Season*, 2019. Digital print (Smac, 2019).

In *Turn, Turn, Turn, Turn* (2019) (Figure 4.25) and *To Everything there is a Season* (2019) (Figure 4.26), Sophie's dress is much more Spartan, as if the anger had

subsided in her. If the white dress can be seen as symbolizing healing, then Sophie is now beginning to experience healing as she comes to terms with the past.

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined how Sibande employs strategies associated with hysteria through her representation of Sophie by means of fantasy and mimicry. It was pointed out how Sibande uses Sophie's dress and the different roles in which Sophie appears. As such, she escapes and transcends her reality as a domestic worker. These strategies – fantasy and mimicry – correlate with hysteria. In this way, Sibande uses hysterical strategies to portray Sophie's ascendancy.

Throughout this chapter, I interpreted selected works from *Long Live the Dead Queen*, *The Purple Shall Govern* and *I Came Apart at the Seams*. In these artworks, Sophie is presented in different roles and positions in which she is not a stereotypical domestic worker, and by this means she escapes and transcends domestic servitude. Sibande manages to achieve this by employing hysterical strategies such as mimicry and fantasy. These hysterical strategies permit Sophie to achieve a state that transcends her social positioning as a maid. Sophie as a representation of a black woman who talks back, aims to expand her limited reality (see Hunter, 1983; Irigaray, 1985; Showalter, 1985,1997; Evans, 1991; McAfee, 2004; Du Preez, 2004; Jones, 2012; Devereux, 2014; Scheffer, 2017; Farber, 2017).

This hysterical escape is effected by portraying Sophie as not engaging with typical “maid's” work. Instead, by means of dress as well as pose and symbolic signifiers, Sophie is mimicking a figure of leisure, privilege and status. Therefore, Sophie's dress specifically can be regarded as the means by which she allows her fantasies to come true and to escape her subordinate identity. As such, Sibande's Sophie character, following the argument of Farber (2017) and Scheffer *et al.* (2017), enacts hysteria as a form of feminist discourse. Through this means, Sophie talks back through her body, and becomes a figure for discursively engaging with black women's agency (cf. hooks, 2015).

Referring to *I Came Apart at the Seams* (2019- ongoing), I discussed how Sophie employs fantasy and mimicry to address and heal from her memories of disempowerment. In *I Came Apart at the Seams* (2019- ongoing), although Sophie is no longer a domestic worker, the memories of the ongoing legacy of inequality are still

there, which makes her angry. By means of fantasy she explores anger in order to heal from it. Through hysteria, Sophie mimics the specific role of a spiritual figure to create a healing space. In this way, Sophie acts as a spiritual figure who endeavours to heal from her past. In this series, through fantasy and mimicry, Sophie is also presented as a warrior who fights the war against oppression. In this sense, Sophie is not relegated to a subversive position, but rather actively fights by confronting her past. She is, furthermore, also presented as a priestess with the aim of healing the anger of the past. It is in this way that Sophie acts as the healing voice in which she gains agency through hysteria.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE HYSTERICAL TRANSFORMATION OF SOPHIE: THE SUBJECT OF HER OWN STORY

5.1 Introduction

This dissertation presented an exploration of Mary Sibande's alter ego, Sophie. I focused specifically on Sophie's transformation throughout the series *Long Live the Dead Queen* (2009-2011), *The Purple Shall Govern* (2013-2014) and *I Came Apart at the Seams* (2019-ongoing). In the latest series, *I Came Apart at the Seams*, Sophie's agency achieves its fullest expression. Sibande achieves this by using hysteria symbolically as a visual strategy. I argue that Sophie visually claims agency by using hysteria. As such, in Sophie's realm, hysteria serves as a strategy for change.

Sophie, who at first appears silenced, transforms to being "hysterical" throughout the three series. Her body becomes the site where her voice, as the platform of her agency, is heard. Consequently, Sophie uses her body to speak and thereby becomes the subject of her own story. This concluding chapter offers a summary as well as conclusions of the main issues addressed in the previous chapters of this project.

5.2 Sophie's hysterical transformation

5.2.1 Hysteria: speaking through the body

Sophie's transformation, as I argue, plays out by means of hysteria. In **Chapter Two**, I briefly traced the genealogy of hysteria. The discussion included different perspectives of hysteria as a pathological (Charcot, 1889), psychological (Freud, 1895) and sociological phenomenon (Lacan, 1977; 2007) respectively. Following Lacan (1977; 2007), this study situates hysteria as a reaction against a hierarchical and oppressive social order or structure. The feminist perspective of hysteria, as put forward by Showalter (1993:286), was also investigated. As the hysteric is subordinated to such an extent that she is deprived of a linguistic response, hysteria is regarded as a form of communication that manifests through the body and serves as a strategy against oppression. This feminist interpretation of hysteria is based on the work of feminist scholars (see Hunter, 1983; Irigaray, 1985; Showalter, 1985; 1997; Evans, 1991; McAfee, 2004; Du Preez, 2004; Jones, 2012; Devereux, 2014) who argue that hysteria encompasses a negotiated expression that functions as an

alternative to linguistic verbalisation. Hence, hysteria becomes an empowering voice used by oppressed women.

This empowering voice occurs through strategies of hysteria as a non-linguistic symptomatologic and bodily expression. By means of fantasy and mimicry the hysteric takes charge of her own story, rather than serving a passive role. As the aim of the hysterical performance is to transform herself, the hysteric simulates those identities, roles or symptoms she desires or visualises herself in. Hysteria is thus a means of speaking through the body in order to transcend oppression and gain agency. Hysteria offered a theoretical framework for reading the selected works of Sibande.

5.2.2 Sophie: The maid

In **Chapter Three**, I investigated and discussed how Sophie, as a visual representation of a domestic worker, can be contextualised within hierarchical and oppressive social structures. I argued that Sophie, who acts as the main protagonist in Sibande's oeuvre, represents a silenced domestic worker, embodied as a marginalized figure vulnerable to exploitative social structures. Sophie is a representation of a marginalized silenced worker in three ways: she is exploited as being black, exploited as a woman and exploited as a working-class black woman (cf. Gaitskell *et al.*, 1983).

In the first series, *Long Live the Dead Queen* (2009-2011), Sophie becomes a reference to how domestic workers are placed in a lower hierarchical position than their employers in respect of race, gender and class in society. Sophie exposes the stereotypical social prescriptiveness to which domestic workers are subjected. She reveals the disempowerment of black domestic workers. Sophie hereby becomes a representation of a vulnerable domestic worker.

Furthermore, I investigated the domestic worker uniform as a signifier of the marginalisation that characterizes domestic services in South Africa. Sophie is introduced as a domestic worker dressed in the distinctive blue dress with a white apron and headscarf or *doek*. This uniform immediately creates a power dynamic between the employer and employee. It also exposes the social difference and accompanying power dynamic between them. I concluded that the uniform indicates the marginalized status of domestic workers in society.

I came to the conclusion that Sibande aims to comment on the social difference between the domestic worker and employer by merging the maid's uniform with the madam's dress. Sibande thus aims to transform Sophie's social position by placing her in a madam's dress. However, Sophie never becomes the madam; instead she symbolises the need to be transformed from her limited social position. I concluded that Sophie, by wearing the domestic uniform, comments on the disempowerment of domestic work while searching for ways to exceed the limitations imposed on her.

5.2.3 Sophie the hysterical figure transcends

In **Chapter Four**, I examined how Sophie hysterically counters her disempowerment as she appropriates what appears to be powerful, mystical and divine figures. First, I examined how Sophie in *Long Live the Dead Queen* (2009-2011) escapes her domestic turmoil. Second, I examined how she gives birth to a new and powerful identity in *The Purple Shall Govern* (2013, 2014). Third, I examined how Sophie mimics an angry and spiritual figure who claims agency whilst simultaneously resembling a healer in *I Came Apart at the Seams* (2019-ongoing). In this chapter, I argued that Sophie escapes her subordinate reality as a domestic worker and creates a healing space by fantasising and mimicking herself into other roles and identities or figures who have power, authority and agency. In all three series, Sophie uses hysterical strategies to break free from her oppressed role and visually becomes the subject of her own story.

She escapes her oppressed role as domestic worker in *Long Live the Dead Queen* (2009-2011) by combining markers of servitude with those of freedom (such as a madam or other authority figures such as a queen). Sibande places Sophie in roles that transcend her reality as a domestic worker and, as such, Sophie escapes domestic servitude by inhabiting characters through which Sophie plays out her fantasies. The escape from servitude is visualised through the activities associated with the roles being mimicked. In this sense, when Sophie mimics royalty and aristocracy, she not only escapes servitude, but also transforms her subordinate status. This transformation of identity or status with the aim to fulfil social desires, conforms with sociological and feminist interpretations of hysteria. As such, hysterical

strategies become the platform from which Sophie can surpass or escape her reality as a domestic worker and to claim positions she was previously denied.

Sophie's fantasies serve as a hysterical attempt to create a new desired identity. In *The Purple Shall Govern* (2013, 2014), the remnants of Sophie's servitude are removed by the newly empowered identity that Sophie seemingly gives birth to. In this series, "non-winged ceiling beings", as Sibande describes (*in* Goniwe, 2013), exit Sophie's womb. These beings remove Sophie's apron and *doek* and then place a halo on her head as if they are crowning her with godliness. Sophie's entire stance and body language speak of someone who has power. In this series, Sophie is portrayed as a powerful figure who is not subjected to oppressive social structures. In accordance with Lacan's (2007:34) interpretation of hysteria, Sophie as the hysteric transforms herself in order to challenge her position. Farber (2017:430), in support of this interpretation, states that Sophie embodies a newly empowered identity, no longer subject to the confines, suppressive and hegemonic nature of domestic work.

In the ongoing series *I Came Apart at the Seams*, Sophie's embodied voice appears to realise itself through hysteria. She is depicted as mimicking powerful, mythical, or spiritual figures such as the queen of the underworld, a Samurai warrior, a *sangoma* and a priestess. Sibande portrays Sophie in red, referencing anger, as a way to confront and deal with rage. In this series, Sophie, depicted as a warrior, narrates a fight against her memories of disempowerment and transforms from a red to a white figure – a healer, *sangoma* or priestess. She hereby narrates her agency and takes control of her past.

In *Long Live the Dead Queen* (2009-2011), *The Purple Shall Govern* (2013, 2014) and *I Came Apart at the Seams* (2019-ongoing), Sophie speaks through her body. According to Irigaray (1985:142), Bronfen (1998:149), Farber (2017) and Scheffer *et al.* (2017), this is a strategy that can be interpreted as typical of a hysterical reaction. I conclude that Sophie visually claims agency through performances in which, as Sibande (*in* Nair, 2020) states, she uses a bodily performance as "a communicative device" to place the domestic worker in an interactive juxtaposition with her reality. As such, Sophie is presented as the hysterical figure who transcends her disempowerment.

5.2.4 Sophie's agency

Throughout Sibande's oeuvre, Sophie's quest for agency is rooted in her hysterical transformation. In *Long Live the Dead Queen* (2009-2011), Sophie can be seen referencing agency by appropriating powerful figures. She does this, as I have mentioned in Chapter Four, by playing out fantasy roles such as a queen or an equestrian. Sophie thus expresses her agency by mimicking powerful roles (cf. Dowding, 2008:21).



Figure 5.1: Mary Sibande, *Wish You Were Here*, 2010. Mixed media installation (Ruxandra, 2011).



Figure 5.2: Mary Sibande, *Sophie-Elsie*, 2009. Mixed media installation (Sibande, 2009).

In *Wish You Were Here* (Figure 5.1), for example, Sibande plays intertextually with the Superman narrative. By claiming Superman's red S for herself, Sophie seems to be announcing that she too has superpowers (something that was in the past usually ascribed to [white] men). Additionally, Sophie claims an alternative lineage for herself as she pulls apart and appropriates a coat of arms with red wool. According to Hogarth and Pine (2019), heraldry⁴² is a symbol that is used to distinguish a person's identity

⁴² According to Hogarth and Pine (2019), heraldry refers to the use of bold symbols that is used to easily identify a group of people. These symbols, such as flags and coat of arms, were used in the Middle

as part of a certain group. In *Sophie-Elsie* (Figure 5.2), Sophie mimics British royalty by wearing a red cloak usually worn by kings or queens according (Sibande *in* Design Art Magazine, 2011). In *Her Majesty, Queen Sophie* (Figure 5.3) Sophie mimics a queen. Her Victorian attire is augmented by a large beaded necklace that spills in long strands onto the floor, each strand ending in a heavy cluster of beads. In this work, according to Henderson (2018:180), this elaborate necklace bestows Sophie with power. As Sibande (*in* Khan, 2013) states: “I wanted to make these excessive beads, like they keep on coming, they keep on making, they keep on growing.” In other words, Sophie symbolises the ongoing legacy of African, and specifically Kenyan Maasai culture, through the elaborate and excessive use of beadwork (Sibande *in* Khan, 2014:225).



Figure 5.3: Mary Sibande, *Her majesty, Queen Sophie*, 2010. Digital print (Artsy, 2018).



Figure 5.4: Mary Sibande, *The Reign*, 2010. Mixed media installation. (Artthrob, 2018).

Ages to aid those who could not read. These symbols were used on the headgear of knights, so they could identify each other.

Figure 5.5: Mary Sibande, *Silent Symphony*, 2010. Digital print (Bidouzo-Coudray, 2014).

As the title suggests, Sophie portrays a ruler in *The Reign* (Figure 5.4). Moreover, Sophie assumes the authority of a conquering, military leader. Sophie mounts the rearing horse, and acts out control over the horse, which suggests that Sophie is in a position of power (cf. Chapter 4). In *Silent Symphony* (Figure 5.5) Sophie mimics a conductor. She is at the forefront of the orchestra and acts as the musical director of the orchestra's performance.

In *I Decline, I Refuse to Recline* (Figure 5.6), as the title implies, Sophie refuses to lie down. This title may also imply that she, mentally and emotionally, does not seek or need assistance as she “declines” it. In *I Put a Spell on Me* (Figure 5.7) Sophie represents a religious leader. In this work, according to Henderson (2018:178), “Sophie brandishes the staff of a Zionist leader, in a pose that suggests religious ecstasy”. Simultaneously, Sophie looks hypnotised, as if she is blindly following someone or something. Henderson (2018:178) implies that Sophie is putting a spell on herself. By putting a spell on “herself” Sophie amplifies the performativity of her fantasy. Hence, in *Long Live the Dead Queen* (2009-2011) Sophie employs hysterical strategies in order to gain a sense of agency by representing figures who act powerfully and independently. She hereby asserts her position, gains confidence, and holds power. The agency that Sophie claims, finds significance in the social context from which she wants to escape – her silenced entrapment.



Figure 5.6: Mary Sibande, *I decline. I refuse to recline*, 2010. Mixed media installation (Gey van Pittius, 2018:128).

Figure 5.7: Mary Sibande, *I Put a Spell on Me*, 2009. Digital print (Goodman, 2010).

In *The Purple Shall Govern* (2013, 2014), she transforms to a new prevailing identity. She does this through performing not only a new colour (purple) but also a new identity. In *A Terrible Beauty is Born* (Figure 5.8), the remnants of Sophie's uniform, such as her *doek* is in the process of being taken off by the mythical "non-winged ceiling beings" she is giving birth to. When a cupid-like being appears to be putting a crown on Sophie's head, Sibande once again references a royal coronation. In the narrative processes in *The Admiration of the Purple Figure* (Figure 5.9), it appears as if Sophie has authority over the creatures around her: they kneel before her, showing respect.



Figure 5.8: Mary Sibande, *A terrible beauty is born*, 2013. Digital print (Perold, 2016).



Figure 5.9: Mary Sibande, *Admiration of The Purple Figure*, 2013. Digital print (Art Africa, 2014).



Figure 5.10: Mary Sibande, *Welding the Collision of the Past, Present and Future*, 2017. Digital print (Smac, 2019).

In *Welding the Collision of the Past, Present and Future* (2017; Figure 5.10), Sophie holds larger than life playing cards in her hands. She becomes the dealer of the cards, as if she is in charge and in control of the game. At this stage of Sophie's transformation, the new purple Sophie is frightening. Sibande (*in* Parsons, 2016:6), explains that this figure reminds one of "... something that's about to become". Sibande (*in* *Design Art* magazine, 2011) states that Sophie is "refusing the limitations of her reality and rejects subjugation by using her dress to occupy a position that is her own choosing". She is giving birth to a new powerful identity, thereby redefining herself.

In her latest contribution, *I Came Apart at the Seams* (2019 - ongoing), Sibande employs hysteria as a way for Sophie to confront the memories of her entrapped past. She does this mainly through performance, mimicry and fantasy as her body language changes into two main contradicting images: a confident and angry-looking red figure, and a serene, spiritual figure dressed in white. Ultimately, Sophie signifies a healing space in order to advance her agency. In this series, Sophie reminds us of what hooks (2015:29) describes as "a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible". Sophie transforms to a point where she realises that to deal with the legacy and memories of disempowerment, she must confront it. In *I Came Apart at the Seams* (2019-ongoing), her identity is no longer based on a subjugated and marginalized position, as she is willing to expose and confront her past. With the aim to heal, she reaches a point where she explores the collective anger about the far-reaching and continuous inequality in South Africa (cf. Simpson, 2019). In the pinnacle of her transformation, Sophie acts as an agent for healing by mimicking a powerful spiritual figure (in *There is a storm in my heart, Turn, Turn, Turn, Turn* and *To Everything there is a Season*), the queen of the underworld (*The Domba Dance*), and a Samurai warrior (*Come You Spirits of the Land and Skies; Good is Bad and Bad is Good*). She no longer exposes inequalities by being subversive (as set out in Chapter Three). Rather, by talking back (as one can clearly see in her body language, gestures and stance), she is claiming her right to reconcile.



Figure 5.11: Mary Sibande, *Domba Dance*, 2019. Mixed media installation (Smac, 2019).

With this in mind, Brownwell (2019) points out that Sophie is addressing collective anger. In this series (see for example *Domba Dance* and *There is a Storm in My Heart*), Sophie is portrayed not as a passive figure, but as an angry one feeding a heart to what Sibande (2019) describes as the “red hell hounds”. In *The Domba Dance* (2019) the transformation and metamorphoses of Sophie are very literally referenced. It can be interpreted as Sophie’s initiation into empowerment and agency, since the Domba dance (as set out in Chapter Four) is an initiation ceremony from childhood to adulthood. This can be deduced from the coloured arms that form the backdrop of *The Domba Dance* (Figure 5.11), where there is a clear reference to time as the sleeves change from blue, to purple, to red, thereby signifying Sophie’s past identities. Her arms are detached from her body. These arms all extend and point to the middle red figure, as if to emphasise the centre.



Figure 5.12: Mary Sibande, *The Locus*, 2020. Digital print (Artsy, 2020).

Figure 5.13: Mary Sibande, *Good is Bad and Bad is Good*, 2020. Bronze (Artsy, 2020).

Figure 5.14: Mary Sibande, *Come You Spirits of the Land and Skies*, 2019. Digital print (Smac, 2019).

As mentioned earlier, in *I Came Apart at the Seams* (2019-ongoing), her objective to gain agency transforms into a need to confront the past, even if it necessitates a fight. In this series, Sophie is seen preparing for what appears to be a war – against those in power perhaps. It is significant that Sophie is ready for the fight, which poses a stark contrast to depictions of Sophie in the first series (cf. *They Don't Make Them Like They Use To*, 2008). Her willingness to fight is evident in *The Locus* (Figure 5.12), *Good is Bad and Bad is Good* (Figure 5.13), and *Come You Spirits of the Land and Skies* (Figure 5.14), where her clothes resemble those of a Japanese Samurai warrior. In these works, Sophie assumes the position of a combatant who fights as a way to confront and express her anger.

In *I Came Apart at the Seams* a transformation in Sophie's agency can be seen. She re-directs her anger about the past to simultaneously give herself permission to speak and move beyond her entrapment. She thereby becomes the healer of her own narrative.



Figure 5.15: Mary Sibande, *There is a Storm in my Heart*, 2019. Digital print (Smac, 2019).

In *There is a Storm in my Heart* (Figure 5.15) Sophie is depicted in a position between anger and healing. In this work, her anger does not deter her from acting as a healer. In *There is a Storm in my Heart* Sophie is represented as a *sangoma*, priest or some type of transcendent figure who, according to Sibande (2019), acts as a healer between the past, present and future. By presenting Sophie as a *sangoma*, Sibande creates a symbolic healing space between the past (night) and present (day), in order

to heal from both. Sophie's possession of agency over her own narrative is also evident from Zehra (2019) who defines Sophie as “the healing space needed between the past and present.”



Figure 5.16: Mary Sibande, *Turn, Turn, Turn, Turn*, 2019. Digital print (Smac, 2019)



Figure 5.17: Mary Sibande, *To Everything there is a Season*, 2019. Digital print (Smac, 2019).

In *I Came Apart at the Seams* (2019- ongoing) Sibande also focuses on Sophie the healer. This is particularly noticeable in *Turn, Turn, Turn, Turn* (Figure 5.16) and *To Everything there is a Season* (5.17), as Sibande uses white to signify healing. This is also evident in Sophie's dress, which is white and no longer as extravagant as earlier, and creates the impression that the anger has subsided in her and, as such, that she is experiencing a sense of peace. Therefore, in *I Came Apart at the Seams* (2019- ongoing), Sophie reaches the climax of her transformation by confronting her past through her body, thereby experiencing mastery over the past and present.

5.3 Final thoughts

In conclusion, Sophie's agency transforms throughout Sibande's oeuvre by employing hysteria as a visual strategy in order to talk back to oppressive social structures. This develops from an initial representation and embodiment of a “silenced” black domestic worker, confronted by hierarchical social structures. Sophie's metamorphosis becomes evident as she utilises hysterical strategies, specifically fantasy and mimicry, to challenge and escape her subjugated position in the social structure. Simultaneously, Sibande destabilises Sophie's story of subjugation by placing Sophie

as the protagonist in all three series, and by exposing, confronting, questioning and, ultimately, escaping her oppression through fantasy. As seen in *Long Live the Dead Queen* (2009-2011) and *The Purple Shall Govern* (2013-2014), through hysterical strategies she also escapes servitude and gives birth to a new powerful identity. In *I Came Apart at the Seams* (2019-ongoing), she uses hysteria to reference a figure who is not predicated on a position of marginality, but rather signifies a healing space. In this sense, Sophie becomes a symbolic declaration of black agency. In *I Came Apart at the Seams* (2019- ongoing) Sophie is presented as, in contrast to a silenced domestic worker, an angry, empowered and spiritual figure who is talking back through the body. Sophie's transformation can therefore ultimately be seen in her becoming the subject of her own story.

The question can be asked; does Sophie remain hysterical? In my opinion, yes. Throughout all three series, Sophie's eyes are always closed, indicating that she is in a state of fantasy. She therefore still employs hysterical strategies of fantasy and mimicry in order to convey the narrative of her own story. Although Sophie does have agency in all the series, she is silenced and deprived of linguistic means to such an extent that she is dependent on the hysterical strategies used by disempowered women. This is appropriate because it reflects the current socio-political circumstances of South Africa where black women, especially domestic workers, are still disempowered and vulnerable (cf. 3.2). If Sophie, as the protagonist in Sibande's oeuvre, was no longer oppressed, then her depiction in the three series would be a utopian portrayal of a black domestic worker, which is not Sibande's goal, as she goes about critically with the contemporary stereotypical portrayal of black women.

However, the dynamic of the transformation of Sophie's strive for agency creates a dimension that, in my opinion, leaves an open question about the extent to which Sophie accomplishes her aim. Since she still uses hysterical strategies, the possibility arises that Sophie, although she gains agency, has not yet fully achieved the agency she desires or is fighting for. Sophie has agency when she talks back in all three series; but since she still uses hysterical strategies to do so, the transformation of Sophie's agency is possibly not yet complete.

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