

African Vernacular Symbols of Black Intersex Children in Sinethemba Ngubane's Installations (2007–2016)

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Sinethemba Ngubane is an artist who works predominantly in the medium of ceramics but includes sculptures in large installations. She was born in 1991 in Durban, South Africa, and completed a national diploma in Fine Art in 2014 and Bachelor's degree with distinction at Durban University of Technology in 2015. She has exhibited in academic group shows in KZNSA Gallery, Durban University of Technology, Steve Biko Art Gallery, and artists' group shows in art space, Durban. Ngubane is currently studying for a Master in Fine Art degree at Durban University of Technology. She is an award winner of the Emma Smith Scholarship.

This paper critically analyzes the vernacular symbols of Black intersex children articulated in her works produced between 2007 and 2016 and the ideas they convey. In defining “vernacular,” Gupta and Adams (2018: 2) posit that “vernacular defines that which is domestic or indigenous.” While the definition of “vernacular” implies “indigenous,” this does not mean Ngubane's artworks are indigenous African art or its continuation; the term is adopted in theorizing her contemporary African art for representing symbolism rooted in cultural practices and experiences that are indigenous to Africa. In this context, it is in discourse with installations that represent human elements and symbols deeply rooted in African cultures. However, such portrayals in Ngubane's installation sculptures may reference not identifiable cultural elements, but rather symbols associated with certain cultural practices against Black intersex children in Zulu culture. This focus on her installations is significant, not merely because she is a Black female artist on the African continent who is marginalized in mainstream art historical discourse, but because her

installations contribute an important thematic nuance to African art. Although Ngubane is a young, practicing contemporary African artist, her inclusion in a mainstream paper was informed by her unique mode of exploring the distorted bodies of those Black children in art. This paper thus contributes an art historical discourse on the artist's vernacular symbolism to global African art history. This is also significant for South Africa, as her works contribute narratives of different forms of contemporary distortions to a national history that had been marred with tortured and distorted bodies from apartheid brutality.

In this paper, the term “intersex” is defined as the condition of a child whose sex deviates from “male” or “female” because he or she mixes anatomical components of both sexes that do not correspond to typical definitions of male and female (Husakouskaya 2013: 11; Jenkins and Short 2017: 92). To interrogate Ngubane's installation sculptures that reflect on the vernacular symbols of those children, five works were selected: *Rebirth of Bio-politics* (2015) (Figs. 1–5), *Nonkiloyi* (2016) (Fig. 6a–b), *Impaired* (2016) (Fig. 7), *Gaze of Disfigured* (2016) (Fig. 8), and *Excavated* (2016) (Fig. 9). The contents and contexts of these works are interrogated through formal analysis and cultural history. Formal analysis interrogates the formal elements of each installation and the ideas the portrayal may convey, while cultural history situates the context in the history invoked in the work. These are combined with visual hermeneutics theory, which is adopted to narrate¹ the experiences in the works by returning to history (Tolia-Kelly and Morris 2004: 158). The following research questions guided the interrogation: What cultural imageries did Ngubane depict in her installation sculptures? What ideas does the analysis of the works reveal? The discussion focuses on Ngubane's media and how she takes a unique artistic path in coming to terms with symbolisms she considers African, as well as why she represents such cultural symbolism in contemporary African art. Another focus is Ngubane's personal influences, frame of reference, knowledge base, ideological stances, and philosophy.

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1 Sinethemba Ngubane
Rebirth of Bio-politics (2015)
 Terracotta installations; 84.5 cm x 184 cm x 20 cm
 Photo: Sinethemba Ngubane, 2017

2 Sinethemba Ngubane
Rebirth of Bio-Politics II (2015)
 Terracotta installation, detail
 Photo: Sinethemba Ngubane, 2020



As a young, contemporary African artist, Ngubane's sources of inspiration are the bodies of young Black intersex children from the Zulu cultural group rooted in South African space. In an interview, Ngubane says, "The sources of my installations are the indigenous cultures in South Africa. I produce sculptures on specific subjects in ways other artists might not have done."² While it appears she is filling a gap in visual culture with a variety of bodies of Black intersex babies, similar depictions of distorted and mutilated bodies are evident in contemporary South African art. But in explaining the kinds of images she portrays in her terracotta installations, Ngubane affirms that, "in my works, I focus on the human body and how people use such human flesh for rituals and sacrifices. Specifically, I focus on the bodies of intersex babies, and societal attitude towards them." (Although her works reflect events in her Zulu culture, they embody not cultural symbols but the distressed bodies of young African children she identified as intersex.) When asked how she discovered this information, Ngubane's response is, "from the South African police and newspapers."

When Ngubane is asked about the focus of her works, she simply says, "My sculptures are associated with the social life in rural and urban areas, but on the subject of rituals among some Black South Africans who want to start business and want the business to prosper." It is, however, contestable that ritual murders (*muti*) of Black intersex children have been practiced by some Black South Africans only in the contemporary era; such murders in Zulu culture date back to the 1900s (Turrell 2001: 22). Arguably, such murders occur mostly because of the myth that such rituals provide riches, protection, fame, and power at the expense of other people's lives. Ngubane says, regarding the dominant ideology her works convey to their audience, "My ideology in these works reflects [myths that invoke] greed and ignorance in denying an intersex baby the right to life. This is done by considering such a child abominable, thereafter; the child is killed and used for rituals." This appears to be the major factor that influenced the production of her works. As Ngubane claims, "I was influenced to produce my kind of sculptures because of the concern I have for the killings of such babies." Ngubane suggests that her sculptures are created as social and moral commentaries to challenge ritual murders and their denial of intersex babies' right to life.



3 Sinethemba Ngubane
Rebirth of Bio-Politics III (2015)
 Terracotta installation, detail
 Photo: Sinethemba Ngubane, 2020

4 Sinethemba Ngubane
Rebirth of Bio-Politics IV (2015)
 Terracotta installation, detail
 Photo: Sinethemba Ngubane, 2020

I won an award for the kind of works I am producing.” Although she is not the first artist to focus on mutilated bodies, the novelty in her work comes from the idea she frames around intersex as protest art. Consequently, the award seems to have spurred her to work harder. In discussing the patronage of her works and the reactions of audience, she claims that “people are easily attracted to my kind of works because the concepts and contents are altogether new, so they ask a lot of questions to understand what the works mean. In addition, I also enjoy patronage of my works from some other people.” This is certainly part of Sinethemba

Expatiating on her continued use of vernacular symbols in her work, she declares, “I still represent them in contemporary artworks because there are no other symbols that reflect this present focus.” Ngubane justifies her focus on the representations of intersex as necessary, noting that there is no other subject worthy of her attention. This is because she is adopting a visual activism approach in confronting such deliberate and targeted ritual murders of Black intersex African children. Moreover, as the biological conditions of the children represented are not very distinct (except in one piece), her works might be taken for the mutilated bodies of young Black children in general rather than intersex alone.

Another aspect central to her works is her media. She works with clay and gelatine mixed with glue and water (Peffer 2009: 42). She glazes each piece after it is dried and fired, to create a color effect like that of a decomposing body. Ngubane observes of her terracotta installations that “I was interested in ceramics at the beginning of my practice, but later had a redirection towards sculpture. So I combine sculpture and ceramic techniques in creating my installations.” This accounts for the glossy effect on her terracotta installation sculptures, because she adopted the ceramic technique of glazing to her subsequent medium.

At the conclusion of our dialogue in 2017, she observed that “the receptions to my works have been impressive so far—in fact,





Ngubane's achievement: Her installation sculptures come as a surprise because they reveal strange cultural practices that are not known to many in the contemporary era.

ANALYSIS OF THE VERNACULAR SYMBOLISMS IN INSTALLATION SCULPTURES

My interrogation of Ngubane's vernacular symbols in installation sculptures begins with *Rebirth of Bio-Politics* (2015) (Fig. 1). In explaining this title, Ngubane claims, "I gave the title to the distorted bodies of intersex babies, because they reveal an aspect in biology that is debated and contested." It is inaccurate, however, for Ngubane to claim that there is a scientific debate on the mere existence of intersex babies; research conducted in 1970, for instance, revealed that "intersex syndromes have been recognized in South Africans' different racial groups" since the 1960s (Hatherley 1970: 3).

This establishes that intersex babies exist not only among Blacks and Whites but among other races in South Africa. Ngubane's installation sculpture, however, references different stages of mutilation in eight bodies of Black babies. These displayed bodies are "exactly rendered as if they were zoological specimens" (Peffer 2009: 62). Reference to zoological specimens

arises because the figures evoke not merely skeletons but severely mutilated bodies. Who is responsible for such mutilations? The "family members and ritualists are responsible" (Peffer 2009: 62). Similarly, mutilation appears in the work of South African artist Penny Siopis, whose works also suggest the massacre of children, albeit not intersex (Neke 1999: 7). Although different degrees of decomposition are depicted in the formal elements of Ngubane's installations, a visible inconsistency appears in the level of decomposition in the same body (Peffer 2009: 58). Such artistic style of representation is a coded indictment of the tortures inflicted on the Black intersex children. For example, while the second figure from the left in Figure 1 shows a high level of decomposition or mutilation on the body, the head appears to be that of a sleeping child. From the left side of the installation, the first body represents the back view, with a normal-shaped head but severely distorted body. It is, however, contestable whether the last two figures on the right were not buried together; this is implied from their positions, which evoke conjoined babies, with heads placed in different directions.

Likewise, the third and sixth figures show various degrees of mutilation, which reveal rib bones painted white, while all other parts show dismembered arms and legs (see Figs. 2–5 for clearer views of the mutilated figures). While the formal structure of the body in Figure 2 evokes severe dismemberment of the head, the bulging eyeballs seem to hint at the lifeless child turning sideways to stare at his murderer, perhaps because of the pain inflicted in his murder. But Figure 5 shows a front view of facial mutilation and the entire body, which leaves behind remains that invoke an attack from a ravenous creature.

The formal structure of the figure in Figure 3 unfolds differently, evoking not merely a museum specimen but also an insect. It signifies a body that was dissected, with all the internal organs removed, rendering it like a shell or exoskeleton abandoned to dry. This evokes not only the murderer's activities of torture but the ultimate vulnerability of intersex individuals (Neke 1999). The havoc caused by uninformed cultural superstition on Black intersex individuals is further revealed in Figure 4. In this context, while the hands and sides of the body are mutilated, the head remains untouched. This implies that the body parts dismembered or physical destroyed were the highly sought-after parts. However, despite the cultural underpinning of these killings and tortures, the sight of them may be distressing to anyone who believes in the right to life (Turrell 2001: 24).

In tracing the prevalence of intersex individuals in South Africa, intersex was first noted in South Africa at the Cape between 1817 and 1827 (Hatherley 1970: 3). While there are no statistics readily available on intersex people in South Africa in the past (perhaps because African cultures were assumed not to have equivalent words for the conditions), in the contemporary era, studies have shown that African cultures do have words for intersex—but the words used to identify people with both male and female or ambivalent genitals in southern African cultures vary. For example, in Zimbabwe, the state is referred to as *incukubili* in Ndebele, *sisikanje* in Shona, and in South Africa, *ubulilimbili* in Zulu culture. Possibly, these names helped the easy identification of intersex individuals in the 2010s, as intersex activist Sally Gross

suggests that the intersex population in South Africa numbered between 45,000 and 90,000 at that time (Husakouskaya 2013: 12). There are different estimates for prevalence of intersex in other parts of the world. For example, in Kenya, while there are no official government statistics, research that focuses on protecting intersex rights suggests that tens of thousands of people in Kenya are born intersex (KNCHR 2018). In Canada and America, it has been estimated that about 1 in every 1,500 to 2,000 births has an intersex condition.³

Following the identification of intersex conditions and the social problems associated with them, medical practice used to embrace surgery for the erasure of sexual ambiguity, but in the 1990s activists and scholars joined forces to counter this medical treatment (Jenkins and Short 2017: 94). For instance, in 2004, the medical community showed interest in not merely reforming but moving away from using surgery as the best practice of erasing any sex of intersex people (Jenkins and Short 2017: 93). Possibly they realized the failure of surgery in remedying the situation. In narrating the challenge associated with failed surgery in a South African case, Ngubane claims she “knew someone who was demoralized and dejected because he was intersex. After he had an operation performed on him to erase the female genital, unfortunately, it failed, and eventually, he committed suicide.” This is why she was inspired to start creating “works that are aimed at drawing public attention to the plight of intersex individuals and the negative societal attitudes to especially infant intersex babies. In rural Black communities, such babies are looked upon as abnormal, so they are killed.” While on the one hand, this hints at the poor treatment some families mete out to intersex babies, on

6a–b Sinethemba Ngubane
Nonkiloyi (2016)
 Mixed media; 16 cm x 48 cm
 Photo: Sinethemba Ngubane.

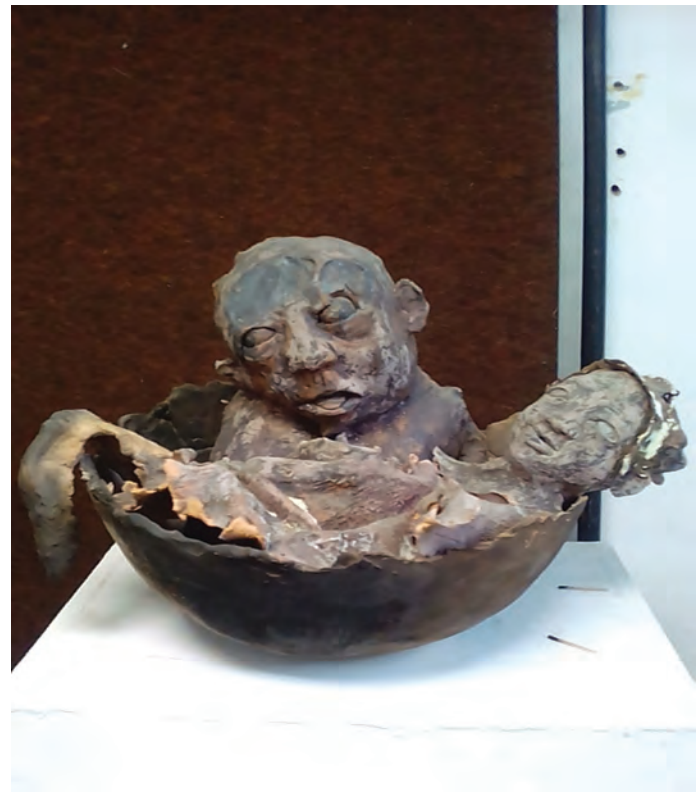


7 Sinethemba Ngubane
Impaired (2016)
Glazed terracotta; 37 cm x 56 cm
Photo: Sinethemba Ngubane

the other hand, it echoes societal beliefs in a rigidly dimorphic approach to sex (Dreger 2006; Jenkins and Short 2017). Thus, it might be argued that this depiction evokes the harder job of treating intersex people (Dreger 2006).

Given that these installations reflect dead babies, they demonstrate that “in African metaphysics . . . the dead remain with [the] living” (Enwezor and Oguibe 1998: 51), even though the depictions seek to “make sense of th[e] debased condition and to contest it through arts” (Peffer 2009: 48). In this portrayal, Ngubane appears to have been guided by a philosophical view that condemns killing intersex babies because of a superstitious belief that they are cursed. Although Ngubane’s works focus on intersex individuals and the negative attitude toward them in the Black South African homeland, in other work, she draws attention to witchcraft activities targeted at Black intersex children. This is seen in her 2016 installation entitled *Nonkiloyi* (Fig. 6). This title evokes cultural identity, as it adopts an indigenous Zulu word that literally means “a witch,” but in this context, is used to draw attention to “witchcraft” and “spiritism” in Zulu culture in South Africa. But in Zulu culture, *umthakathi* is the term used for witches, not *nonkiloyi*. Although in the African worldview witchcraft may not always entail harmful practices, here the focus is on the negative use of witchcraft in attacking intersex babies. Thus, witchcraft is defined as “the crime called ‘maleficium,’ the practice of harmful black magic” (Mesaki 1995: 165). It involves the use of supernatural, occult, or extraordinary power in performing deleterious deeds. For this reason, ordinary Africans may feel they are helplessly and defencelessly exposed to pursuit by witches, and in South Africa and other parts of Africa, practitioners of witchcraft are brutally killed whenever they are caught (Harnischfeger 2000: 100; Leistner 2014: 54).

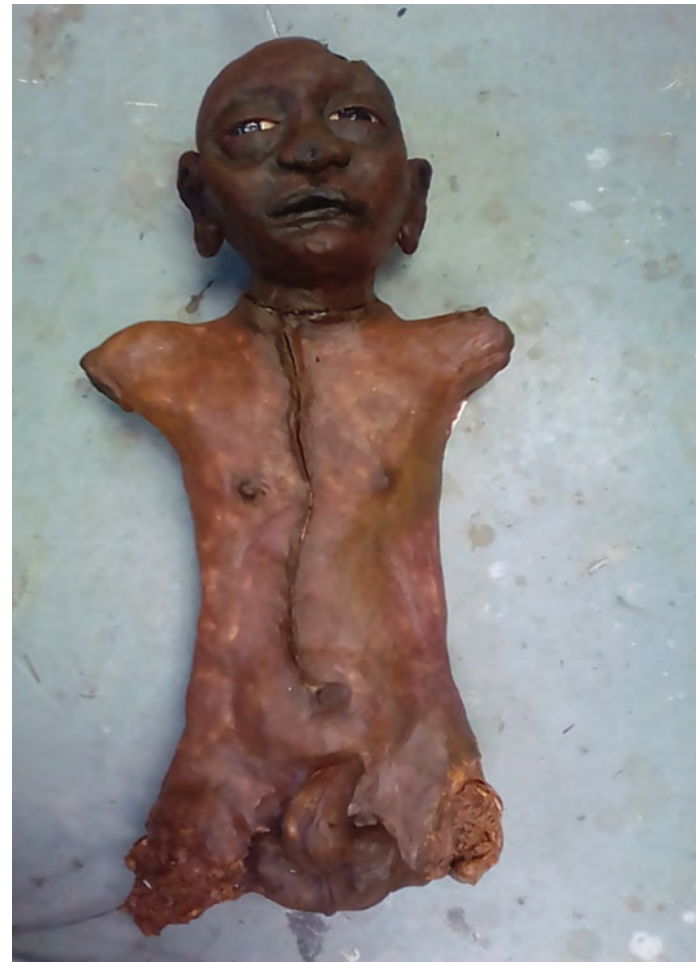
While the conceptual mode of *Nankiloyi* is at the experimental stage, it is rarely found among fine artists in South Africa (Vogel 2012: 10). Yet the media she adopts have their own language. The formal elements include a rough-textured human head, a nail fastened to the forehead, piece of blue cloth wrapped over the head; there is a skin strap on one head, while the other has none; they are both arranged inside shallow basins. However, the eyes portrayed within their sockets look sideways, bordered by a rough-textured nose and a face likened to a victim of terrible skin disease, such as leprosy. It can be argued that this leprous head as a



work of art evokes a ritual sacrifice in an African culture, perhaps to appease the gods to stop the spread of the disease. On the other hand, the heads are not portraits, but symbols employed in witchcraft that “have in them no power to cause misfortune or suffering” (Kombo 2003: 83). Ngubane says they are symbols of what “a witchcraft practitioner uses before turning into *Mantindane*, known as *tokoloshe* [a dwarflike water spirit] and then goes after a Black intersex child of certain age, to kill and feed on them.” It can be argued that the act of piercing the symbol’s forehead is expected to kill the targeted child (Mesaki 1995: 163). Alternatively, in Zimbabwe, a Shona reading of this installation would be that the head in the basin is that of a witch caught in the act and killed, because in some Shona cultures, when a witch is caught in the act at night, a nail is used to pierce the head. The ritual is set up so that the witch goes and dies at his homestead, where examination of the body will reveal the nail on the head as evidence.

This depiction narrates an experience that recalls the cultural history of witchcraft in African societies. The history of witchcraft as a social issue may be traced to the precolonial era, during which it was a reality in many African societies (Mesaki 1995: 174). But in some parts of Africa, when it was established that someone was a witch or wizard in the precolonial era, he or she was expelled, sold into slavery, or wrapped in banana leaves or grass and burned alive (Harnischfeger 2000: 100). In the 1950s, reports show that fear of witches increased among Black Africans (Harnischfeger 2000: 101). A belief among the Bantu of the Early Iron Age attributed the evil of witchcraft to human envy and malice (Mesaki 1995: 166). But during the colonial era in South Africa, Blacks worried that their reports of witches eating them at night were taken too lightly. Thus, they were encouraged to persecute witches by illegal means (Harnischfeger 2000: 101). As a result of the persecution of suspected witches, police reports state that between 1985 and 1995, 312 people were killed in Lebowa, a

8 Sinethemba Ngubane
Gaze of Disfigured (2016)
Mixed media; 47 cm x 23 cm
Photo: Sinethemba Ngubane



former homeland in eastern Transvaal (Harnischfeger 2000: 99). Nevertheless, Ngubane says the aim of this figure is to suggest the spiritual killing of “intersex children through witchcraft” not merely to eliminate them but for other wicked purposes, such as to obtain power or keeping wealth running.

Alternatively, African witchcraft practiced by some persons in Zulu areas reeks of inhumanity towards intersex children. And such inhumanity defines “the evil associated with witchcraft” (Richards 2005: 69). Consequently, witchcraft activity is an ambivalent scenario, because while the malevolent individuals associated with the practice consider their lives worth living, they see a Black intersex child as vulnerable to attacks inflicting suffering and death. This portrayal demonstrates a quest not to support witchcraft, but perhaps a reiterative persuasion for the government or judiciary to acknowledge “witchcraft as a criminal offence” (Harnischfeger 2000: 100). In this installation, Ngubane seems to have been guided by a philosophical view that the life of a Black intersex child is precious and must not be taken away through witchcraft. In the next installation, entitled *Impaired* (2016) (Fig. 7), a different scene is unveiled. While the title suggests the reduction of something, the work depicts young African children’s bodies reduced into a pot. It hints, Ngubane says, at a “work that symbolizes the bodies of intersex babies fetched and being prepared in ritual procedure.” Although it may appear contestable to conclude that the bodies are prepared in ritual, it can be argued that “the central act of ... killing ... a child or baby, perhaps stolen” (La Fontaine 2017: 308), and reduced into a pot, signals a ritual process.

Although such an act may evoke an image or scene of ritual sacrifice, it speaks more of tortured bodies (Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu 2009: 47). This is likened to a form of ritual murder of infant twins that was abolished among the Efik people of Calabar, south-south Nigeria, in the 1880s. At that time, rather than cook their flesh, infant twins were put inside a pot and thrown into the bush, where they were left to die (Imbua 2013: 142). While that practice demonstrates abhorrence for twins because of ignorance, they were not killed for any ritual purpose. In this context, such reduction of those Black intersex children into a pot recalls works depicting inhumane conditions of the human body in distress (Peffer 2009: 41) by South African artists such as Paul Stopforth, Jane Alexander, Gavin Young, and Pitika Ntuli, whose works are overtly political.

However, to comprehend complex rituals in African societies, they must be located in their proper cultural context (Richards 2011: 55). Therefore, cultural history traces the experiences of bodies offered in ritual sacrifices in African societies (Omatseye and Emeriewen 2010: 530). In the precolonial Zulu kingdom, ritual murders were associated with gaining extraordinary power “required to win competitive advantages in chiefly rivalries over people” (Turrell 2001: 22). But between the 1900s and 1930s, Natal chiefs lost their monopoly on ritual murder. In contemporary South African societies, there are reported incidents of cannibalism in Wembezi, an indigenous Zulu township “where many of the alleged cannibal incidents” take place. In urban areas in Zululand, where these killings take place, within 24 to 48 hours



9 Sinethemba Ngubane
Excavated (2016)
 Glazed terracotta; 50 cm x 30 cm
 Photo: Sinethemba Ngubane

of report of a child missing it is assumed that “by that time they would have cooked the child” (Olifant 2017: 1). On the other hand, these symbols reveal the insincerity of individuals who claim to kill intersex babies because of a superstitious belief that they are cursed or abominable; it is for other, hidden motives.

What goal is relayed by the interpretation of this work? Ngubane says that such ritual processes are not merely for sacrifice but for eating the babies’ flesh, especially by ritualists who “seek to be successful outside legitimate means of livelihood.” Arguably, it defines persons engaged in cannibalism who “were told [it] had magic properties and would convey money, power, and protection” (Maseko 2017: 1). Therefore, those lured into this practice do it out of avarice, not caring what they do to achieve or accumulate wealth.

We can conclude that Sinethemba Ngubane uses her sculpture to communicate the need to rethink so as to give intersex babies the privilege to live, rather than kill them. It can be maintained that the philosophical view that guides her is framed on a principle of African humanism, that despite the biological conditions of intersex children, they should be culturally accepted. Another installation sculpture unfolds with the title *Gaze of Disfigured* (2016) (Fig. 8). This title seems to ask viewers to take a close look at a dismembered body. The context shows a naturalistic figure which references the lifeless and disfigured body of an intersex African child. It shows a dimension of dismemberment characterized by the amputation and altering of flesh rooted in the Zulu countryside. However, the deletion which does not seem to

be ritually motivated evokes a narrative that, “as the body of the victim is taken apart, society may itself cohere around the spectacle and move into the realm of the wolf pack” (Peffer 2009: 72).

In formal terms, the work is made of raku clay mixed with wax. While the body lies lifeless, the eyes appear slightly opened but with no hint of being able to see. Aside from the evident mutilation, there is a cut around the neck and an incision from the bottom of the stomach to the top of the chest, showing inhumane conditions. A similar slit is evident in Jane Alexander’s sculpture *The Butcher Boys*. To establish a reason for the slit, a question was asked: “have their hearts and other organs been removed?” (Peffer 2009: 65). This question suggests that when such a slit is created, vital internal organs are removed for undisclosed purposes. Thus, Ngubane’s sculpture signals not merely mutilation of hands and legs, but perhaps also of the lungs and guts. To demonstrate the identity of the Black African body as intersex, in the immediate foreground a curved male genital allows a clear view of the female genital directly below, which hints at how both sexual organs co-exist in the body of an intersex baby.

This experience invokes the cultural history of dismembered bodies in South Africa. Although in the 1890s *muti* murders were reported among the Sotho, Zulu, and Swazi, there seem to be few amongst the Xhosa in the Cape (Turrell 2001: 22). Forms of killing in which a person’s body is dismembered for local charms have a long history in Zululand. In the 1910s, two young Black boys witnessed their comrade being murdered and saw his wretched body mutilated (Turrell 2001: 21). But in the twenty-first century, a traditional healer in the Zulu cultural group argues that “ritual

killings and the use of human tissues are not part of traditional healing” (Maseko 2017: 1). This suggests that, although human tissues are used for rituals, these are not for traditional healing but for a different purpose in Zulu communities. A similar depiction of the excision of limbs in a sculpture entitled *War Victim* (1982–86), by contemporary Ugandan artist Francis Nnaggenda (b. 1936), reflect a war victim (Nyachae 1995: 167). This suggests that, as the common experience in Ngubane’s installation is in the mutilation of body parts, society is at war with herself and her children—which means that not only an intersex child but “anyone could be vulnerable to bodily violation” (Peffer 2009: 62).

Although mutilation “is a prolific problem that affects every single community, there is no evidence that adults are specifically asked for, but there is evidence that kids are mutilated” (Bailey 2010: 1). To reiterate that this act of disfiguring a young Black African child is a contemporary practice, Ngubane says it is done “around the rural areas in South Africa.” In her view, such mutilations are aimed at using the body parts for *muti* rituals, which feed the “quest to be rich, to get power, or gain good yield in farm produce.” But, I argue that even though progress is desired in life, it is a mistake to build it on a mythology framed around mutilating human bodies. Such a practice hints at “a kind of hybrid monster of the sort produced in times of civil war and barbarism” (Peffer 2009: 59). This recalls the reactions of Ezrom Legae and Helen Sibidi, who saw the image of animal sacrifice as an indictment of human cruelty. If they saw animal sacrifice as human cruelty, then the image of a distorted young intersex Black African child is worse than cruelty, because it echoes cannibalism, in which the people are filled with lust for human flesh (Peffer 2009: 72; La Fontaine 2000: 313). Therefore, it can be argued that Ngubane’s philosophical idea is guided within the parameters of opposing carnivorous rituals done not with animals but with the human body. But a different installation sculpture entitled *Excavated* (2016) (Fig. 9) echoes the excavation of a buried body, which signifies a “historic and traumatic migration” (Peffer 2005: 340), not of the living but the dead.

The depiction, which combines sculpture and ceramic techniques in producing glazed terracotta, represents a body covered with earth. It would have been analyzed as terracotta if glaze was not applied to create visual aesthetics and finishing. However, the smoked, fired work represents a body that was dug up and mutilated, a practice rooted in the rural areas in Zulu culture. The mixed media employed include local clay, glaze applied for firing, and twine for stitching the cuts. Although earth covers the head and parts of the body, it is to symbolize an exhumed body. Assuming that it narrates an experience within a culture, what does the cultural history of this depiction reveal? It reveals the history of the different forms of exhumations in South Africa. For example, in the 1990s, the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) undertook several exhumations of corpses of opponents of the apartheid government who disappeared in the 1980s. The aim of the exhumation was to provide healing to the victims’ families (Satyapal 2012: 57), rather than desecrating their graves.

In the twenty-first century, in KwaZulu-Natal province, another form of exhumation is identified. As it is alleged, young men are sent “to dig graves in the middle of the night so [as] to make magic charms known locally as *muti*” (Maseko 2017: 1). While *muti* is used as a general name for all traditional charms in southern

Africa, the forms of charms differ. With grave desecration taking place around the rural or urban areas of KwaZulu-Natal, it can be argued that the persons identified with such exhumations can only be ritualists who visit a grave, dig it up, and desecrate it by tampering with the dead body (Olifant 2017: 1). In further narrating the vernacular symbolism, Ngubane claims that “this violence of exhuming intersex is committed for purposes of supplying highly valued body parts to people that use them for ritual.” This implies that the removal of organs from an exhumed intersex baby that is “rendered down’ [is] to make mixtures that were believed to give immense power when eaten or imbibed” (Turrell 2001: 21). Thus, this relays an African “fairy-tale” of traditional medicine that creates wealth in Zulu culture. However, through this installation it can be observed that Ngubane portrays a philosophy that is guided by the principle of humanity against manifestation of inhumanity in grave desecration.

CONCLUSION

In concluding the visual narratives of Sinthemba Ngubane’s contemporary African installation sculptures, the analysis reveals the depiction of vernacular symbols of disparate mutilated bodies of young Black African children identified as intersex. Through the visual culture narratives on intersex, the interrogation echoes negative family and societal attitudes in collaborating with ritualists or others to kill a Black African child born intersex. But this invokes “disingenuous sentimental abuse” (Richards 2011: 53). Similar sentiment was manifested towards twins in the distant past in Nigeria. As part of past superstitious belief in the Efik culture of Calabar people in south-south Nigeria, it was a taboo to give birth to twins. Because twins were considered strange and unusual beings, therefore, they were killed (Peek 2008: 15). Although credit is given to Mary Slessor for the abolition of twin-killing in Efik culture, there were others who also contributed to the elimination of that evil custom. Prominent among them were the United Presbyterian Missionaries, who began their social revolutionary program in 1846 and labored for more than thirty years trying to eliminate customs that were against Christian ethos. However, twin-killing was abolished only after September 1876, when Mary Slessor came to Calabar (Imbua 2013: 141). She succeeded in persuading the Efik people to discontinue the murder of twins and ostracism of their mothers.

There is a lack of recorded history to establish when the killing of Black intersex children began in rural areas in South Africa; nevertheless, it can be argued that, like the killing of twins in Nigeria, such violence has a long history that dates to the precolonial era. But in the contemporary era, the disingenuous sentiment towards intersex people is manifested in the swift killing, mutilating, and removing body organs for *muti* ritual. This is similar to the ritual violence that is prevalent against people with albinism, as they are also killed and their body parts used for *muti* or traditional medicine in some parts of Africa (Baker, Lund, Nyathi, and Taylor 2010: 177). Records reveal that the killing of albinos in parts of Africa dates at least to the nineteenth century and arises from mythological beliefs held about them. Similarly, as is argued in this paper, the ambivalence linked to killing, exhuming, and desecrating the grave of a Black intersex child is also because of a “mythological subject ... [in] Africa” (Peffer 2009: 42). This is

because some people believe that eating the body parts of an intersex baby in a *muti* ritual will promote wealth and give protection. Aside from the ritual killing, Ngubane's work echoes the evil of witchcraft against intersex individuals. It reveals cases of mysterious attacks aimed at ending the life of such vulnerable young Black African children. As it may be argued, witchcraft expresses "supernatural powers ... [that] bring disaster, death, or fear to their victims" (Kombo 2003: 75).

Lastly, it can be argued that through depictions of different forms of mutilation targeted at Black intersex children in South Africa, Ngubane has created a body of work that challenges the practice of killing, mutilating, and using their bodies' parts in ritual murder. As a form of protest art, she seeks not merely to expose the practice but to discourage it in the different cultures where it is practiced.

Notes

1 In narrating the experience a work of art focuses on conveying, a return to history as proposed in the visual hermeneutics of these authors help in situating how similar occurrences in the past will aide an understanding of the present representation or occurrence in a given society.

2 Sinthemba Ngubane, interview with author, November 15, 2017, Durban University of Technology, Durban. All quotes from the artist come from this interview.

3 SIPD (n.d.) argues that the implication of 1 in every 1,500 births being an intersex child is that an intersex is born every two days in Canada and five intersex children are born each day in the United States.

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