

## Looking in the Mirror of *ulwela amaza* by Buhlebezwe Siwani

*A Reflection by Jennifer Tosch*

“How does one tell impossible stories? Stories about women, children, and men bearing names that deface and disfigure? How do we capture the words exchanged between captives, freedom-seekers, the self-emancipated warriors, and their descendants—when their voices were never recorded in the archives, their appeals, prayers, and secrets never uttered because no one was there to receive them?”<sup>1</sup>

I co-wrote this poem for *Sites of Memory (SoM)*, a site-specific historical theater company I co-founded that centers on the lived experiences of the enslaved, self-emancipated, and freedom-seekers—people who have been forgotten or deliberately erased from dominant historical narratives. This poem was inspired by Saidiya Hartman’s essay *Venus in Two Acts* (2008),<sup>2</sup> which wrestles with the challenge of telling stories that history has silenced or ignored.

When I first entered the exhibition space at ROZENSTRAAT—a rose is a rose is a rose, I was struck by a sense of familiarity, despite never having been there before. The installation *ulwela amaza* (2024) held echoes of the locations where SoM had performed over the years. The presence of artist Buhlebezwe Siwani (South Africa, 1987) in our project *Emerging Memory* (2019) further deepened my connection to this exhibition. As I absorbed the videos projected on life-size screens positioned throughout the room while listening to Logan Hon Mua’s haunting and melodic score, I felt as though the room was filled with stories interconnected across time and space. Interwoven with the stories, the performers’ choreography appeared synchronized with the soundscape—yet it was not. Their gestures and movements conveyed the concept of a non-narrative embodied knowledge in dance, a form of understanding inherent to the body that emphasizes the significance of a somatic experience—knowledge gained through movement and sensation. Rather than being only physical, the dancers themselves became a profound expression of knowing and being.

On opening night, the anticipation was palpable. Siwani’s work is marked by its ability to challenge, provoke, and expand the viewer’s perceptions. The entryway buzzed with the energy of arriving guests, leading into a narrow hallway that opened onto a deceptively simple gallery space. The stark white walls serve as a backdrop for the profound visual narratives. Each film is set in recognizable locales in Amsterdam, such as the Rijksmuseum and the Museum Van Loon, as well as at the sea in Middelburg, where Dutch East and West India company ships once passed. The floor beneath the screens was layered with colonial commodities —sugar, coffee, cocoa, and spices—material remnants of histories of exploitation that continue to reverberate in the present.

I immersed myself in the sensory experience that the installation conjured. The film projections felt like portals to another time and space. Then, as the soundscape shifted, a voice emerged—a voice both familiar and otherworldly. The six performers stepped forward as if materializing from the very screens on which their choreographies were projected. Their movements captivated their individual expressions in how they occupied the space. They were not performing for us, but in spite of our presence. Their performance was not a staged spectacle; it was an extension of the exhibition’s spirit—an embodiment of histories that demand to be felt, not merely observed.

I share my experience of *ulwela amaza* not as a critic but as a descendant-observer, weaving my personal reflections into the broader cultural and historical narratives Siwani invokes. The project invites us to engage deeply with themes of adjacency, symbolism, language, and ritual, positioning these within the long shadow of colonial history. Through this engagement, we are compelled not only to look outward but also inward—to see ourselves reflected in these narratives to interrogate our own place within history, and to question how we choose to remember, acknowledge, and act.

### **Positioning Ourselves: Adjacency vs. Distance**

Tina Campt, a feminist theorist of visual culture and contemporary art, offers a compelling framework for understanding *ulwela amaza* through the lens of adjacency. She defines adjacency as “the reparative work of transforming proximity into accountability: the labor of positioning oneself in relation to another in ways that revalue and redress complex histories of dispossession” (2019).<sup>3</sup> This concept is central to the exhibition. Siwani’s work does not permit passive observation; it urges us to close the distance between ourselves and the historical and contemporary narratives unfolding before us. Rather than maintaining an academic or analytical detachment, we are called to engage intimately with these scenes and locations—recognizing our entanglement in the continuum of memory and forgetting.

This proximity is not comfortable. It requires reckoning with the past in the present that is often ignored or sanitized. It demands an acknowledgment of complicity and inheritance. But in stepping closer, in embracing the discomfort, there is potential for deeper understanding and, perhaps, for transformation.

### **The Power of Symbolism**

Throughout *ulwela amaza*, symbolism plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative and evoking deeper emotional responses. The placement of colonial commodities on the gallery floor is not arbitrary. These were among the goods that fueled the transatlantic slave trade, embedding a painful legacy within what we now consume everyday. These substances carry histories of forced labor, displacement, and brutality—histories that continue to shape global inequalities today.

The video installation and live performance are equally steeped in symbolism. In one moment the six performers are bound together, their movements evoking the motion of waves that would have been experienced by the enslaved crammed into the hull of a ship. The choreography is not just representational; but also an embodied reenactment of memory, an assertion that these histories are not abstract but lived and felt. The haunting score that permeates the gallery creates an ancestral presence, reinforcing the idea that history is not a static past but a force that continues to breathe and shape our present.

### **Rituals as Resistance and Healing**

Siwani’s work critiques not only the historical commodification of Black bodies but also the ongoing ways in which Black existence is constrained within societal structures. By situating dancers in historically charged locations, she highlights the persistence of colonial legacies and

institutional racism. Yet, amidst this critique, the exhibition also offers moments of resistance and healing.

Rituals—tea drinking, dance, music—are interwoven throughout the live performance are not simply aesthetic choices; they are acts of reclamation. In a conversation with Buhlebezwe after the opening she describes the rituals as, “gathering (our ancestors) back together to bring them home”.<sup>4</sup>

Ritual has long been a means of survival, of connecting to ancestors, of asserting presence in traditionally colonial spaces. The choreography of the performers, who emerge from the screens into the physical space, amplifies this reclamation. Their movements defy the confines of history, carving out space for remembrance and agency. Even without the live performance, I understood Buhlebezwe’s intention.

### **Confronting the Afterlife of Slavery**

*ulwela amaza* compels us to reckon with the afterlife of slavery—the ways in which its legacies persist in systemic racism, economic disparities, and the erasure of Black narratives. Hartman describes this as “an ongoing state of emergency in which Black life remains in peril”. Siwani’s work does not offer easy answers, nor does it provide closure. Instead, it insists that we sit with these histories, that we acknowledge their weight, that we confront the uncomfortable truths they reveal.

How do we navigate the in-between space between acknowledgment and action? We must continue to interrogate the production of knowledge, dismantling outdated and dominant narratives. We must continue to amplify marginalized voices, make hidden histories visible, confront injustice, and stand in solidarity with one another. We must co-create a future not only built on diversity and inclusion but on justice and equity.

### **Conclusion: Art as a Space for Remembrance and Reimagining**

Art is not simply an aesthetic endeavor; it is a space of struggle, remembrance, repair, and possibility. It allows us to reckon with the past while imagining new futures. Through storytelling, ritual, and performance, we can reclaim lost narratives and restore dignity to those whom history has forgotten, ignored or erased.

*ulwela amaza* is an invitation—a call to look deeper, to engage more fully, to refuse the easy distance of historical abstraction. It challenges us to ask: What do we choose to remember? And how do we ensure that the voices of the past continue to shape our collective consciousness?

Through Siwani’s work, we are reminded that history is not behind us; it is with us, shaping who we are and who we might become.

#### **References:**

1. Poem adapted by Jennifer Tosch in collaboration with *Sites of Memory*.
2. Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”, in *Small Axe*, Number 26 (Volume 12, Number 2), June 2008, pp. 1-14, Duke University Press.
3. Tina Campt, “Adjacency” lecture in “Retouch” Conference, 2019. Available [online](#).
4. Conversation with Buhlebezwe Siwani, December 2024.

**Jennifer Tosch** is the founder of Black Heritage Tours, which aims to reveal the hidden colonial history within the built environment. Guests explore the earliest presence of people, both free and enslaved, who arrived from various parts of the world. In addition, Jennifer is the co-founder of *Sites of Memory*, an organization that produces history-themed theater.

She is also a member of the *Mapping Slavery Project Netherlands* and has co-authored three books: *Amsterdam* (2014, 2019), *The Netherlands Slavery Heritage Guide* (2019), and *Dutch New York Histories* (2017). Jennifer was born in Brooklyn, New York, to Surinamese parents. Her ancestors also come from Suriname and West Africa; and, since 1944, the Netherlands.