

*Senzeni Marasela's
'Waiting for Gebane'*



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Senzeni Marasela's body of work encompasses multiple disciplines and mediums. Through photography, performance, embroidery and painting Marasela centralises, performs and complicates the Black maternal. Taking from Judith Butler's notion that gender is instituted through the "stylization of the body and hence must be understood as the mundane way which bodily gestures, movements and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self"¹ 'Waiting for Gebane' continues to enact and fictionalises the life of Senzeni Marasela's mother Theodorah. Susan Pickard describes waiting as constituting a gendered temporality- a constrained state of expectation founded on racialised and gendered passivity². Through Theodorah we come to realise that waiting is a grammar that defines black femininity. We also come to realise that Black women disavow this grammar by filling the spaces of waiting with minor and major acts of resistance.

Theodorah is a persona crafted to represent the experiences of Black womanhood and is the figure around which Senzeni makes pointed commentary on the constructions of gender, migration, family, memory and ultimately personhood. Theodorah first appears on the scene in 'Theodorah in Johannesburg'. This enactment shows the image of Theodorah, a woman, whose rural status is cemented by the red isiShweshwe dress she wears religiously. The isiShweshwe fabric originally associated with the Basotho, comes to be a marker of Black womanhood regardless of ethnicity. It is a symbol of class and

1 Judith Butler (1986) 'Performative acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal*, 40(40), pp. 519-531.

2 Susan Pickard (2019) 'Waiting Like a Girl? The Temporal Constitution of Femininity as a Factor in Gender Inequality', *Wiley Online Library*, pp1-14

differentiates the modern woman who is often a city dweller from the rural woman who exists on the fringes of the modern world, wed to a traditionally constructed femininity. In 'Waiting for Gebane' however, Marasela attired in the isiShweshwe fabric positions the Black woman as an interloper, an entity that cannot be neatly characterised as either urban or rural, modern or traditional. Her sojourn renders her an unstable figure that oscillates between subject and object. The instability of Black womanhood as a category is named and enacted through waiting, waiting to be brought in from the fringes of modern society, waiting to be liberated from the vagaries of traditional laws that determine what it means to be a woman in rural and peri-urban areas, waiting for an opportunity to indict the archive that labours in service of her exclusion, waiting ultimately to enter the bounds of national consciousness and claim all that has been lost to this waiting.

An archive is popularly imagined as a sacrosanct entity whose boundaries are stagnant, incorruptible, secure, much like the contents enclosed therein. Achille Mbembe underscores the materiality of the archive, stating that the material nature of the archive means that is inscribed within the universe of the senses³. We know however that the term archive appeals to an array of conceptual realms. Mbembe addresses how the archive operates within these varied discursive terrains such that we come to understand that the term archive is a fluid one, that in naming the archive we are naming a corpus of meaning making that is replete with lacunae, inconsistencies, illegible fragments, and contradictions. Archiving is both an emblem of the past and a

3 Achille Mbembe (2002) 'The Archive and its Limits' in *Refiguring the Archive* eds Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid and Razia Saleh, Clayson Printers, Cape Town, 19-26.



Senzeni Marasela
Waiting for Gebane
Kaffir Sheet
145 x 90cm
2017

Gebane on the day of his departure

Marasela 2017

process of meaning making that unfolds in real time. What constitutes the archive is determined by what appeals to popular sentiment, to collective memory, what when retrieved from the rubble of the past evokes a feeling of national consciousness. Art – that ephemeral corpus that often eludes neat legibility – functions in service of this archival impulse.

This recognition of a fluid archive informs the ethos of the Works of Art Collection at UCT. The collection is continuously expanding through the acquisition of works by contemporary artists who either loan, sell or donate their works to the collection. Through this collection we see that the archive constructs the past whilst operating as a response to that curatorially constructed historicity. The archive's fluidity unfolds in the present, it is constantly scrutinised. It is reconfigured to suit the sensibilities of the day, to right the wrongs of the past or reimagined to pre-empt a much-desired future.

The acquisition of Senzeni Marasela's 'Waiting for Gebane' furthers the archival imperative. It continues to uncover the complexity of the archive by offering a narrative rendered not through a singular institutional voice but through a myriad of tones that have helped shape the collection. 'Waiting for Gebane' is a work that Senzeni Marasela created as part of a series that explores waiting, more specifically the waiting of Black women as a performative gesture. Senzeni's artistic practice is a pointed reflection of how Black womanhood is constructed through mundane acts such as waiting. It implicates a patriarchal society that has consigned Black women into a liminal space defined by absence, erasure and loss.

Senzeni Marasela describes the motivation behind the 'Theodorah in Johannesburg' series works thus: "Theodorah, my alter ego first appeared in my work in 2005. Then, she was making journeys into Johannesburg. To look at Johannesburg and visit sites of trauma. Johannesburg is a transitory space, people go through the city, come to the city and dream of the city. It's the dream destination for many people throughout Africa. For Theodorah this has been a site of pain and fear" (Das, 2021). Johannesburg is an urban metropolis built on capitalist sensibility that is synonymous with colonial expansion, segregation and the systematic dehumanisation of Black people.

The migrant labour practices instituted by the colonial administration in the 1860s reached its zenith after the discovery of gold in the Witwatersrand. The apartheid regime conscripted mostly men from the rural areas to satisfy its need for cheap labour on the rapidly expanding mining complex. As it was often women who remained in the rural, peri-urban and quasi-independent areas termed Bantustans, these systems of migratory labour entrenched certain dynamics that became endemic to the African heterosexual family coupling in South Africa. Theodorah traverses the city, a contemplative voyeur whose fastidious gaze indicts the city. In many of the photographs that form part of Marasela's expansive body of work, Theodorah has her back to the viewer. We do not see her gaze upon the objects of her curiosity. We do not know whether her gaze is contemplative, pensive, inquisitive, shocked or approving, her presence at the sight of history is implication enough. Theodorah stands as an oddity, a woman marked by her isiShweshwe garb. She is out of place in whichever setting she is presented to the viewer. Senzeni thus offers insight into the ways femininity functions in space, how one's gestures, movements and performance of social codes are either in keeping with

popular conceptions of gender or a rebellion against these strictures. Theodorah in Johannesburg is a pointed disavowal of the city and the idea that the urban landscape is a masculine domain. As Christo Vosloo puts it, the migrant labour system was a system of isolation and control. It sought and was able to achieve the separation of urban from rural, men from women, fathers from their families, hostel dwellers from the urban population and ethnic groups from one another.⁴ Through conscription and coercion this system swallowed up black men to work in service and industry such that the urban escarpment became both figuratively and literally a world of masculine pursuit.

The system relegated Black Women to the status of left behind, a space characterised by want and mitigated by waiting. Megan Burke reminds us that waiting is a temporal hiatus that exists between the past and the future. That it is a distinct experience of the present between the present as passive without strong intentional links to a past or future. Waiting also possesses a decidedly feminine tincture, it is an experience in which woman is annexed into the universe of men, a world that is for men insofar as they come to create and solidify a woman's situation as a relative existence⁵. Tiana Reid captures how waiting becomes synonymous with Black womanhood, more so with the figure of the maternal when she describes the character of her favourite book, Gregory's momma, as the prototype of Black womanhood, a woman who is not only part of an exploited labour class, but who belongs to the class of the "left behind" such that she is always waiting. "She's waiting for love. She's waiting for welfare, she's waiting for her check from work.

4 Christo Vosloo (2020) 'Extreme Apartheid: The South African System of Migrant Labour and its Hostels, Image and Text.

5 Megan Burke (2017) Gender as Lived Time: Reading The Second Sex for a Feminist Phenomenology of Temporality, *Hypatia*, (X) X, pp. 1-17.

She's waiting on her dirty-ass kids. Most of all she's waiting for Gregory's father to come home, even in her own death it feels like she's waiting" Reid writes⁶.

In the image acquired by the Works of Art Collection, we see the maternal figure, a figure outlined in red thread, donned in the isiShweshwe fabric and plaid blanket, a figure we assume is Theodorah. Theodorah has her hands outstretched, a position we wouldn't ordinarily associate with waiting, yet it is through this subversive stance that we come to recognise that waiting is a dynamic gesture that cannot be easily delimited. When Theodorah traverses the city, she is waiting, when she trespass the threshold of that liminal space of the "left behind" and enters into that of the voyeur, she is still waiting. So too when she enters contemporary discourse as a figure that complicates what we understand to be an archive, she does so as a figure in waiting.

Written by Sihle Motsa.

6 Tania Reid (2014) 'Daughters Have Their Own Agenda,' *The New Inquiry*, <https://thenewinquiry.com/daughters-have-their-own-agenda/>, 2021.