

Cracking-open vernacular stand-up comedy: Reflections on Celeste Ntuli's work on sexuality

Noma Pakade

Abstract

After 1994, the South African stand-up comedy scene was dominated, shaped and defined by men. Stand-up comedy is now expanding in its various expressions. The insurgence of 'vernacular' comedy and visibility of women comedians are amongst the disruptions that signal the relevance of subjectivities. The central theme of this article is the location of Celeste Ntuli and her – award-winning comedy – within an exploration of Black cultural reproduction. Ntuli presents her narrative(s) through humour while critiquing the socio-political which stereotypes woman's subjectivities. Sexual and gender stereotypes feature heavily in her work, and so the article focuses on Ntuli's subversive counternarratives performed through self-reflective anecdotes. The article will further tease out women's sexuality as a confrontation between social and cultural limits. Ntuli's autobiographical style highlights the visibility of Black womanhood through the self, which is embroiled in a thoughtful critique of social issues. In the article I demonstrate how Ntuli positions her voice by questioning the existing hierarchies of power through playful narratives in comedy – and constructing sexuality as (re) negotiation, expression and subversion.

keywords: Celeste Ntuli; stand-up comedy; 'vernacular' comedy; sexuality

“We naturally deal with a lot of crap. In a day, I deal with four or five things because of patriarchy, so I'm not always going to skip those issues. Men, if you look at their material, are always having fun, and that is something that resonates with their boys' club mentality. There are a lot who speak of serious issues like race and politics, but I find that being the only woman on stage at night among seven guys, women can still do it all and maintain their femininity. Women are funny in general because we carry a lot in our lives, minds and handbags” (Kwanele Sosibo, 'Celeste Ntuli', Special Report, *Mail and Guardian*, August 31, 2018).

Introduction

Stand-up comedy has been gradually opening up in post-1994 South Africa, moving from a white-male dominated sphere to a sphere which is both racially and gender-inclusive. The changes are evident in the participation of people from various backgrounds and geographies and the recent emergence of what is dubbed 'vernacular' comedy. Seirlis (2011) sketches the boom of comedy in post-1994 South Africa, quoting Kassir, that by 1997 there were 27 known comedians. Parker (2002) references how the 25th Anniversary of the National Arts Festival, held in Makhanda (formerly known as Grahamstown) between 29th June and 11th July 1999, had an all-male team of 13 stand-up comedians.

It is undeniable that the increased production of stand-up comedy is tied to its commercialisation. For instance, festivals such as the 2019 *One Africa Comedy*,¹ hosted in South Africa, facilitated the visibility of artists like Agnes Akite (Uganda) and Eunice Mommite (Kenya), enabling the intracontinental exposure of stand-up comedians. Another

example is the *AY Comedy Show* in Lagos, Nigeria, which hosted South African comedian Thenjiwe Moseley in 2017,² Similarly, Nigerian comedian Basket Mouth has hosted several gigs in Nigeria,³ inviting a variety of African stand-up comedians, including Celeste Ntuli. The documentation and distribution of the live performances, such as the documentary *In Stitches*⁴ and online streaming services such as Netflix, have also diversified the catalogue of stand-up comedy both in its production and accessibility to wider audiences.

In academia, there has been development of humour or comedy studies which also includes African case studies. For instance, Kinuu (2013) uses a pragmatic approach to analyse Eric Omondi's performances regarding the usage of stereotypes in Kenyan stand-up comedy. Various categories are explored, including stereotypical framing of women, tribes, body sizes, nationalities and regions. Onyancha (2015) locates the Ugandan comedian Anne Kansime Kubiryabas' work (both sketches and stand-up) within humour studies' theories rather than a socio-cultural reading – for example, the gendered forms that Kansime's work represents. While in Nigeria, Adejunmobi (2014) acknowledges that despite the post-2000s expansion of Nollywood and other commercially oriented stand-up performances, there are few women like Helen Paul who have managed to make a name for themselves. Similarly, Wafaa (2017) maps the stand-up comedy scene in Saudi Arabia by foregrounding bilingual creativity in performances.

It is in this context that Ntuli is continuously aware of her contribution within comedy as a Black Zulu-speaking woman. As the opening quotation suggests, the visibility of female comedians disrupts the normalisation of a male-dominated industry, but tied to this is the burden of proving that women are funny. In the quote – Ntuli's response to whether women make better comedians because of their gendered struggles – is an awareness of patriarchy as a source of women's challenges and thereby centres related social concerns for interrogation, as part of her work. For this piece, Ntuli is singled out partly because of her visibility and accolades as a known celebrity (stand-up comedian, actress, producer, MC and so on), but more because of her consistent provocations on women's body image, relationships and sex as re-emerging areas of discussion in her work and off-stage in personal interviews. This article attends explicitly to the articulations of Black female subjectivity through Ntuli's work, relying on secondary data – interviews and recorded performances – to illustrate stand-up comedy as performance of what hooks (1995) refers to as a site of educational opposition.

Journeying into comedy

Ntuli's career path

Celeste Ntuli, also affectionately known by her clan name MaMbhele, was born in KwaZulu-Natal, Empangeni-Eniwe, in 1975, as the sixth child of eight (Ncube, 2018). Ntuli attended public township schools, which, according to her, was an upgrade as her older siblings went to rural schools (Kaya FM Uncaptured, 2019). By chance, while walking in downtown Durban, Ntuli saw a comedy poster and knew the contact person, Sthe Khumalo, whom she had met during her university years. This turned into her first gig which was held in a church. Ntuli was told not to discuss religion, sex and politics. She refers to this as the 'Jesus Corporate Gig', and the only thing left was for her to talk about her life. The first joke was about her family and buying clothes from Pep⁵ (Mdoda, 2017). She made R500 at the gig but returned to her employment at Exclusive Books⁶ where she worked and read self-help books and African fiction (Mdoda, 2017).

Ntuli harnessed her interest and received support from her social environment, in the sense that people would invite her to parties because she would create a vibe with her stories (Garda, 2015). A friend's boyfriend lent her group of friends a DVD of *Kings of Comedy*, which featured African American stand-up comedy greats such as Bernie Mac, Richard Pryor and others. As she watched the video, it occurred to her that she did this with her friends. Pryor (December 1, 1940 – December 10, 2015) was an African American comedian, writer and actor, a revered entertainer from the 1970s, whose stand-up material focused on race relations and racial inequalities in the United States. Ntuli was particularly impressed with Pryor's social commentary on race; the joke that brought it home to her was Pryor marking the difference in how Black and white men would respond to a snake in a safari setting, to make the point that Black people explore life cautiously, geared towards survival mode, while white men would most likely confront the snake to their detriment. This was hilarious to Ntuli. That was the beginning of her journey into comedy. Although Ntuli's interest is in women, based on her experiences and those she has witnessed in her life, it can be argued that Ntuli's style is influenced by Pryor's in its social critique of gender inequalities and stereotypes.

Monwabisi Grootboom called Ntuli for her first professional gig, as one of the producers of the *99% Zulu Comedy Show* – the longest standing vernacular comedy show to date – in December 2005. By then, a lot of corporate gigs had started inviting her. Ntuli joined *So You Think You're Funny*, a comedy competition show, which aired on SABC 1 in 2009 and was one of the top three finalists. In the same year, she participated in a show with Eugene Khoza and Loyisa Gola⁷ at the Durban International Convention Centre (ICC) which was organised by MTN⁸. This would be Ntuli's first standing ovation. Eugene called her the following day to suggest that she should quit her day job. Indeed, Ntuli resigned on that day (Garda, 2015). Precisely because the industry is dominated by men, as is the case elsewhere, much of the support Ntuli received came from male comedians and entertainment organisers. Ntuli refers to Gola as her personal role model: quoting Gola, she says, "Comedy is a personality sport, you can't tell a story and be starring all the time. The intention is to make people laugh. The jokes grow with practice, after each show it evolves" (Mdoda, 2017). Aside from Pryor and Gola, her late father remains a key source of inspiration.

Holmes (2017), in articulating the art of stand-up, notes that stand-up is the artist's public conversation with themselves while feeding off interactions with the audience, thereby projecting a theatrical embodiment of themselves as self-disclosure. They reveal nuances about a given society, and, using humour, they expose cultural patterns to both subvert and reproduce the status quo. That is, beyond entertainment; stand-up comedy surfaces societal affairs. Therefore, it is not surprising that Ntuli's work centres on Black women's experiences. Similarly, Greenbaum (1999:34) positions stand-up comedy as persuasion towards the comic's vision:

By adopting a stage persona and employing the standard narrative tools of comedy – incongruity, exaggeration, sexual hyperbole, mockery, reversal, mimicry, punning – comedians used their comic voices to control the rhetorical dimensions of their speech. Further, I discovered that comic speech, as it moves from thought to transcript to performance, is in a constant state of revision, bouncing off the needs and mood of the audience.

When asked about the process of stand-up comedy, Ntuli responded:

“I write after I come on stage, I make a note on what I would like to talk about. The joke might not work for many reasons; it could be the timing of the word; just one word might make a whole difference with the punchline. So for me to understand, I have to try it with different audiences. We are together in this thing; I am telling a story, the audience feeds it back to me, responding with the oohs, the aahs, and the laughter” (Kaya FM Uncaptured, 2019:n.p.).

Greenbaum speaks of the use of standard narrative tools to control the rhetorical dimensions of comedians’ speech, and the constant state of revisions bounced off communication with the audience. This is the feedback, and reworking of the timing and the punchline bounced off of the responses through sounds and laughter. The persuasion of the stand-up content lies in the reworking of the stories shared towards resonance, if not understanding, between the comedian and their audience. The temporality of the reworkings is not spontaneous; it is a deliberate assessment of the interplay between delivery and reception. It becomes a continuous process of toning and persuasion, and of thought frames or perceptions. Ntuli insists on intentions or drive as integral to her work, delivering an authentic performance that is accessible, and questioning of a social phenomenon (Garda, 2015). hooks (1995:211), in her book chapter ‘Performance practice as a site of opposition’, makes the case that a performative standpoint matters. If the enquiry considers critical intervention, then ‘ritual play’ as an embodied performance of everyday experiences into the public becomes a cultural terrain for reinforcing or transmitting ideas as public production. Ntuli, believes we live in changing times and references the increasing representation and various expressions of Black womanhood, noting a paradigm shift:

“We come from a culture that taught us to hate ourselves. To undo this damage, we have to look into ourselves ... I’m very hopeful with what is happening in the world in terms of comedy. In as much as comedians are crazy, they are honest. There isn’t a show I watch and not come out with something in terms of how the world is viewed or how it views us with whatever issues the comedian raises. In South Africa, it is much more important, because we are a dialogue country. Only now after 23 years, people are waking up into ‘ok what is going on politically?’ We have been happy; it was freedom. Guys we gave people to handle things, we were partying. Now our situation is questioning us, what is it that we know, understand, and where we are going as a country. That is why comedy becomes a healing process ... That is why comedians are becoming important, even with little things and institutions, people are questioning marriages, religion etc.” (Ncube, 2018:n.p.).

Ntuli's autobiographical style highlights the visibility of Black womanhood through the self: her comic persona becomes that of a friend questioning, inviting the audience to witness her in this questioning while assessing whether she resonates with her audience. She uses isiZulu to surface cultural representations, not just as an accessible language or genre, but to offer a critique on gender and sex stereotypes. Ntuli, generally in her work summons the woman’s body into question. At times, she critiques the yellow bone trope (or light-skin) as a standard of beauty or refers to thick women as winter stocks along with how they navigate sexy selfies and underwear in keeping up with relationship playfulness. In essence, her work returns us to the body within a South African experience of gendered inequalities. As Bakare-Yusuf (2003:20), advancing a phenomenological theory of African female existence, argues that the body is the existential ground of experience and perception:

the body is understood as a situation, with this implying both freedom and constraint in the ongoing dialogue between world and embodied agent. The meaning of “African woman” becomes material, embodied, multiple and generative, rather than a disembodied abstraction.

Thus Ntuli’s thematic focus, from her subject position, folds into her personhood and that of a projected comic persona embedded in its context – the practice of making the personal political.

Ntuli’s catalogue of comedy

Seriously Celeste (2010) was the first post-1994 recorded South African DVD of a one-woman show. She later used the same title for her two-hour radio experimentation show during which she played music and shared her jokes. *Black Tax* and *Home Affairs* are some of her other one-woman shows to date. Ntuli’s catalogue of comedy, the titles and subject matter illustrate her consistent interest in the embodied experiences of being a Black woman. Consciously, the show would be planned for women's month, which coincides with Ntuli’s birthday. Reflecting on this, Ntuli says, “There is progress but much questioning. For example, we're almost told how strong we are, but I don't want to be the strong beautiful woman” (Channel Africa, n.d.:n.p.). In this article I focus on the *99% Zulu Comedy Show*, one of her earlier performances, to illustrate what constitutes the sexual in Ntuli’s work.

Boyce *et al* (2018:2) point out that sex and sexuality are complex concepts as terms of analysis, as they are both referenced as specific and universal terms, thereby recognising sexualities as a manifold of “configurations of embodied intimacies” that include the ambiguities of sexual experiences that may not be readily presented. African scholarship on sexuality or conceptualising African sexualities is an ongoing debate (see for example Ahlberg, 1994; Mama, 1996; Ampofo *et al*, 2004; Aniekwu, 2006; Salo and Gqola, 2006; Undie and Benaya, 2006; Arnfred, 2009). Magubane (2014) is amongst the African scholars advocating for sexualities as a central area of enquiry in African feminist thought leadership. Although Magubane’s (2014) analysis of sexuality is on the dynamics of the state and its subjects (the state-sponsored violence through legislations such as the Ugandan anti-pornographic law, the late 2000s spread of anti-homosexuality legislation across Africa and the limitation of legislation, in South Africa, for preventing violence and promoting social cohesion in diversity), these narratives are presented as a register, which present the normative expectation of sexuality. As a move away from reading sexualities in human rights-based activism, as suggested by Boyce *et al* (2018), yet situated in Magubane’s broader call, this piece explores the notion of sexuality in stand-up comedy as a critical site of public dialogue, as an attempt to situate questioning as a feminist practice.

Ntuli sets the tone for her set (*99% Zulu Comedy Show*), by first acknowledging Vusi Ximba⁹, a musician whom she performed after by briefly mimicking his comedic style of sexually explicit narratives with the shock factor. Ntuli's grandmother had a crush on Ximba; the grandmother would tell her what she would do with Ximba if they met:

“*Uma ngingakuthola loku okunguVusi ngingavele ngikugone la bese ngithi kuqabule la*” (If I were to find that Vusi, I would grab him and instruct him to kiss me here: gesturing towards the neck) (Ntuli, 2013:n.p.).

A grandmother over the age of 73 years is sexualised further when Ntuli says grandmothers love their sex but tend to project an asexual life – “*umuntu okhanda igiza kodwa enza ngathi akayikhandi*” (literally, a person who repairs a geyser but acts as if they don’t repair it). Ntuli recognises the power of pleasure along with other competing interests. The grandmother is sexualised with the agency over her desire for Ximba – positioned as a sex symbol in ways relatable to the type of Black masculinity projected through *uMaskandi*¹⁰ as a Zulu cultural expression in song and music. Age is an entry point to the continuum of desire and life stages; she makes public the couched desires amongst the elderly in comparison to the silence of the younger generation’s (possibly uncomfortable or surprising) sexual explorations. Ntuli complains that the elders shy away from discussing their sexual exploration or sexual activities as a commitment to the monogamous mother, who only knows sexual intimacy from the father of her children. Heterosexism remains dominant, along with what Gqola (2015) terms the cult of femininity, Ntuli opens up these expressions of femininity through their limitations, benefits and surprises.

On sexual practices, the other thread running through the same set is the notion of *ukulahla* (literally means to throw out or give away – in this instance, sex). The plot is heterosexist; the insistence is that *ukulahla* happens as if to negotiate admission. As a matter of statement, Ntuli faces women as her audience:

“All of us here, including myself, must admit that *sike salahla* – we have given away. It won’t make you a terrible person, just own the cookie. It’s the sex that shows that *ulahlile* – gave away [it is often a post analysis], as a woman you become one with the headboard – (gesturing) as one can tell they are being worked” (Ntuli, 2013:n.p.).

For Ndlovu (2019:171), *ukulahla* among the Ndebele Zimbabwean speakers is associated with the youth-slang euphemism associated with ‘a sexually loose lady’. However, in the South African context, the phrase was popularised by the 2015 Kwaito hit song *Sister Bettina* by Mgarimbe who admitted that after listening to the song, he was embarrassed by it, as it is about luring women with money to have sex (Grethe Kemp, ‘Here’s the story behind the national anthem, Sister Bettina’, *City Press*, September 13, 2020).¹¹ There is no doubt that the sexual meaning attached to *ukulahla* is part of popular culture. Nonetheless, it is Shai’s (2018) interpretation of *ukulahla* situated in the constructions of ‘modern girl femininity’ and sexual agency that echoes Ntuli’s sentiments. Shai (2018:xiv) refers to *ukulahla* “... as the act of women having sex with men who finance their entertainment in this context, material benefits.” The women who participate in the practice operate within a code of conduct that facilitates the avoidance of *ukulahla* associated with binge drinking, black-outs and sex with strangers. Shai (2018) concludes that the construction of femininity is entangled with women’s health risks and human rights violation, and on the other hand, with women’s resilience, and agency.

Similarly for Ntuli, the story is that of casual sex, and how at times the intercourse takes different turns from what was anticipated, even alluding to what Chengeta (forthcoming) writes about amongst young university students ‘consenting to unwanted sex’. However, it also borders on surprising elements of sexual exploration. It is an insider’s observation of single women trying to date and enjoy sex – a cautionary tale on the pitfalls of sexual liberation. Yet it reiterates the heterosexual script of the male as the doer of sex in so far as the woman is the other party that is “being worked”. Notwithstanding that desire takes various forms, the stark gestures signal the negotiation of casual sex by positioning the woman in a question that asks, would you recognise the moment when ‘you consent to

unwanted sex' or surprise oneself in sexual exploration? It is a moment of being present that points to particular awareness, *zokulahla*. Ntuli's critique is of women's (limited) agency over their sexual pleasure; the subject position of women as the passive-receptive sexual subjects in the act of sex, and also the socio-economic conditions of transactional sex through which alcohol consumption in a party setting is subsidised by men who expect sex in return.

In the 2017 Johannesburg International Comedy Festival – which was established in 2015 – Ntuli's set attributes pain-pleasure centred sexual acts to racialised experiences, as in the Hollywood blockbuster movie *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The movie opens up a commentary around sexual scripts with regards to what becomes acceptable for a Zulu girl. It is also affirming in the sense that, while the mainstream projects such kinks and explorations outside the acceptable norm, it is also acceptable to stick to what one knows, in terms of exploration, skills and conversations.

“I stick to my lane: the sjambok, handcuffs, blindfolds, really who must die. The choking with eye-balls out *Fifty Shades of Grey* is for white people, I'm a Zulu girl. Sex is like an audition – you give but not too much. Blowjobs come with the congregation and skills. We need to stick to our lanes” (Ntuli, 2017:n.p.)

By drawing on *umjendevu*¹² (single woman), *nokulahla* and lifting the veil off the asexual grandmother, this is a stance on sexual agency devoid of a critique of heterosexism. However, it is not a reinforcement through complicit masking of sexual satisfaction of the male gaze. For Ntuli, the older women's narratives are mediated by rural upbringing, and the omission of sexual pleasure. As Spronk (2009) signals, sexuality through sexual pleasure as agency is embroiled in cultural belonging and the centrality of sex in self-identification. Similarly, Willett *et al* (2012) writing on the erotic politics of laughter, argue that the use of humour accumulates political force by borrowing from the shock value of the obscene, which is a feature of feminist humour. Ntuli projects this persistent reality of how sex is an ongoing negotiation through which women are active agents of their sexual lives despite the heteronormative and other related constraints. Ntuli does not read women as the oppressed. In conversation with women, she questions how women see themselves in their situatedness. She recognises the sexual through sex acts – in which gender performance in sexual practices are an arena of contested power – by surfacing and questioning women's agency.

Navigating the industry

Commenting on the challenges in the industry, Ntuli believes that stand-up comedy is not perceived as work; as a result, artists are underpaid. While Public Relations (PR) and management companies are useful in the commercialisation of art, Ntuli only took this path in March 2018.

“PR companies do not know how to sell artists, people are not sold properly. People underpay female comedians, and when people are not commercialised this becomes harder ... the tendency is to sell what is common ... I can't show a thigh, cleavage and makeup to sell my work, it's just not me. There is nothing wrong with those who do but people fail to understand that as artists, we are different and for different markets. Then you find managers and PR teams that can't sell you. I sell myself better most of the time because it's hard to find someone who can implement the vision you have as an artist ... For me to do the *Black Tax* show, my former manager did not believe in the dream. So I had to go at it or find another manager. Starting with the tour worked

because now people see the vision. Sometimes it's about the journey” (Ncube, 2018:n.p.).

Ntuli offers a critique of promoting women comedians through hyper-feminine packaging of the persona in the form of thigh-and-cleavage-showing, make-up-wearing woman. However, in her shows, she wears make-up and dresses up, sometimes showing her cleavage. This may appear contradictory, Ntuli ultimately illustrates the gendered projection of what sells, yet she chooses so as part of her performance rather than as pressure to comply as a condition for attracting audiences and mainstreaming her work. Ntuli often owns her look as a thick woman – *isidudla*, dark-skinned and less aligned with the ‘fashionable look’ of light-skinned and petit bodies (Ncube, 2018). The increasing participation of Black women such as Tumi Morake, the ‘first lady of comedy’ (a seSotho speaker), Celeste Ntuli, ‘Queen of Zulu comedy’, and Thenjiwe Moseley is evidence of diversity in the expansion of stand-up comedy in South Africa. Yet Noko Moswete, a South African comedian, describes in *In Stiches* the continuous work that black women in comedy have to do to prove that women can be funny (On Letter 27 Productions, 2018). Similarly, Davis (2016:18) illustrates the expectation on women, quoting Sibongile Mafu: “Female comedians have to be extra special”, she says. “You're treated like you have to do a bit more than your male counterparts. Comedy is a hard craft, whether you're male or female, but women still have to deal with the sense of surprise people have when a woman tells a joke.”

Arol's (2017) conference report, *Women and Stand-Up*, although situated within the Canadian Quebec and Indian context, shows how prejudice towards women comedians cuts across cultural boundaries. Clark (1997) and Limon (2000) point to the challenge of overcoming societal expectations on women that often feature also as content in stand-up comedy. Gilbert (2004:117) conceptualises this subject position of women as “performing their marginality is performing power”. For Haggins (2007) framing women in stand-up comedy as cultural critics is to recognise the interrogation of (gendered) conditions of existence within a context that calls attention to socio-cultural limits. Thus, the very existence of Black women in comedy is a disruption – by inclusion in the industry but also in content form (Fulton, 2004). In the case of Ntuli, however, it is not so much to position Black women’s participation as radical critique of power but rather to offer insights into women’s subject positions, even through stereotypes, as an expansion of stand-up comedy in South Africa. Their very existence takes a form of resistance that is the refusal to be represented and spoken of in their absence or as subcategories of what is made public. The performance meets resistance.

Concluding remarks

The article does not offer a comprehensive biographical account of Ntuli’s work, it highlights only one aspect (stand-up comedy), even though her passion for story-telling extends to being an actress and movie producer. Ntuli is mindful of the political in its democratic electoral landscape but recognises a need for change, hence the questioning more broadly. In her questioning, she sits within the contradictions of women’s subject positioning as she refuses to be ‘strong and beautiful’ as a Black woman. She does not see empowerment in these two attributes, or at least she is suspicious of what it means to be such, almost to say, ‘At what cost?’

It must be acknowledged that, in the process of writing this article, there is a loss encountered by transposing performance into descriptive text; there is a shift in meaning from the stage to the page. Interpreting a comedy as performance, along with the translations into English,

makes the text removed from the many layers of the story along with its retelling as performative. While her comedy is delivered in isiZulu, it projects an equivalent to what Dowling (1996) referred to as isiXhosa oral humour encompassing knowledge of the culture and language. Dowling (1996) and Turner (1990) make the example of *Izibongo/Izithakazelo* – personal praises tied to clan-lineage – praise poetry that contains ‘amusing’ elements. Moreover, what the authors refer to as teasing is integral to the language that combines satire and caricature, along with comedy and humour in riddles, folktales, proverbs, word-play and tongue-twisters. This humour pours out into ordinary everyday conversations. hooks (1995) attests to the transgressive impulse of Black live performance, and its power to mark the territory of unofficial histories and to affirm unofficial acts, which is what Ntuli grapples with in her usage of isiZulu. It is testimony that African languages are infused with elements of humour even though stand-up comedy may be a recent phenomenon. The notion of Black or ethnic humour has been less explored in the literature concerning comedy in Africa. However, the idea of vernacular comedy in South Africa opens up similar discussions on language and cultural markers in a context of an English dominated stand-up comedy while projecting Black subjectivities from the realm of the marginal majority.

In this ‘cultural terrain’ of performance, I position Ntuli’s work as an example of the practices of questioning that run parallel to traditional organising, concerned with women’s subjectivities. What exists here is the feminist practice of questioning: through stand-up comedy. She mobilises the mind towards a dialogue on women’s sexuality – thus tapping into topical issues in feminist discourse through stand-up comedy as a performance of social critique. Her subject of interest is women but within a context of Black South African or Zulu narratives of everyday life. Stand-up comedy does not take the form of politics as organised interest or the politics of representation as critiqued by Neocosmos (2016),¹³ rather it becomes the collective mobilisation of thought towards an open stance. It means mobilising the psyche in relatable ways that value the everyday narrative, and that the human experience is that capital that we should not lose sight of when (or if) we mobilise. As a thought process, it is a public dialogue that makes explicit the conditions and the distribution of power in gendered forms. Ntuli projects women as sexual subjects, not in the familiar ‘art for social justice’ which Sachs (1991) has argued was necessary for transitioning South Africa towards national unity, but a kind that dares to be politically incorrect, that blurs the-so-called divide of public-private in making bare the tensions of what is sexual.

Notes on contributors

NOMANCOTSHO PAKADE has extensive working experience in advocacy and documentation work in NGOs and research posts, with a focus on education, gender and sexuality. Currently, she is a Doctoral candidate at the Department of History and Heritage Studies, University of Pretoria. Noma is also a researcher at the Public Affairs Research Institute. Email: ncotsho@gmail.com.

Notes

1 See poster: https://www.nmbt.co.za/events/one_africa_comedy_experience.html (accessed 4 May 2020).

2 See clip of Moseley’s performance: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMFF8tW_BJk (accessed 4 May 2020).

3 Basket Mouth is the producer of Lord of the Ribs Comedy, amongst other related initiatives. See Ntuli's first (2017) performance in Nigeria:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5nvONRdtPQ8&list=RDCMUCfNoF7MELBNt1Lviq3F8cZQ&start_radio=1&t=2 (accessed 4 May 2020).

4 On Letter 27 Productions (2018) 'In Stitches: Exploring vernacular comedy in South Africa'.

5 Pep is a retail company that targets the mass lower- to middle-income end of the market; as such it seeks to sell low-cost clothes and is the largest single-brand retailer in South Africa.

6 One of South Africa's biggest bookselling chain stores.

7 Khoza and Gola are prominent stand-up male comedians in South Africa; Khoza specifically uses isiZulu.

8 Africa's biggest telecommunications network provider.

9 Vusi Ximba was a South African musician best known for his comic style of music and skit-like performances. Ximba was born and raised in Mandini, in northern KwaZulu-Natal. He was a popular artist who mixed township jive and *maskandi* sounds with sexually explicit lyrics, some of the controversial songs were banned on the radio (Drum Digital, 2011; Mojapelo, 2008) Ximba's music was rooted in narratives of labour migration that also made him popular for their social and political satire (Muller, 2008).

10 A kind of Zulu folk music.

11 <https://www.channel24.co.za/Music/News/heres-the-story-behind-sister-bettina-the-countrys-favourite-song-20180913> (accessed 15 April 2020).

12 This can be a derogatory word for a woman who is single. It can also mean a spinster.

13 Neocosmos rejects women's experiences (along with identity) as a category or universal subject for historical analysis, but advocates for a return to theorising emancipatory practices that centre on the notion that *people think*.

Reference

Adejunmobi M (2014) 'Stand-up comedy and the ethics of popular performance' in S Newell & O Okome (Eds.) *Nigeria In Popular Culture In Africa: The Episteme Of The Everyday*, New York: Routledge.

Ahlberg B M (1994) 'Is there a distinct African sexuality: A critical response to Caldwell', in *Africa*, 64, 2, 220–242. doi: 10.2307/1160981

Ampofo A A, Beoku-Betts J, Njambi, W N & Osirim M (2004) 'Women's and Gender Studies in English-speaking sub-Saharan Africa: A review of research in the Social Sciences', in *Gender & Society*, 18, 6, 685–714. doi: 10.1177/0891243204269188

- Aniekwu N I (2006) 'Converging constructions: A historical perspective on sexuality and feminism in post-colonial Africa', in *African Sociological Review*, 10, 1, 143–160.
- Arnfred S (2009) 'African feminists on sexualities', in *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines*, 43, 1, 151–159.
doi: 10.1080/00083968.2010.9707587
- Arol Z N (2017) 'Women and stand-up comedy. The ethics and aesthetics of stand-up comedy', Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA, April 5-8, *American Society for Aesthetics Graduate E-Journal*.
- Bakare-Yusuf B (2003) 'Determinism: The phenomenology of African female existence', in *Feminist Africa: Changing Cultures*, 2, 8–24.
- Boyce P, Morris C & Cornwall A (2018) 'Editorial introduction' in C Morris, P Boyce, A Cornwall, H Frith, L Harvey & Y Huang (Eds.) *Researching Sex and Sexualities*, London, UK: Zed Books Ltd.
- Channel Africa (n.d.) 'Celeste show', Podcast, IONA.FM., viewed at: <https://Iono.Fm/E/588654>, accessed 4 December 2019.
- Chengeta G (forthcoming) 'Uncovering what lies in the gap between desire and consent, for Black women'.
- Clark A (1997) *Stand and Deliver*, Canada: Doubleday Canada.
- Davis R (2016) 'A man's world: Women in South African comedy', in *Laugh Out Loud: The Politics of Satire In Africa*, Heinrich Boll Stiftung Publication, *Perspectives: Political Analyses and Commentary - Africa*, 2, 16-20, available at: https://www.Boell.De/Sites/Default/Files/Perspectives_2_2016.pdf, accessed 21 November 2019.
- Dowling T (1996) 'The forms, functions and techniques of Xhosa humour', Unpublished thesis, DPhil (African Languages and Literatures), University of Cape Town.
- Drum Digital (2011) 'Vusi Ximba laid to rest', *Drum Magazine*, South Africa, available at: <https://www.news24.com/Drum/Archive/vusi-ximba-laid-to-rest-20170728>, accessed 16 April 2020.
- Fulton D S (2004) 'Comic views and metaphysical dilemmas: Shattering cultural images through self-definition and representation by black comediennes', in *Journal of American Folklore*, 117, 463, 81–96. doi: 10.1353/jaf.2004.0010
- Garda A (2015) #Inthespotlight Celeste Ntuli – Stand-Up comedian and actress, SA FM Afternoon Talk Show, available at: <https://Iono.Fm/E/202963>, accessed 14 November 2019.
- Gilbert J R (2004) *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Gqola P D (2015) *Rape: A South African Nightmare*, Auckland Park, Johannesburg: Jacana Media.

Greenbaum A (1999) 'Stand-up comedy as rhetorical argument: An investigation of comic culture', in *Humor*, 12, 1, 33–46. doi: 10.1515/humr.1999.12.1.33

Haggins B (2007) *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post Soul America*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Holmes C H (2017) 'Laughing against white supremacy: Marginalized performance of resistance comedy', Senior Independent Study Theses, Paper 7770, available at: <https://Openworks.Wooster.Edu/Independentstudy/7770>, accessed 4 October 2019.

hooksb (1995) 'Performance practice as a site of opposition' in C Ugwu (Ed.) *Let's Get It On: The Politics of Black Performance*, Seattle, WA: Bay Press.

Kaya F M Uncaptured (2019) 'Profile Interview (Savannah Comics Choice Awards) with Celeste Ntuli, available at: <https://Iono.Fm/E/735600>, accessed 28 September 2019.

Kinuu K C (2013) 'A Pragmatic approach to Kenyan stand-up comedy: A study of Erick Omondi's performances', Unpublished MA Dissertation.

Limon J (2000) *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*, Durham, NC, London: Rutgers University Press.

Magubane Z (2014) 'Reflections on African women's thought leadership in the 21st century: The Importance of engaging with sexuality', Speech delivered to the Thabo Mbeki African Leadership Institute, University of South Africa, Pretoria,

Mama A (1996) 'Women's Studies and studies of women in Africa during the 1990s', Working Paper Series 5/96, Dakar, Senegal: CODESRIA.

Mdoda A (2017) 'Real Talk with Anele Season 3 Episode 68 - Celeste Ntuli & Tracey-Lee Oliver', viewed at: <https://Www.Youtube.Com/Watch?V=Oursxtayq84>, accessed on 11 October 2019.

Mojapelo M (2008) *Beyond Memory: Recording the History, Moments and Memories of South African Music*, South Africa: African Minds Publishers.

Muller C A (2008) *Focus: Music of South Africa* (2nd edition), New York and London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis.

Ncube K (2018) 'Comedian Celeste Ntuli talks her latest tour "Black Tax Tour"', Transafrica Radio, Utopia, viewed at: https://www.Youtube.Com/Watch?V=Ww0_1dyuvzi, accessed 11 October 2019.

Ndlovu S (2019) 'The Sncamtho contribution to the Ndebele idiomatic language change' in G G Atindogbe & A E Ebongue (Eds.) *Linguistics and Sociolinguistics of Youth Language Practices in Africa: Codes and Identity Writings*, Cameroon: Langaa Research and Publishing Common Initiative Group.

- Neocosmos M (2016) *Thinking Freedom in Africa: Toward A Theory of Emancipatory Politics*, Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- Ntuli C (2013) '99% Zulu Comedy Show', Durban Playhouse, Durban, full set, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNqUI_jihN8, accessed 21 October 2019.
- Ntuli C (2017) 'Johannesburg International Comedy Festival, Alexander Theatre, Johannesburg, partial set, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSrcjsKhQZ4>, accessed 11 October 2019
- On Letter 27 Productions (2018) 'In stitches: Exploring vernacular comedy in South Africa', viewed at: <https://www.Screenafrica.Com/2018/11/19/Film/Business/In-Stitches-Exploring-Vernacular-Comedy-Isouth-Africa/>, accessed 21 October 2019.
- Onyancha M (2015) 'A pragmatic approach to comedy: A case study of the character of Kansiime's use of irony in creating humour', Unpublished Master's thesis, Linguistics, University of Nairobi.
- Parker Z (2002) 'Standing up for the nation: An investigation of stand-up comedy in South Africa post-1994', in *South African Theatre Journal*, 16, 1, 8–29. doi: 10.1080/10137548.2002.9687739
- Sachs A (1991) 'Preparing ourselves for freedom: Culture and the ANC Constitutional Guidelines', *TDR*, 35, 1, 187–193. doi: 10.2307/1146119
- Salo E & Gqola P D (2006) 'Editorial: Subaltern sexualities', in *Feminist Africa*, 6, 1–6.
- Seirlis J K (2011) 'Laughing all the way to freedom?: Contemporary stand-up comedy and democracy in South Africa', in *Humor International*, 24, 4, 513–530.
- Shai P N (2018) 'Constructions of femininity in the context of sexual relationships among women living in the rural Eastern Cape Province, South Africa', Unpublished thesis, Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Public Health, Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of the Witwatersrand.
- Spronk R (2009) 'Sex, sexuality and negotiating Africanness in Nairobi', in *Africa*, 79, 500–519. doi: 10.3366/E0001972009001041
- Turner N S (1990) 'Elements of satire in Zulu', Master's thesis, University of Natal, Durban.
- Undie C C & Benaya K (2006) 'The state of knowledge on sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa: A synthesis of literature', in *JENDA: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*, 8, 1–33.
- Wafaa A (2017) 'Bilingual creativity in Saudi stand-up comedy', in *World Englishes*, 36, 4, 666–683. doi: 10.1111/weng.12239
- Willett C, Willett J & Sherman Y D (2012) 'The seriously erotic politics of feminist laughter', in *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 79, 1, 217–246.