

# Ubuntu as a Dramaturgical Tool for Building Community in Protests

Refiloe Lepere<sup>1</sup>  & Tebogo Radebe<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> University of Witwatersrand, South Africa.

<sup>2</sup> University of Zululand, South Africa.



## ABSTRACT

In this paper, *ubuntu* is proposed as a dramaturgical lens for analysing social phenomena, particularly focusing on the 2015 Wits Student Protest (#FeesMustFall). The purpose of this study was to explore how *ubuntu*, as an epistemological and dramaturgical tool, can deepen the understanding of protest and community dynamics through performance. Methodologically, dramaturgy of everyday life framework is used to analyse the songs sung during the #FeesMustFall protest, emphasising their role in shaping political agency and fostering community. Songs analysed are “*Jikijela*” by Letta Mbulu, along with its reworked version by *Thandiswa Mazwai*, the decolonised “*Nkosi Sikelela iAfrika*,” and the title song from *Mbongeni Ngema*’s play *Asinamali*. The findings suggest that *ubuntu* provides an alternative epistemic lens, challenging traditional views of protest as primarily destructive. Instead, through shared performance and song, *ubuntu* fosters collective identity and democratic participation. The argument posited is that embodiment of *ubuntu* during protests creates space for community negotiation and self-actualisation, redefining the narrative of democratic agency in protest. This study contributes to scholarship by offering a new framework for understanding the role of songs in protests as dramaturgical tools that create roles, scripts, and shared experiences. *Ubuntu* as a dramaturgical lens expands the possibilities for analysing social movements and highlights the transformative power of performance in building communities.

## Correspondence:

Refiloe Lepere & Tebogo Radebe

## Email:

leperer@gmail.com  
refiloe.lepere@wits.ac.za

tebogo.radebe07@gmail.com  
radebetb@unizulu.ac.za

## Publication History:

Received:

31 July, 2024

Accepted:

24<sup>th</sup> November, 2024

Published online:

22<sup>nd</sup> January, 2025

*Keywords: Ubuntu, Dramaturgy, Protest, Song, performance, #FeesMustfall*

## INTRODUCTION

The 2023 the South African political party Economic Freedom Fighters held a national Shutdown on the day before Human Rights Day. The protest drew global attention as young black South Africans filled the streets with song and dance. International observers on social media curiously asked, “Do you guys meet to rehearse the songs and the dance?” This question seemed peculiar to many black South Africans, who have grown up in church and protest, where song and dance are a norm, yet it was not the first time such an inquiry had been made. During the #FeesMustFall (#FMF) protests in 2015, a similar request arose: “Could we have a rehearsal or something for the songs?” Initially, the question was met with laughter. However, after further discussion, the question resurfaced. This highlights how song and dance in protests are perceived not just as spontaneous expressions, but as integral performances deeply rooted in cultural practice. “We all don’t know the songs,” and more importantly, “Can we get new songs?” This internal and external collective social anxiety regarding the performance of songs at protests sparked a significant

question: What are the gestures, actions, scripts, and contours of protest? Who authors these elements? In many protests, conflict is recognised as dramaturgy, with clear lines of dialectic between the oppressor and the oppressed, the employer and the employee, the protestor and the authority. Protest in South Africa is a well-known performance site where participants engage in civil unrest and simultaneously perform a sort of collective expression. Grounded in the analysis of the South African student movement in 2015-2016, the paper argues that there is an intersection between *ubuntu* and dramaturgy as collectively curated expressions.

This paper thus explores the interrelations between protestors and how camaraderie is formed through performances. In particular; how a song acts as both a performance and a dramaturgy of protest. It is a key element that unites protestors as a collective or an ensemble. A song is not only a performance but also a narrative that creates a unified identity of the protest movement. In her article titled “Song as a Register for Black Feminist Theatre-Making Aesthetic” Lepere argues that song in South Africa is a way of imagining that marginalised groups; have written themselves into history.<sup>1</sup>

According to Lepere, songs can be seen as theatrical poetics and a form of creative making that black women engage in.<sup>2</sup> Lepere further argues that songs hold significant methodological value for arts-based processes and research. Songs, as a black aesthetic, depict individual and private experiences that have broad communal implications.<sup>3</sup> This article makes a case for understanding songs within the *Ubuntu* framework, highlighting their role in depicting black agency and contributing to communal understanding and mobilisation. Historically in South Africa, songs have been used to articulate everyday life; from precolonial expressions of life to protest theatre, song has been a way of revealing everyday life and struggles.

In this article, three songs are analysed: “*Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika*” South Africa’s national anthem that was composed and recorded in different years, “*Asinamali*” by *Mbongeni Ngema* and has found resonance on the picket line, and “*Jikijela*” by *Letta Mbulu* and *Thandiswa Mazwai*. These songs symbolise historical performances and solidarity-inspired creative expression and a call for an ubuntu-centered space for rehearsing a decolonised academic present and future. The paper illustrates the embodied expression of academic freedom and the decolonisation of epistemology through singing and chanting embodies the principles of dramaturgy and *ubuntu*. The goal is to demonstrate how song functions as a tool for both *ubuntu* and dramaturgy. By examining protest singing in South Africa, dramaturgy is looked at and how it informs the understanding of *ubuntu* and participatory collective mobilisation.

## METHODOLOGY

### Analysing Songs

The paper employed the framework of *ubuntu* as a dramaturgical tool to analyse the role of song in South African protests. By applying this framework, the research sought to dissect how songs function as performative acts that embody and express communal values and collective experiences. The methodology included a detailed analysis of three significant songs: The South African National Anthem composed by Enoch Sontonga and its decolonised version, “*Nkosi Sikelela iAfrika*,” performed by the Mighty Wits SDASM Choir - which became the staple for the #FeesMustfall movement, “*Asinamali*”, and “*Jikijela*” by legendary South African singer and composer *Letta Mbulu* (original version) and its recomposed version by South African Afro-Pop singer, feminist, and activist *Thandiswa Mazwai*. The songs were analysed through the lens of *ubuntu* as a dramaturgical tool, focusing on the following elements: Scripting and storytelling, roles and staging, audience engagement, and collective effort in performing the song. By analysing these songs through the framework of *ubuntu* as a dramaturgical tool, the study aimed to reveal how song serves as a powerful medium for scripting, enacting, and understanding collective experiences and aspirations in the context of South African protests.

<sup>1</sup> Refiloe Lepere, “Song as a Register for Black Feminist Theatre-Making Aesthetic,” in *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy*, vol. 21, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Lepere, “Song as a Register for Black Feminist Theatre-Making Aesthetic.”

<sup>3</sup> Lepere, “Song as a Register for Black Feminist Theatre-Making Aesthetic.”

### Setting the stage: #FeesMustFall

Dramaturgy likens social interactions, such as protest action for free decolonised higher education, to a theatrical performance where individuals assume roles and enact behaviours based on the social context they find themselves in, much like actors on a stage. It involves space, role, and set design. The focus is on song and *ubuntu* as analytical tools for reading the world in relation to everyday activities, offering a re-imagining of democratic participation through protest in addressing social crises and their solutions. The song is a way of reading the world and can assist in understanding social movements while enabling a reimagining of democratic participation based on the legitimacy of students' concerns within the principle of *ubuntu*. "Freedom songs register protest by South African collectives and these cultural performances constitute emergent expressions that often exceed one singular function or domain of impact."<sup>4</sup> The utilisation of creative methods to stage social protests is not uncommon. "Through song, activists experience protests as moments of invigoration that reaffirm connection to others and to a purposeful self."<sup>5</sup> The paper therefore suggests the concept of *ubuntu*, a philosophical underpinning rooted in the African sense of being that embodies interconnectedness and shared humanity, as a framework for understanding how dramaturgy is manifested through song. This paper delves into the idea that *ubuntu* can serve as a dramaturgical lens, offering a unique perspective to decipher protests and songs as dynamic performances of democracy.

#FeesMustFall protests were driven by the demand for affordable and accessible education. South Africa is renowned for its rich history of protests, and #FeesMustFall was not an isolated phenomenon but part of a broader tradition of resistance and collective action in the country. #FeesMustFall emerged as a powerful student movement that swept across institutions of higher education in South Africa. Students from various universities united in their call for the abolition of tuition fees, highlighting the financial barriers that prevent many from accessing higher education. The movement gained momentum rapidly, drawing attention from national and international media and sparking widespread discussions on the state of education in South Africa. Through the lens of *ubuntu*, the #FeesMustFall protest is illuminated as an embodiment of "tshebeletso ya batho pele ka botho." This framework of knowledge-making thrives on communal meaning-making generation and emphasises the interconnectedness and shared humanity of all participants. The protest becomes more than a mere act of collective dissent; it transforms into a dramaturgical tool that unveils layers of agency, politics, and community dynamics.

Dramaturgy, in this context, can be better understood as a practice that involves a specific relationship between *ubuntu*, song, and protest. The songs sung during the protests were not only expressions of solidarity but also tools for creating a sense of unity and purpose among the protesters. These songs, deeply rooted in the cultural and historical context of South African resistance movements, served as a means of articulating the protesters' demands and aspirations.

Through an analysis of the songs that characterised the #FeesMustFall movement, we propose that *ubuntu* as dramaturgy, emphasises the importance of communal participation and collective meaning-making. This perspective allows the exploration of protest as a dynamic performance of democracy, where the roles and actions of individuals are shaped by their social context and their relationships with others. #FeesMustFall movement exemplifies the intersection of protest, song, and *ubuntu*, demonstrating how dramaturgy can be a powerful tool for understanding and analysing collective actions and social movements.

### Dramaturgy

Dramaturgy likens social interactions to a theatrical performance where individuals assume roles and enact behaviours based on the social context they find themselves in, much like actors performing on a stage. Erving Goffman's "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life," introduces the idea that individuals engage in presenting themselves on social stages.<sup>6</sup> This theatrical analogy extends to the realm of social moments when conflicts, tensions, and intense interactions take centre stage within society. Dramaturgy gives meaning and a vocabulary, especially to collective ways of being. The argument put forward is that

<sup>4</sup> Omotayo Jolaosho, "Singing Politics: Freedom Songs and Collective Protest in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *African Studies Review* 62, no. 2 (2019): 23.

<sup>5</sup> Jolaosho, "Singing Politics: Freedom Songs and Collective Protest in Post-Apartheid South Africa."23.

<sup>6</sup> E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959).

elements of dramaturgy enable a “making sense out of events.”<sup>7</sup> Dramaturgy becomes a powerful tool for dissecting the dynamics of protests, and other collective expressions of dissent. Much like a theatrical play, it features actors (individuals or groups) who perform on a stage (the public context) to communicate their grievances (the script/storytelling) and desires to an audience (the broader society). The protesters wear costumes (specific colours or outfits for protests), the stage is public and the audience consists of not only passive spectators but also the media and others who are converted into participants. Using dramaturgy to analyse protests, offers a way to understand the complex layers of interactions, the scripts protesters follow, and the varied reactions of the audience. Ratliff elaborates on the symbolic nature of protests. He highlights that protests are not just spontaneous outbursts, but carefully curated performances designed to evoke specific responses and convey messages.<sup>8</sup>

### *Ubuntu as episteme*

*Ubuntu* episteme is an embodied way of knowing. The conceptualisation of *ubuntu* episteme, or way of knowing, is rooted in a communal exploration of knowledge-making. “Umuntu [Human being] is the specific entity that continues to conduct an inquiry into being, experience, knowledge, and truth.”<sup>9</sup> According to Ramose being human is an activity that is an ongoing process that is also an inquiry.<sup>10</sup> In essence, to be human is to be in a constant state of questioning and being. It’s a process. “Ubu may be regarded as being becoming, and this evidently implies the idea of motion.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, *ubuntu* episteme or way of knowing can be a description (noun) and a doing word (verb). “The indivisible oneness and wholeness of *Ubuntu* mean, therefore, that *Ubuntu* is a verb-noun.”<sup>12</sup> The framing of *ubuntu* as an episteme is pronounced as a sense of becoming a process. This philosophical contribution is useful in reminder of *ubuntu* as a form of knowledge from everyday human-to-human relations. It is an offer to the process of theory-making. “Knowledge cannot be reduced to ‘philosophical’ and ‘scientific’ forms only. Recognition of various forms of knowledge and knowing is called for.”<sup>13</sup>

*Ubuntu* as an episteme is informed by the awareness and understanding that, human beings, knowledge can be related to everyday life, which informs how people know and think. *Ubuntu* is therefore concerned with how humans negotiate their sense of being in the community with others by using local indigenous cultural knowledge and reflections. From a philosophical perspective, the episteme refers to “How reality is defined, the nature of reality, how truth is determined, that which is knowable and can be known, and what the relationship is between knowing (process), the known (subject), and the knower (being).”<sup>14</sup> Episteme informs how people think of knowledge in relation to others, as well as constituting their sense of community. *Ubuntu* episteme is shaped and constituted by the consideration of the nature or surroundings of the producer and carrier of knowledge. Along with their process of meaning-seeking and making, which informs their sense of being human. As a way towards truth. *Ubuntu* episteme can be an expression of how truth is determined. Truth is a function of a consideration of the relationship between the one who knows and their knowledge and that which they know. It indicates that “knowledge comes from participation with and experience in reality, as human relatedness is the praxis of our humanity.”<sup>15</sup> It is based on the experience of human relations as a foundation of knowledge. Tendayi Sithole, in his work “The Black Register,” emphasises the importance of song and artmaking as integral components of knowledge production within the context of black communities.<sup>16</sup> Sithole argues that these forms of expression are not just artistic practices but are also critical methodologies for creating and disseminating knowledge.<sup>17</sup> He suggests that song and artmaking are ways of documenting and preserving the lived

<sup>7</sup> E. Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Harper and Row, 1974).10.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas N Ratliff, “On the Stage of Change: A Dramaturgical Approach to Violence, Social Protests, and Policing Styles in the US,” 2011.

<sup>9</sup> M.B. Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu* (Harare : Mond Books, 2005).35.

<sup>10</sup> Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*.36.

<sup>11</sup> Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*.36.

<sup>12</sup> Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*.36.

<sup>13</sup> Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “The Dynamics of Epistemological Decolonisation in the 21st Century: Towards Epistemic Freedom,” *The Strategic Review for Southern Africa* 40, no. 1 (2018).5.

<sup>14</sup> Nhlanhla Mkhize, “African/Afrikan-Centered Psychology,” *South African Journal of Psychology* 51, no. 3 (2021): 422–29.

<sup>15</sup> Mkhize, “African/Afrikan-Centered Psychology.”

<sup>16</sup> T. Sithole, *The Black Register* (John Wiley & Sons, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Sithole, *The Black Register*.

experiences, struggles, and resilience of black people. He argues that these creative practices serve as registers of black life, capturing the nuances of existence and resistance that are often overlooked by conventional academic frameworks.

This means that knowledge-making is premised on human relations as a felt and embodied process. *Ubuntu* as a way of knowing can reflect how those who participate in collective vocal expression make meaning of the everyday. In terms of song, the *ubuntu* way of knowing is explained and characterised by collective improvisation and experimental making. *Ubuntu* is a way in which protesters and activists engage in songs they know and understand themselves on their own terms within the context of their local community. Protesters come together to “interpret and reinterpret their experiences to record and make sense of events and experiences.”<sup>18</sup> The process of collectively making meaning of life experience as *ubuntu* episteme or way of knowing can be found in understanding protest songs as a site that enables elements of dramaturgy.

### ***Ubuntu as Dramaturgy***

In dramaturgy, *ubuntu* can be seen as a “relational feature of meaning-making.”<sup>19</sup> *Ubuntu* in the context of dramaturgy can be described as the process of collective knowing, storytelling, story-making and story-sharing. A process in which those who come together in song share each other’s narratives, songs and dance movements as an organising principle. Through understanding the elements of dramaturgy, thinking can be understood as an action that fosters *ubuntu* and fellowship among people engaged in protest songs. The *ubuntu* and spirit of being in a collective through singing is premised on sharing the same ideas and the desire for having something to say to one another which results in thoughts motion.

*Table 1* and *Figure 1* below aim to integrate the principles of dramaturgy and ubuntu, highlighting how *ubuntu* can serve as a dramaturgical tool in the context of protest and collective action.

**Table 1. Dramaturgy to *Ubuntu* as dramaturgy**

<b>Element</b>	<b>Dramaturgy</b>	<b>Ubuntu</b>	<b><i>Ubuntu</i> as a Dramaturgical Tool</b>
<b>Role</b>	Actors performing roles based on social context.	People are part of a collective whole, influencing and being influenced by others.	<b>Roles:</b> Protesters are actors who are interconnected and part of a collective.
<b>Performance Space</b>	The societal context where interactions occur.	The community or society at large.	<b>Staging is performance space:</b> Public spaces where protests occur are transformed into stages that reflect the communal spirit and collective objectives.
<b>Costumes and Symbols</b>	Specific colours, outfits, or symbols are used in performances.	Cultural symbols and practices that emphasise unity and shared values.	<b>Symbolic gestures and efforting:</b> Use of cultural symbols, and songs that resonate reinforcing the collective identity and purpose.
<b>Scripts and Narratives</b>	Predefined scripts and behaviours that guide interactions.	Oral traditions and communal storytelling.	<b>Scripts and Storytelling:</b> Narratives and songs used in protests tell the collective story, express shared grievances, and articulate common goals.
<b>Audience</b>	Society, media, and other participants who observe and react.	The broader community and future generations.	<b>Audience Engagement:</b> The immediate and extended community, including international onlookers, who engage with and respond to the performance of protest.

The concept of “*Ubuntu* as a Dramaturgical Tool” captures the convergence of *ubuntu* and dramaturgy into a framework for collective creation and community engagement. **Roles** involve actors

<sup>18</sup> Mkhize, “African/Afrikan-Centered Psychology.”

<sup>19</sup> J. Hughes and H. Nicholson, *Critical Perspectives on Applied Theatre* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

performing roles based on social context, while *ubuntu* emphasises individuals as part of a collective whole. Together, this manifests as protesters who are interconnected and part of a collective. **Staging is performance space**, it is the societal context where interactions occur, whereas *ubuntu* views it as the community at large. Combined, public spaces where protests happen are transformed into stages that reflect communal spirit and collective objectives. **Symbolic gestures and efforting** include specific colours and outfits, while *ubuntu* involves cultural symbols that emphasise unity. Unified, these elements use resonant cultural symbols and songs to reinforce collective identity. **Scripts and Storytelling** consist of predefined behaviours, whereas *ubuntu* relies on oral traditions and storytelling. Together, they create narratives and songs in protests that express shared grievances and goals. Finally, the **Audience** encompasses community, while *ubuntu* includes the broader community and future generations. As a dramaturgical tool, this involves engaging both immediate and extended communities, including international onlookers, in the performance of protest. The diagram in the next section illustrates how *ubuntu* and dramaturgy intertwine to form a comprehensive approach to understanding and enacting social movements.

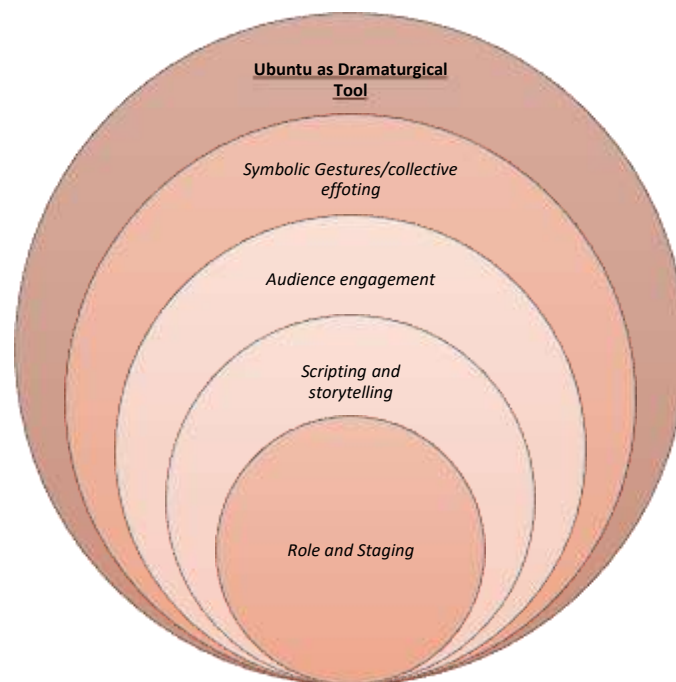


Figure 1: *Ubuntu as Dramaturgical Tool*

The three songs chosen for this analysis hold both historical significance and contemporary resonance. These songs, originally composed during periods of apartheid and colonial encounters, encapsulate forms of protest and resistance against oppression. Over time, they have been reimagined and adapted for contemporary protests, continuing to resonate with the collective consciousness and audiences of these movements. Analysing these three songs through the lens of *ubuntu* as a dramaturgical tool allows us to explore how they function as performative acts that express and reinforce communal values and collective experiences. Their historical roots and contemporary adaptations provide a rich context for examining the intersection of music, protest, and community dynamics. By focusing on these songs, the study aimed to demonstrate how the embodied articulation of concepts like academic freedom and decolonisation of epistemology through singing and chanting serves as a powerful manifestation of dramaturgy and *ubuntu*.

### ***Decolonised “Nkosi Sikelela iAfrika”***

Originally composed by Enoch Sontonga, “*Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika*” is one of the most iconic anthems of African unity and resistance against colonialism. Initially used as a hymn of liberation, the song played a significant role in rallying people together during the anti-apartheid movement. Nqambaza in her analysis of the song shares: “When the apartheid state attempted to ban it from existence, the prayer sought refuge in the song “Weeping,” by the South African band Bright Blue, hiding in plain sight. After the dawn of

democracy, “*Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika*” was incorporated into a medley to represent the “rainbow nation” and declared as the South African national anthem.”<sup>20</sup>

The decolonised version of “*Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika*,” first performed by the Mighty Wits SDASM Choir, reflects an attempt to return to the character of the past and the original weeping of the former hymn. The decolonised song excludes the English and Afrikaans parts. This updated anthem mirrors the ongoing struggle for a truly decolonised and equitable society. This contemporary rendition of the song continues to serve as a unifying call for collective action and embodies the principles of *ubuntu* in the context of the present day.

### ***Decolonised Nkosi Sikelela***

*Nkosi sikelel’ iAfrika*

God Bless Africa

*Maluphakanyisw’ uphondo lwayo,*

May her spirit rise high up

*Yizwa imithandazo yethu,*

Hear thou our prayers

*Sibe moya munye*

To be united in one spirit

*Noma sekunzima emhlabeni*

Even through hard times in this world

*Sihlukunyezwa kabuhlungu*

When we are painfully abused

*Nkosi siph’ amandla okunqoba*

Lord give us strength for victory

*Silwe nosathane.*

To fight the devil

*Noma sekunzima emhlabeni*

Even through hard times in this world

*Sihlukunyezwa kabuhlungu*

When we are painfully abused

*Nkosi siph’ amandla okunqoba*

Lord give us strength for victory

*Silwe nosathane*

To fight the devil [Repeat]

*(translation by Authors)*

### ***Scripting and Storytelling***

The decolonised version was sung by the Wits #FMF student movement. This song was used to link #FMF to a greater Pan Africanist Conversation around democracy and nation-building. The song highlights the historical linkage to the rest of Africa around protest. Thus, “[song] is not based on one rhythmic structure only but will contain numerous seemingly mutually exclusive rhythms.”<sup>21</sup> In terms of scripting and storytelling during protests, the song is sung by the lead singer with an alto lead. Unlike many protest songs that are led by bass male voices, this song can be led by both male and female voices. This is how the song is sung:

The lead sings: “*Noma Noma, sekunzima?*” (Even though it is hard time)

The collective responds: “*Noma sekunzima, emhlabeni*” (Even though it is hard in this world)

Leader: “*Sihlukunyezwa?*” (We are abused and bothered)

Collective: “*Sikhukunyezwa kabuhlungu*” (We are abused and bothered badly)

<sup>20</sup> P. Nqambaza, “Born of Struggle on Africa Is a Country,” 2024, <https://africasacountry.com/2024/05/born-of-struggle>.

<sup>21</sup> A. Impey and B. Nussbaum, “Music and Dance in Southern Africa: Positive Forces in the Workplace,” in *Sawubona Africa: Embracing Four Worlds in South African Management*, ed. R. Lessem and B. Nussbaum (Sandton: Zebra Press, 1996), 4.

The “*Decolonised Nkosi Sikelela*” held a unique position in the 2015 protests, bridging the old and the new. It embodies the dual nature of being a well-known traditional song and a reimagined anthem for contemporary resistance. The call-and-response format played a crucial role in its adaptation and effectiveness during the protests. In 2015, the song’s familiar structure was both an asset and a canvas for innovation. The call-and-response interaction was not just a musical technique but a pedagogical tool on the picket lines. Protestors used this format to quickly teach each other the song, creating an inclusive and participatory atmosphere. The improvisational aspect of the call-and-response allowed for real-time adaptation and creativity, fostering a sense of community and solidarity among the participants. As they sang, individuals had to rely on each other, ensuring everyone was aligned and in tune with the song’s rhythm and message.

Songs and narratives in protests do more than entertain; they tell a collective story. They articulate the participants’ shared experiences and aspirations, binding them together. Through the “*Decolonised Nkosi Sikelela*,” protestors communicated their demands for decolonisation and social justice, resonating with both their immediate community and broader society. Media and other observers could witness and react to this collective expression, amplifying its impact. Benford & Hunt argue that scripts play a crucial role in integrating and coordinating movement activities. The song #FMF movement exemplifies framing historical ideas.<sup>22</sup>

The song also served as a diagnostic tool, highlighting the conditions of black students in South Africa and within universities. It composes dialogue that resonates with historical injustices and current grievances, directing participants’ actions through its powerful lyrics and call-and-response structure. This scripting process moves ideas from mere concepts to enactment, empowering participants to embody the movement’s goals.

### **Roles and Staging**

The call-and-response elements make “*Decolonised Nkosi Sikelela*” an “interactive, communicative, and communalistic [song, which] creates a high degree of social cohesion.”<sup>23</sup> (emphasis added). The lead singer’s role is to guide, while the community’s backing role reinforces unity and collective identity. This dynamic transforms the song into a powerful tool for expressing shared grievances and common goals.

The call-and-response format creates clear roles for the lead singer and responders, mirroring broader societal roles of oppressed and oppressor. As Benford and Hunt note, “Social movement scripts are about power relations.”<sup>24</sup> In this context, the lead singer represents the voice of the oppressed, guiding the collective response and highlighting the power dynamics at play. By providing a structured yet flexible script, the song helps integrate and coordinate the activities of the #FMF movement. Participants quickly learn their roles and the song’s message, fostering unity and a shared sense of purpose.

The song’s historical framing and clear role delineation enable participants to connect their personal experiences with the collective struggle, strengthening the movement’s coherence and impact. Roles and staging are a negotiated harmony achieved through call and response. The lead chorus “*Nkosi sikelel’ iAfrika* (God Bless Africa)” is accompanied by the same chorus, promoting inclusivity and unity. “Songs and rituals transmit values, ideas, and profound beliefs naturally through play and active participation.”<sup>25</sup> The song progresses towards a defined end or final cadence but focuses on prolonging the shared experience through repetition and returning to the beginning. This cyclical structure ensures that people feel part of a collective whole, influencing and being influenced by others.

### **Audience Engagement**

When the protestors sing the song, everyone participates, eliminating the distinction between performer and audience. The song transforms into a prayer that unites people, symbolising shared humanity. Singing the anthem as a hymn facilitates communal healing, as both performers and the audience become co-creators of the song. This collective participation fosters cultural affirmation and fellowship. Vocalising

<sup>22</sup> Robert D Benford and Scott A Hunt, “Dramaturgy and Social Movements: The Social Construction and Communication of Power,” *Sociological Inquiry* 62, no. 1 (1992): 36–55.

<sup>23</sup> Impey and Nussbaum, “Music and Dance in Southern Africa: Positive Forces in the Workplace.”

<sup>24</sup> Benford and Hunt, “Dramaturgy and Social Movements: The Social Construction and Communication of Power.”<sup>39</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Cosmin Tudor Ciocan, “Congruence of Rituals and Theatre. The Use of Drama for Religious Ceremony,” 2015.42.

songs in protest can thus be seen as expressing “a vocabulary that is local.”<sup>26</sup> The immediate and extended community, including international onlookers, engage with and respond to the performance of the protest, reinforcing solidarity and support.

### **Collective effort in performing the song**

The call-and-response structure of “*Decolonised Nkosi Sikelela*” fosters a sense of identification and solidarity among all participants. The lyrics, including words like Nkosi (God) and calls for strength in unity, highlight the collective effort to fight and conquer a common enemy. This collective performance draws symbolic strength from the act of gathering and giving, providing hope to the hopeless. Each participant in the song supports and empowers the others. The use of indigenous language further enhances cultural dignity and affirmation, encouraging everyone to engage in the performance.

Protests, as dynamic performances, not only highlight conflicts but also emphasise dialogue and communal engagement. As Turner notes, “Rituals are means of doing the same, but by allowing the normal social structure to be inverted and broken out of temporarily so that the return to the everyday structure is enhanced in value.”<sup>27</sup> The song’s ritualistic nature temporarily inverts social structures, reinforcing solidarity and collective strength. The “*Decolonised Nkosi Sikelela*” is a testament to the power of music in social movements. Its call-and-response format facilitates quick learning, community building, and social cohesion, making it a vital part of the 2015 protests. The song serves as a powerful script in the #FMF movement, framing historical and contemporary issues, directing collective action, and clarifying power dynamics. This integration of music and movement activities underscores the importance of scripts in social movements, as articulated by Benford and Hunt.<sup>28</sup>

In 1983 Mbongeni Ngema created the play “*Asinamali*” which was later turned into a film in 2017. The play included music and songs and one of the key songs was named after the title of the play, *Asinamali*. The play together with the song “*Asinamali*” was born out of a crucial moment in South African history. Its creation was deeply influenced by the socio-political environment of apartheid South Africa, particularly focusing on the struggles and resistance of the black working class against oppressive economic and social policies.

#### ***Asinamali***

*Wayeshil’ u Msizi Dube (asinamali)*

He did say, Msizi Dube (We don’t have money)

*Asinamali’*

We don’t have money

*Asinalutho (asinamali)*

We don’t have anything (We don’t have money)

*Wayeshil’ u Msizi Dube (asinamali)*

He did say, Msizi Dube (We don’t have money)

*Asinamali’*

We don’t have money

*Asisebenzi (asinamali)*

We don’t work (we don’t have money)

*Imali, imali (asinamali)*

Money, money, (We don’t have money)

*Imali, imali (asinamali)*

Money, money, (We don’t have money)

*Imali, imali (asinamali)*

Money, money, (We don’t have money)

*Imali, imali (asinamali)*

Money, money, (We don’t have money)

<sup>26</sup> W. Mignolo, “Further Thoughts on (de) Coloniality,” in *Postcoloniality - Decoloniality: Black Critique*, ed. S. Broeck and C. Junker (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2014), 21–53.

<sup>27</sup> V. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 95.

<sup>28</sup> Benford and Hunt, “Dramaturgy and Social Movements: The Social Construction and Communication of Power.”

*Wayeshil' u Msizi Dube (asinamali)*  
He did say, Msizi Dube (We don't have money)  
*Akunamal'*  
There is no money  
*Akusetshenzw' (asinamali)*  
We are not working (We don't have money)  
*Wayeshil' u Msizi Dube (asinamali)*  
He did say, Msizi Dube (We don't have money)  
*Asinamal'*  
There is no money  
*Asinalutho (asinamali)*  
We don't have anything (We don't have money)  
*'aw' imali, imali (asinamali)*  
Oh money, money (We don't have money)  
*Imali, asisebenzi (asinamali)*  
Money, we don't work (We don't have money)  
*Imali, imali (asinamali)*  
Money, money (We don't have money)  
*Imali, imali (asinamali)*  
Money, money (We don't have money)  
*(translation by Authors)*

### **Scripting and Storytelling**

The slogan “*Asinamali*,” meaning “We have no money,” emerged as a cry of defiance during these protests, encapsulating the economic hardships and the struggle for basic rights and dignity. *Ngema*, inspired by the resilience and bravery of the workers and leaders like *Msizi Dube*, sought to bring their stories and struggles to the stage. The song’s narrative revolves around economic exploitation, social injustices, and the indomitable spirit of resistance of the workers. This narrative resonated with students who were clearly articulating that they do not have money to pay for the exorbitant fees of higher education. The stories of NSFAS that required students to share their poverty stories are highlighted by this song. “*Asinamali*” highlights the interconnectedness of personal suffering and collective struggle. The use of music and traditional African performance styles serves to not only entertain but also to educate and mobilise the audience, making it a form of protest in itself. “*Asinamali*” for its political significance brought the plight of South African workers and students together. The story of the workers is the story of the students. Success underscored the power of art as a tool for social change and highlighted the importance of telling the stories of those on the front lines of resistance.

### **Roles and Staging**

The students of the Fees Must Fall movement found profound resonance with historical leaders like *Msizi Dube*. They identified deeply with their struggle to be seen and heard, understanding that their fight for free and decolonised education was a continuation of past battles for justice and equality. *Msizi Dube* was an activist and leader within the South African labour movement, a relatively obscure historical figure whose contributions were nonetheless significant. He organised and led workers in marches and protests against the exploitative conditions imposed by the apartheid regime. One of the most notable events was the workers’ march in Lamontville, Durban, which became a pivotal moment of resistance. In the song “*Asinamali*,” the character of *Msizi Dube* is mentioned in the song, symbolising the fight against economic and social injustices. His legacy represents the ongoing struggle against oppression, which transcends generations.

### **Audience Engagement**

In 2015/2016, the Fees Must Fall movement not only demanded the end of tuition fees but also fought against the outsourcing of workers at universities. This solidarity between students and workers was crucial as it highlighted the interconnectedness of their struggles. The workers, often the parents of the

students, were marching alongside them, showing a unified front against systemic injustices. By aligning their core struggles with those of the workers, the students embodied the spirit of historical figures like *Msizi Dube*. This connection is significant as it shows that the fight for justice in education is part of a larger battle against all forms of economic and social exploitation.

Mentioning *Msizi Dube* in their narratives allowed the students to embody the character and the values he stood for. It demonstrated that the broader societal issues were very much visible and relevant to the students. By invoking *Dube*, the students acknowledged the continuity of their fight with the historical struggles of the labour movement, emphasising that their education and their activism were inseparable from the economic conditions and rights of the working class.

### ***Collective Effort in Performing the Song***

In essence, the students of the #FeesMustFall movement not only sought to address their immediate needs but also positioned their struggle within the broader context of South Africa's fight for justice and equality. By identifying with leaders like *Msizi Dube*, they underscored the importance of historical continuity and the interconnectedness of social struggles. This historical awareness enriched their movement, providing it with deeper significance and a broader mandate for change.

### ***“Jikijela” by Letta Mbulu and Thandiswa Mazwai***

*Letta Mbulu's* original version of “*Jikijela*” was composed during the apartheid era, serving as a powerful form of protest and resistance against the oppressive regime. The song embodies the struggle and resilience of the South African people during a time of intense political and social upheaval.

*Thandiswa Mazwai's* recomposed version of “*Jikijela*” brings the historical context of the song into the present, adapting its message for modern-day protests. This reimagined version resonates with contemporary audiences, particularly in the context of movements like #FeesMustFall, by connecting past struggles with current demands for justice and equality.

#### ***Jikijela***

*Jikijela ngamatye*

Throw Stones

*Sobashaya ngamatye*

We will stone them

*Ngob'zobuya nini*

Because when will they come back

*Jikijela ngamatye*

Throw Stones

*Sobashaya ngamatye*

We will stone them

*Ngob'zobuya nini*

Because when will they come back

*Jikijela ngamatye*

Throw Stones

*Sobashaya ngamatye*

We will stone them

*Inkomo zobuya nini*

Till the cows come back

*Jikijela*

Throw Stones

*Nkomo zoze zibuye*

The cows will come back

*Jikijela ngamatye*  
Throw Stones  
*Jikijela ngamatye (Repeat 2x)*  
Throw Stones  
(translation by Authors)

### **Scripting and Storytelling**

“*Jikijela*,” was released as a single from *Thandiswa Mazwai’s* “*Belede*” album. The song features the voice of Busisiwe Catherine Seabe, a prominent #FeesMustFall student leader and activist, adding a powerful layer of authenticity and connection to the movement. The song serves as both a tribute and a rallying cry. The song’s structure is meditative, with repetitive lyrics that create a hypnotic rhythm. This repetition is a hallmark of many protest songs, designed to embed the message deeply within the listener’s consciousness. In both *Letta Mbulu’s* original version and *Thandiswa Mazwai’s* reinterpretation, repetition underscores themes of mourning and a call to action. The lyrics, though simple, carry profound meaning. The act of throwing rocks, as encouraged in the song, symbolises resistance and the reclaiming of lost respect and dignity. For four minutes, *Mazwai’s* voice wails this instruction, assuring the listeners that the cows (a metaphor for resources, respect, and rights) will return as long as the rocks are thrown. This imagery conveys that through persistent struggle and resistance, what has been lost can be restored.

### **Roles and Staging**

The song “*Jikijela*” was created and remade alongside the protest. *Mazwai* in her rendition revealed solidarity with the students. In this regard, the roles were about closely identifying with the protestors. During this time, *Mazwai* hosted several concerts in solidarity with women leaders of the student movement, highlighting the role of women and care on the picket lines. “The staging of this historic song also brought logistical matters into focus, suggesting that activists must develop and manipulate symbols to gain broader community and national support for the student movement.”<sup>29</sup>

The singing of this historical song, linked to South Africa’s anti-apartheid struggle, was a central dramatic task for engaging appropriate audiences and using politically resonant symbols. Though the song was not sung on the picket lines, its presence during the time symbolised the creation of a community beyond the immediate protests. It signalled that the country recognised the students’ struggle as significant, extending beyond university issues to a national concern. The role and staging of “*Jikijela*” demonstrated the maintenance and expansion of the #FMF. By fostering solidarity, engaging with historical symbols, and broadening the support base, the song played a crucial part in the dynamics of the #FMF movement.

### **Audience Engagement**

*Mbulu and Mazwai’s* renditions of “*Jikijela*” utilises repetition not only to drive the melody and flow but also to evoke a sense of urgency and solidarity. The song’s repetitive nature mirrors the persistence and determination of the student protestors, emphasising the continuous and relentless nature of their fight. The inclusion of Busisiwe Catherine Seabe’s voice connects the song directly to the movement, blurring the lines between music and activism. By analysing “*Jikijela*” through the framework of *ubuntu* as a dramaturgical tool, the song is seen as how it functions as a performative act that reinforces communal values and collective experiences. The song becomes more than just a piece of music; it transforms into a dynamic expression of unity, resistance, and hope.

### **Collective effort in performing the song**

The song fosters community-making when sung collectively. It is also designed for call and response, where the leader instructs, “*Jikijela!*” and the collective answers, “*Ngamatye.*” This interactive singing is not just a present activity. As Alexis Pauline Gumbs suggests, “When we sing historical texts, we are also singing with those who have sung the song before. It becomes a form of collective breathwork. By

---

<sup>29</sup> Benford and Hunt, “Dramaturgy and Social Movements: The Social Construction and Communication of Power.”

singing the song in the present, we engage in a dialogue with those who sang it during apartheid, creating a temporal bridge through music.”<sup>30</sup> The versions of the song illustrate that those who sing in the present moment do so along with those who are now in spirit, forming a collective chorus that spans generations. The act of singing together unites the present and the past, embodying a shared struggle and a common goal. Through this musical connection, a powerful sense of community and continuity is created.

### ***Echoing Collective***

The three songs demonstrate that South Africa has a long history of protest, with the two “*Jikijela*” songs highlighting both the front stage and backstage aspects of dramaturgy. “*Old Jikijela*” represents the backstage, serving as a script that embodies the way South Africa protests. These songs highlight the scripting of protest, mixing various languages, namely, *isiZulu* and *isiXhosa*, which reflect their popular accessibility and widespread adoption.

The text-based analytical and political resonance of the lyrics of protest songs, as expressions of *ubuntu* with dramaturgical significance, is not always fully revealed and documented in the South African context. However, these songs continue to hold meaning in grassroots efforts addressing contemporary issues in South Africa. The persuasiveness and effectiveness of lyrics in conveying contentious messages are increasingly debated.<sup>31</sup> Despite this, lyrics remain accessible to script-centric modes of analysis and knowledge production. Sara Ahmed discusses how affective value accumulates and intensifies over time, noting that affect is not an intrinsic feature of objects or persons but moves through them, accumulating value in the process. This creates an economy of affect where “feelings appear in objects, or indeed as objects with a life of their own, only by the concealment of how they are shaped by histories, including histories of production (labour and labour time), as well as circulation or exchange.”<sup>32</sup>

An emotional ideology pervades South African narratives regarding the necessity of expelling pain from the individual body. This was evident among the female activists who “viewed harboured sorrow, anxiety, and pain as particularly destructive to physical health.”<sup>33</sup> The use of performative tools to read and make the world relevant to the broader fields of humanities and social sciences. By linking everyday democratic acts to creative performance through dramaturgy as a process of *ubuntu*.

The role and staging of protest songs in South Africa underscore their significance in maintaining and expanding the capacity of movements. Through solidarity, historical resonance, and collective participation, these songs continue to shape and inspire social movements, reflecting the deep interconnections between music, politics, and cultural identity.

## **CONCLUSION**

*Ubuntu* as a dramaturgical tool, reveals the interrelations between protestors and how camaraderie is formed through performances. This is demonstrated that songs act as both performances and dramaturgy of protest. They are key elements that unite protestors into a collective ensemble, creating a unified identity for the protest movement. The songs provide direction for performance, delineating roles, scripts, props, and set designs. The embodied history within these songs breathes new life into the present, emphasising the dramaturgy of scripting and roles as collective experiences of protest and meaning-making.

South Africa’s history of protest provides a script with clear roles for individuals in the background and on the frontlines. Analysing the three songs reveals the scripting, roles, and space-making that allow for community building through collective singing. These songs highlight how protest becomes a collective chorus of the nation, with the past and present intertwined through performance. Songs serve as a way of reading the world, contributing to understanding of social movements and reimagining democratic participation. The songs explain the elements of scripting, roles, and space-making:

The songs have a scripted presence during protests, guiding how protestors engage. There is clarity on who performs which actions within the protest. The songs foster community by connecting those

<sup>30</sup> A.P. Gumbs, “The Black Feminist Breathing Chorus Promotes Action through Meditation,” For Harriet, 2014, <https://www.forharriet.com/2014/06/the-black-feminist-breathing-chorus.html>.

<sup>31</sup> A. Roy, *Poverty Capital: Microfinance and the Making of Development* (New York: Routledge, 2010).13.

<sup>32</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 120-121.

<sup>33</sup> Jolaosho, “Singing Politics: Freedom Songs and Collective Protest in Post-Apartheid South Africa.”

singing in the present with those who sang during apartheid, creating a collective chorus of the nation. community building and protest aesthetics connects the creative and performative aspects of the world.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ahmed, Sara. "Affective Economies." *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 117–39.
- Benford, Robert D, and Scott A Hunt. "Dramaturgy and Social Movements: The Social Construction and Communication of Power." *Sociological Inquiry* 62, no. 1 (1992): 36–55.
- Ciocan, Cosmin Tudor. "Congruence of Rituals and Theatre. The Use of Drama for Religious Ceremony," 2015.
- Goffman, E. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Harper and Row, 1974.
- . *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959.
- Gumbs, A.P. "The Black Feminist Breathing Chorus Promotes Action through Meditation ." For Harriet , 2014. <https://www.forharriet.com/2014/06/the-black-feminist-breathing-chorus.html>.
- Hughes, J., and H. Nicholson. *Critical Perspectives on Applied Theatre*. Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- Impey, A., and B. Nussbaum. " Music and Dance in Southern Africa: Positive Forces in the Workplace." In *Sawubona Africa: Embracing Four Worlds in South African Management*, edited by R. Lessem and B. Nussbaum, 1–23. Sandton: Zebra Press, 1996.
- Jolaosho, Omotayo. "Singing Politics: Freedom Songs and Collective Protest in Post-Apartheid South Africa." *African Studies Review* 62, no. 2 (2019): 6–29.
- Lepere, Refiloe. "Song as a Register for Black Feminist Theatre-Making Aesthetic." In *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy*, Vol. 21, 2021.
- Mignolo, W. " Further Thoughts on (de) Coloniality." In *Postcoloniality - Decoloniality: Black Critique*, edited by S. Broeck and C. Junker, 21–53. Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2014.
- Mkhize, Nhlanhla. "African/Afrikan-Centered Psychology." *South African Journal of Psychology* 51, no. 3 (2021): 422–29.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo. "The Dynamics of Epistemological Decolonisation in the 21st Century: Towards Epistemic Freedom." *The Strategic Review for Southern Africa* 40, no. 1 (2018).
- Nqambaza, P. " Born of Struggle on Africa Is a Country ," 2024. <https://africasacountry.com/2024/05/born-of-struggle>.
- Ramose, M.B. *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*. Harare : Mond Books, 2005.
- Ratliff, Thomas N. "On the Stage of Change: A Dramaturgical Approach to Violence, Social Protests, and Policing Styles in the US," 2011.
- Roy, A. *Poverty Capital: Microfinance and the Making of Development*. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Sithole, T. *The Black Register*. John Wiley & Sons, 2020.
- Turner, V. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969.

## ABOUT AUTHORS

Dr. Refiloe Lepere is a Performing Arts lecturer, an award-winning theatre director, a drama therapist, a journalist, and a facilitator. Her expertise includes participatory theatre, critical race, postcolonial and feminist theories, and artistic activism. By fusing history, statistics, and personal narratives, her therapeutic theatre work addresses social (in)justice, trauma, intersectional identities of black women, and labour as a performance. She creates interdisciplinary and cross-cultural performance projects. Her innovative stagings of cross-cultural experiences and research investigate how race functions, framing and shaping our perception of the world. She situates her work within the larger field of black feminist aesthetics and drama therapy, investigating how we absorb, interpret, and are moved by stories. She holds Ford Foundation, THInK, and TAU fellowships. Her international facilitation work includes training for the German Chamber of Commerce, GIZ Lesotho & South Africa, and FES South Africa. She has given seminars on Gender and Climate Change, Sexual Harassment, and Decolonial Pedagogies for international organizations. She has delivered training sessions on peacebuilding and dialogues for the Davis Peace

Project. Refiloe has collaborated with the ILO, Cosatu, UN Women, and UNFPA on the Women's Leadership Development Initiative in South Africa.

Dr. Tebogo Radebe is a dynamic creative scientist, academic, published interdisciplinary researcher, scholar, drama practitioner, facilitator dedicated to using drama to activate communities in various social contexts. He has been to local and international conferences. He is a Stellenbosch University, SA & Michigan State University, USA Ubuntu Dialogues International Fellowship holder. With extensive experience as an applied theatre practitioner, he has facilitated decolonial dialogues at Stellenbosch University, enriching the academic and social discourse. His passion for development is evident in his self-motivated, solution-driven, critical, creative, and analytical work ethic. Tebogo's expertise lies in employing creative arts for social development and change. As an award-winning radio producer, he has contributed significantly to Voice of Wits, SA FM, and Maties FM Radio Station at Stellenbosch University. His experience in radio highlights his ability to engage and educate through media. His selfless dedication and commitment to his passion for arts based creative sciences and cross disciplinary life long learning through Soweto Kliptown Youth Program, Soyikwa Institute of African Theatre, Blaq Aesthetics Arts Collective, University Of South Africa, Wits and Stellenbosch , Zululand University continue to lay a foundation for his career. Dr. Radebe's commitment to education, creativity, and community activation continues to inspire and impact the fields of Arts based and Creative as well as Interdisciplinary research.