# Zoë Modiga's *SINENKANI* (2020): A Womanist exploration of contemporary South African Afrosurrealism and Zulu identity


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## ABSTRACT

Stereotypical and sexualised representations of Black women's bodies have long been scrutinised in academic literature. The presentation of Black women in hip-hop videos, in particular, in both an international and South African context, has been hypersexualised and typified. Scholars in western feminism and Black feminism have demonstrated how Black women musicians have challenged one-dimensional portrayals of Black women by taking ownership of their sexuality and rebranding stereotypical language and images with more empowered messages. Less examined in current literature on the representation of Black women in music videos is how Black African women musicians use music videos to exercise creative control in their self-expression. In this article, we use a Womanist perspective to interpret South African artist Zoë Modiga's *SINENKANI* (2022) music video. We argue that in *SINENKANI*, Modiga engages in a Womanist gaze, combining elements of Afrosurrealism and Zulu indigenous culture to create an empowered intra-communal perspective. We argue that far from just countering stereotypical representations of Black women, Modiga creatively constructs a complex identity of Zulu African womanhood which can only be fully understood intrasubjectively.



Dates:
Received: 2025-02-24
Accepted: 2025-09-01
Published: 2025-11-24

Published by

SCHOOL OF THE ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES



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DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2617-3255/2025/n39a25



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**Keywords:** Afrosurrealism, Black feminism, feminism, music videos, Womanism, Zulu.

# Introduction

Music videos have long served as platforms for artists to expound on their identities, respond to social constructs, and creatively express themselves through audio and visual elements. Black artists, in particular, have used music videos to respond to the historical limitations associated with the label of Blackness (Rubin 2016:74-75). Furthermore, with the increased digitisation of broadcast technology, Black artists have circumvented the regulatory standards of mainstream music corporations to, as Joel Rubin (2016:75) argues, 'bypass corporate taste making and produce more culturally salient work'.[1] Though the production of music videos has provided financial and representational opportunities for Black artists, there has also been an imbalance in the power dynamics between Black male artists and the women who feature as dancers and their love interests in their videos. April D. Lundy (2018:57) states that the participation of Black women in music videos as dancers and video-girls has been characterised by one-dimensional portrayals which have contributed to, in her words, 'the production of stereotypical and degrading depictions of my own people, more specifically young Black women'. The overly sexualised characterisation of Black women in music videos, according to Lundy (2018:58), is part of a tendency in Western visual culture to relegate Black women to prototypical roles that they have occupied since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as the 'oversexed … jezebel or mulatto' and now the modern-day "thot".[2] Additionally, as Ryann Donnelly (2017:62) shows, there has been a near-exclusive focus on the physicality and attractiveness of Black women in music videos, which has detracted from their full range of being.

In South Africa, academics such as Ntebaleng Mpetsi and Toks oyedemi (2018) and Maud Blose (2012) have, respectively, argued that there is a similar tendency in hip-hop and Kwaito music videos to objectify the Black video vixens featured in their music videos. Mpetsi and oyedemi (2018:100) posit that the sexualisation of women in hip hop videos is achieved through their physical proximation to material objects, such as expensive cars and houses. The acquisition of Black female bodies is communicated through close-up images of the women's body parts, followed by shots of luxury vehicles and mansions. By hyperfocussing on the women's scantily clad bodies in combination with the material objects, Mpetsi and oyedemi (2018:99-102) suggest that the viewer is encouraged to participate in the scopophilic fetishisation and commodification of Black women. Whereas Mpetsi and oyedemi focus on the visuals of South African hip-hop music videos, Blose (2012:52-53) demonstrates that Black women are objectified through both the imagery and lyrics of Kwaito songs. Blose illustrates that while the emergence of Kwaito as a

musical genre is associated with a post-apartheid democratisation of the music industry, particularly with its mixing of African languages and Afrikaans slang, Kwaito lyrics often slander and hypersexualise women. In her words, 'Kwaito songs often degrade women to position them as objects of sexual pleasure. Generally, in the music videos, women are portrayed in eroticised ways, skimpily clothed, designed to elicit male desire'(Blose 2012:52).[3, 4]

The role of music videos as spaces where Black African women musicians can assert greater creative control over their own representation has received limited attention in academic research. While some scholars – such as Helen Nabasuta Mugambi (2008) as well as Precious Simba and Nuraan Davids (2020) – have applied an African feminist perspective to analyse the works of Black African women artists, most scholarly literature on the music videos of Black women has largely focussed on African American female artists such as Beyoncé, Cardi B, and Nicki Minaj.[5] Furthermore, much of the current literature on the representation of Black African women in music videos, such as the aforementioned studies by Mpetsi and oyedemi (2018) and Blose (2012), is largely situated in and in response to western feminist theories. There is, thus, a distinct lack of African and South African contextualisation in the readings of music videos that feature Black African women. Due to an over-reliance on western contextualisation to explain the content and reception of music videos created by Black Africans, South African cultural elements that affect the reading of the music videos could be ignored or even overlooked.

In this article, we conduct a Womanist interpretation of the South African artist Zoë Modiga's *SINENKANI* (2022).[6] We argue that the music video engages in an intrasubjective African Womanist gaze, interspersing elements from pop and Zulu culture.[7] We argue further that Modiga articulates this intrasubjective and intra-communal position using the conventions found within the Afrosurrealist genre and Zulu indigenous culture. We, therefore, begin our article by laying the theoretical foundations of both Womanism and Afrosurrealism.

## The representation of Black (African) womanhood in music videos

Despite there being an overt focus on Black women's bodies in music videos on a global scale, authors, such as Rana Emerson (2002), Gwendolyn D. Pough (2007), Erica B. Edwards, Jennifer Eposito and Venus Evans-Winters (2018), and Adeerya Johnson (2021), have shown that music videos have platformed Black women musicians who challenge stereotypical representations and allowed for the representation of a more diverse spectrum of being for Black women. In these cases, Black women musicians take control

of their image in a sex-positive manner. Black women have used music videos to freely express their sexuality and as a channel to dismantle white supremacy and its racially oppressive ideals (McClain 2018:9). Indeed, this discourse has continued to echo across several African-inspired genres dominating the cultural zeitgeist on the continent. With respect to Afrobeats, for instance, Simphiwe Rens (2023) articulates the complexities around media representations of Black women's sexuality in the African context. Specifically, he references the power dynamics ingrained in 'heteropatriarchal African cultures', where African female musicians adopt a 'sexssertive', or sexually assertive, persona to combat the limiting conservative views on female sexuality. Rens (2023:3) states that there should ideally always be 'an acknowledgement of women's agency and bodily autonomy should not cease to exist in our scholarly reflections on gender relations in [the African] context'.

In the United States, Black women musicians such as Megan Thee Stallion and Cardi B have been unapologetic proponents of 'ratchet' culture. According to Bettina L. Love (2017:540), the term ratchet represents an embracement of stereotypes that have followed Black women, such as, in her words, 'being single mothers, their sexual choices, and acting on their desires'. By embracing their so-called ratchetness, Black women artists shake off the negative associations, such as shame and sexual disease, which have been historically correlated with the display and artistic consumption of Black women's bodies (Gilman 1985). Through the commercial success of Meg Thee Stallion and Cardi B, the normalisation of the ratchet movement within popular culture has surged (McClain 2018:24).

Less explored in scholarship on music videos is how they have served as platforms for Black African women musicians to exercise more creative control in their representation. Though there have been applications of an African feminist perspective in interpreting the works of Black African women artists by scholars such as Helen Nabasuta Mugambi (2008) as well as Precious Simba and Nuraan Davids (2020), scholarly literature on the music videos of Black women has primarily focussed on African American female artists such as Beyoncé, Cardi B, and Nicki Minaj.

Additionally, much of the current literature on the representation of Black African women in music videos, such as the aforementioned studies by Mpetsi and oyedemi (2018) and Blose (2012), is largely situated in and in response to western feminism. There is, thus, a distinct lack of African and South African contextualisation in the readings of music videos that feature Black African women. Due to an over-reliance on western contextualisation to explain the content and reception of music videos created by Black Africans, South African cultural elements that affect the reading of the music videos could be ignored or even overlooked. Nonetheless, despite music videos being a platform for Black musicians to perform the diversity and multifacetedness of Blackness, studies

repeatedly show that Black women must disproportionally contend with capitalist structures that seek to pigeonhole displays of their creativity and sexuality in the name of corporate profit-making (Oikelome 2013; Schoppmeier 2015; Rwubaka & Prieler 2022).

Outside of the literature on music videos, there have been various accounts that document how Black African female musicians manoeuvred exclusionary spaces. The laws of apartheid impeded Black expression through access and censorship. Musicians, such as the Mahotella Queens, Miriam Makeba ("Mama Africa"), and Letta Mbulu, faced the prospect of their performances being disrupted or entirely suppressed (Coplan 2002:106). Despite the threat of suppression, these musicians thrived during an African musical renaissance, when genres such as Marabi and Mbaqanga became staple soundtracks for Black, working-class jazz enthusiasts in urban milieus (Coplan 2002:106).[8]

Reflecting on the resistance of these Black women musicians, Siseko H. Kumalo (2022:138) posits that the lyrics and musical compositions of artists like Busi Mhlongo and Mbulu centred the 'Fact of Blackness' in their songs. In centring the phenomenology of Black lives through their music, what Kumalo (2022:133) refers to as the creation of 'aesthetic object[s]', Black women musicians were able to speak about experiences in languages and modes of understanding inaccessible to the logic of the apartheid state. This avenue contributed to the legitimisation, resistance and resilience of Black South African women musicians in allowing them to reflect and process their experiences, and further, contribute to the strength and authenticity of their work. The stature and successes of these artists laid the groundwork for artists such as Modiga, who embraces her Blackness, African cultural themes, and womanhood in her music.

## Womanism as productive resistance and a theoretical approach

Black feminism, African feminism, and Womanism are not mutually exclusive theories. There are some minor distinctions between the terms as theoretical frameworks. Still, all the terms are considered both movements and theoretical frameworks concerned with Black women's culture, life experiences and social issues (Guy-Evans 2024). Womanism, however, is most aligned with the productive enunciation of Black women's lives as opposed to the occasionally reductive narratives of Black feminism. As Rose M. Brewer (2020:91) stipulates, 'racialized, capitalist patriarchy is foundational to the most radical expressions of Black feminism, while a deeply rooted cultural lens informs Womanist approaches to Black women's oppositional consciousness'.

The term 'Womanism' was initially coined by African American novelist and social activist, Alice Walker, in her 1983 collection of essays, *In search of our Mothers' gardens: Womanist prose*. Womanism, according to Walker (1983:xi), sought to validate and platform the societal and political concerns of Black women. She felt that the white-centred feminism of her time inadequately dealt with the specific issues and concerns of women of colour. Walker (1983:xi), thus, posits that a 'Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender'. Simply put, feminism pales in comparison to Womanism due to its predominantly white-centric agenda. White feminism needs to consciously include the struggle of Black women, but Black women's struggles are inherently part of Womanism. Unlike the term Black feminism, there is no need to preface Womanism with Black as it was born with Blackness at its centre (Brewer 2020:97).

Although Womanism was initially conceptualised as encompassing African American women's issues, Mary Modupe Kolawole (2002:97) emphasises its relevance in African societies due to its ability to speak to African women's 'collective' struggles. For example, Womanism broadens the scope of discussion by including themes related to African indigenous culture, religion, and spirituality, themes that may otherwise fall outside of the western feminist framework (Montelaro 1996:71). Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1985:64) further asserts that Womanism has a specific cultural element, stating that 'More often than not, the white woman writer may be a feminist, a Black woman writer is likely to be a "womanist." That is, she will recognize that, along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations into her philosophy'. Womanism can, therefore, be described as a more encompassing theoretical approach than Black feminism, in that it decenters the western experience and is more aware of national, cultural, or ethical elements that affect the reading of images of Black women on an international basis.

Unlike some forms of Afrofeminism that *respond* to issues specific to African women, Womanism both acknowledges the collective struggles of African women and strives to dismantle systemic issues through positive action. Womanism is additionally relevant to the South African context due to the immeasurable oppression that Black women have historically encountered and continue to contend with (Molehe, Marumo & Motswaledi 2020:16804). Whether it is the discrimination they face culturally, economically, and politically, or the persistent threat of gender-based violence, in many instances, women have been pushed to the margins of African society – an ill that Womanism, but more specifically African Womanism, attempts to offset through its principles (Msutwana, Nyawo & Mashau 2019:156).

In South Africa, Pumla Gqola (2001:11) has also been an ardent challenger of patriarchal, colonial, and white supremacist sentiments, especially related to the representations and

experiences of Black women. She is vehemently opposed to merely assimilating to white supremacist systems that are divorced from the reality of the Black woman on the African continent (Gqola 2001:12). Thus, Gqola's reflections are crucial to understanding the everyday, communal lives of Black African women in ways that are not beholden to theories and traditions incongruent with their lived experiences.

In an interview detailing the themes of her album, *INGANEKWANE* (2020), where *SINENKANI* features, Modiga (2020) alludes to her alignment with Womanism, stating that the album's contents 'pertain to abantu abamnyama, Black people; there's themes that relate to knowing that something is within you. There's themes that talk about our Creator, Umdali wethu' (Monaheng 2022). The album begins with a short harmonic and spoken word song titled *KWASUKASUKELA*, which means 'in the beginning' – an allusion to the storytelling convention in Zulu oral tradition. This term shares some parallels with the phrase 'Once upon a time,' stated at the beginning of English folktales (Ndlovu & Klop 2023:27).[9] As Heike Tappe and Agness Hara (2013:312) observe, kwasukasukela also serves as the narrator's invocation, inviting the audience to suspend their disbelief in anticipation of the unfolding, fantastical narrative. Similarly, the song signals the album as a lyrical weaving of reflexive stories that tell of Modiga's world and context. Consequently, the self-reflexivity in this process further concretises the aspirations of Gqola when she remarks that the exercise of 'always challenging the meanings of being Black women' should refrain from being an outward-looking one (Gqola 2001:20).

Modiga, as an African woman, recounts melodic tales of her origins, spiritual beliefs, the socio-political context and struggles that saturate her artistry. African identity, philosophies, and spirituality, concepts intricately aligned with Womanism, resound in the album as Modiga explores the politics of her identity as a Black African woman navigating a post-apartheid South Africa. As Aleksandra Izgarjan and Slobodanka Markov (2012:311) state, Black women have been subjected to multiple forms of marginalisation, owing to their skin colour, economic disparities and patriarchy. Womanism considers the multiplicitous histories, fluid identities, and complex roles that African women embody within their local and global contexts, intersecting issues such as race, class, and gender.

## Intsh'inenkani, asisabi lutho: The meeting of Afrosur-realism and Zulu material culture in *SINENKANI*

In alignment with Womanism, we stray from a western feminist reading of the video that may use the white male gaze as a primary reference point for analysing the viewpoint of the video, even when critiquing it. We do so for two reasons: firstly, we are conscious of

the objectification of Black women and assert a more positive reading of them. Secondly, we wish to incorporate the spiritual and ethical concerns surrounding the expressions of Black African women. We also find Womanism to be more productive in tackling the racist and paternalistic history of colonialism in ways that pay indiscriminate attention to the remediation and healing of all its victims. We therefore read Modiga's video as a source and example of Black South African achievement of *self*-representation.

The temptation to categorise Modiga's image as 'exotic, or the interesting and entertaining other' (Neal 2022:43) leads to conservative approaches that control and delimit the bodies that possess real agency. Read as merely subversive, Modiga's music video does not gain its power as a productive source of knowledge. An author like Mbali Mazibuko (2022:38) would agree that merely reading Black women as 'hypersexual and attention seeking' yet still empowered, could discredit the autonomy of creative decision-making or conscious cultural choices that they make. According to Paul Gilroy (1991:113), Black women's stories are often subsumed beneath colonial economies of power and theft – hence why we argue that sonic cultures, including music, gesture, and dance, are forms of communication that are 'just as important as the gift of speech'. Thus, we position Modiga as a Black African Womanist director who exerts the prime creative direction of her music videos.

Notably, we argue that the direction in *SINENKANI* is intrasubjective and exemplifies the intra-communal gaze (Van der Vlies 2012). Modiga's work is intrasubjective in the sense that she, alongside the assistance of the director of photography, Tseliso Monaheng, directs her image. We posit that her embodied experience as an African woman informs the direction of the camera. The direction of *SINENKANI* reads in a way that does not stigmatise, essentialise, and objectify Black women. Rather, there is a clear acknowledgement of the very human and complex identities of Black South African women. For this reason, the camera commits itself to a shared gaze in how it documents Modiga's presence, and by extension, the virtualised co-presence of other Black South African women as members of a joint community. The camera is therefore not passively used to simplistically reflect her singular worldview, but enables a generative and (self-) constructed image of African womanhood in a post-apartheid setting.

*SINENKANI* is loosely translated to 'We are stubborn'. The title of the song could even be interpreted as evoking an isiZulu proverb that references the trait of obstinacy: Unenkani okweselesele lifun'ukuy'emsamo.[10] The phrase, loosely translated to 'A person who is as obstinate as a frog which, when pushed away, keeps returning and hiding in remote areas of the home,' is often used to underscore an individual's unyielding persistence (Zondi 2003:106).[11] The song and video take audiences on a journey that combines harmonic music, powerful messages, and intriguing visuals. Modiga repeats the melodic Zulu phrase,

‘Intsh’inenkani, Asisabi lutho’, loosely interpreted as 'A small fire has started', but more accurately translating to ‘The youth is stubborn/obstinate, we fear nothing’. The phrase melismatically guides listeners to contemplate the continued resilience of South African youth. The song’s thematic references to 16 June 1976 are a reminder of the characteristic ingenuity of Black youth in *surviving* deep socio-political realities such as the ethnic cleansing that is (post-)apartheid violence. As eloquently stated by Mark Anthony Neal (2022:41), ‘survival is, of course, a distinctly improvisational mode of navigating the world’. Modiga explores the tensions that surround Black survival through indexing and archiving African tragedies and trauma, but not without reminding listeners of the ultimate transcendence of these struggles. To do this, Modiga not only leverages the power of her voice and words to articulate Black transcendence, but, as we argue, she also employs Afrosurrealist aesthetics to strategically position Black women in familiar yet otherworldly contexts.

Surrealism has historically challenged the social, cultural, and economic hegemony of rationality (Spencer 2020:9). Using the weird and the fantastic, Surrealism draws aesthetic and political attention to the dangers of hegemonic rationality, which have for so long normalised global injustices such as white supremacy, patriarchal domination and class discrimination. Rochelle Spencer (2020) explains that while European figures in literature and the arts dominate Surrealism, it is not solely a European phenomenon.[12] For example, Negritude is a literary movement created by African Surrealists, such as the Senegalese poet and politician Léopold Senghor, Guianan politician Léon-Gontran Damas, and Aimé Césaire from Martinique (Hawkins 2021). Negritude drew on African spiritual, supernatural, and mystical themes to critique European colonialism. As an aesthetic *and* political movement that rejects pure mimesis, Surrealism allows space for the incorporation of African cosmologies, which typically philosophise what Sizwe Hlope (2019:15) refers to as the ‘mystical and metaphorical’ (Miller 2013:114).

Afrosurrealism grows out of this tradition with the exception that it focusses on Black culture, and on the lives, experiences, and traumas of Black persons both individually and collectively. Afrosurrealism, therefore, actively resists (white) hegemonic rationalities that consciously and unconsciously limit the ways in which Black people can exist and live more freely. Knowing that racial domination ‘generates a grammar that helps reproduce … the standards of white as the standard for all’ (Bonilla-Silva 2011:1), Afrosurrealists highlight and critique the centring of white experiences by exposing the normalcy of Black erasure.

Foundational to its resistance strategies is the exposure of Black oppression through critiquing dichotomies of irrationality and rationality. Through a further deliberate paradoxical merging of dreaming and reality, madness and rationality, and intuition and logic,

Afrosurrealism liberally explores Black landscapes of feeling and psychology. In short, Afrosurrealism takes seriously the inner lives and inner workings of those who exist in alternate modes to normativity. By engaging with the surreal, the hyperreal, and the strange, Afrosurrealism employs aesthetic means to liberate the imagination from the limits imposed by systematic forms of oppression that significantly shape how people perceive and even feel. In Afrosurrealism, the struggle for Black freedom and liberation through creative and fantastical strategies remains an integral and ongoing pursuit. A focus on the inner landscape of Black individuals enable Afrosurrealists to use 'cultural memories and futuristic dreams as tools of resistance' (Spencer 2020:6) where the Black body becomes a 'cultural archive' – what Gloria Wekker (2016:19) characterises as a repository of memory stored 'between our ears and in our hearts and souls' – of the many ways in which Black people have overcome oppression and exploitation through agential creative strategies. With recalcitrant force, Afrosurrealism employs costume, colour, carnality, emotion, sound, and subconscious, dream-like imagery to reposition historical trauma. Within Afrosurrealist landscapes, Black survival and Black historical consciousness are affirmed through the self-formed cultural currency of revised Black culture, beauty and identity.

## Modiga's otherworldly Afro-aesthetics as Womanism

In our reading of *SINENKANI*, we posit that Modiga's paradoxical fusion of the familiar and the otherworldly employs Afrosurrealism as a creative form of resistance and self-determination. It stands in our article that self-determination is a key fixture within the Black Womanist tradition as it bolsters a degree of subjectivity and agency previously determined by Black and white patriarchal structures (Malatjie 2011:23). In addition to this, Afrosurrealism as an aesthetic and political counterpoint to Black oppressive existence equally plays an integral role in how Modiga articulates the historical and contemporary resistance of Black youth and women in South Africa. Fittingly, the album's title translates to 'folktale', signalling Modiga's incorporation of the fantastical to address Black political realities. In her words, 'This album speaks to the human condition and the realities of black bodies from my perspective' (Modiga, cited in Khumalo 2020). In our analysis, *SINENKANI* is a site where we examine the stylistic and thematic convergence of Afrosurrealism and Womanism, where Modiga's direction contemplates and enunciates a form of Black resistance that is not in response to white intellectualisms and hegemony, but is productive of the intrasubjective and intra-communal Black female gaze.

Straying from the grandeur of large sets, the influence of Afrosurrealism is apparent in Modiga's costume, cinematic choices, and the emotional currency carried within the

video. The video begins by taking the audience behind the scenes. The expository, documentary-like footage reveals a scene of collaboration and care, where we are invited to watch and listen to the contributions of the people who worked on the video.[13] In South Africa, Black labour, even in the creative field, has been historically and contemporarily associated with "hiding", social isolation and obscurity (Griffin 2009; Ginsburg 2011; Martin 2013).[14] Including behind-the-scenes footage loudly celebrates the collaborative nature of Black African creativity (Douglas 2005:6). In line with the tenets of Afrossurealism, there is an apparent refusal to relegate Black labour to absence and quiet servitude (Miller 2013:116).



FIGURE Nº 1

Behind-the-scenes, Zoë Modiga sings the Power Rangers' theme song before shooting *SINENKANI*, 2022. Screenshot by authors.

Afrosurrealism loudly aligns with the absurd, but the absurdity in *SINENKANI* is more subtly expressed. As previously mentioned, the presence of the absurd, the irrational, and the fantastic is part of Afrosurrealism's critique of the world and the conventional sources of authority by undermining the idea of a universally shared reality (Spencer 2020:8). Absurdity is introduced in the music video when audiences view Modiga assessing her make-up using a hand-mirror (Figure 1). While looking in the mirror, she playfully sings, 'Go, go Power Rangers', a popular cultural reference to the opening theme song of the original *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* (1993) television series. Modiga's reference to this song is not incidental, as Modiga's metallic eye makeup resembles the Power Ranger's arch-villain, Rita Repulsa – a humanoid sorceress determined to embark on intergalactic domination. Despite being a villain, Repulsa is a powerful female magic

caster in the Power Rangers universe who can cast curses, control humans and teleport individuals to other dimensions. The fantastical elements of Modiga's work are emphasised through the shimmer of metallic eye makeup that creates a dramatic re-shaping of her features. In the Afrosurrealist style, Modiga, alongside the dancers in the video, augment their facial features to exist outside the common markers of Black female identity. Leaning on fiction to disrupt reality, the video uses Repulsa as a metaphor, as they similarly resist the ordering of earthly society and expectations by presenting themselves as somewhat ethereal figures that are out of this world. Through the makeup and the repeated lyrics that form harmonic chants and incantations, Modiga produces a mystical aura that elevates her message to the level of sanctity. The use of costume, repetition, and incantation is integral to many forms of African ancestral memory and can therefore be powerfully medicinal and spiritual (Falola 2022).

Resistance to rational expectations is not only referenced in Modiga's makeup. The unadorned background setting focuses the viewer's attention on the dancers, Lulu Mlangeni and Karabo Lekoane, whose bodies bend, contort, and shift in choreographed movements that resemble traditional isiZulu dancing. The women's costumes paired with the movements that blend Voguing[15] with ukusina, lead to an amalgamation of identities that carry Afrosurrealist 'mixing, melding, and cross-conversion'. The movements, although clearly inspired by isiZulu tradition, defy easy classification, thereby inspiring liberation of the body, mind, and by extension, the imagination (Miller 2013:116) (Figure 2). The way the women move in the video is reflective of the powerfully fluid, unpredictable, and resistant ways in which Black women have learnt to mobilise their bodies outside Eurocentric gestures and towards meanings and significations that narrate and protect their own physical presence and fate (Foster 1996).

However, focussing on the women's bodies, even while highlighting their movements, may inadvertently revert to white supremacist tropes on the value of Black women. As Amber Jamilla Musser (2018) points out, Black women's bodies are easily reduced to a 'fleshiness' due to an enduring history of hierarchised systems of racialisation that operated through the objectification of Black bodies. For this reason, Musser states that the bodies of Black women are often read as 'excess forms of embodiment' that automatically render them not only a commodity, but also sexually available. Modiga's authoritative use of the camera's gaze, costume, choreography and song is a means through which Black women's 'fleshiness' is redirected into a powerful production of selfhood. The self-creation of her image could then be read in line with Janell Hobson's (2005:89-90) 'mirrored image', or the creation of images of Black women's bodies that do not align with the racist or limiting Western tropes that have characterised images of Black women as pornotropic figures in the past. With this in mind, it is even possible that the gyration and grinding movements made by the bodies of Black women in the video are not only painful

signals of their objectification and sexualisation but are an embodied emergence of both the pleasure and pain that comes with possessing a Black woman's body (Musser 2018:4) and a Black woman's voice.



FIGURE Nº 2

Modiga dances with her background dancers in front of a white backdrop, 2022. Screenshot by authors.

Furthermore, Modiga's costuming and movements showcase the centrality of dance in expressing Black women's flexibility and creative expression. Dance is a fundamental part of Black resilience and ancestral faith. The undeniable ways in which the women labour through the energetic motions, and the impactful force of their patterned movements, point to Nompumelelo Zondi's (2023) research on the women of Zwelibomvu in KwaZulu-Natal, wherein she probes the important intersection of song and dance in the lives of Zulu women, particularly those residing in rural areas. Part of this study sheds light on the combination of Zulu songs and dance as apparatuses to express women-centred issues that are not ordinarily addressed in their patriarchal communities (Zondi 2023:59). Particular to the music video, Modiga, and the women dancing with her, use the Zulu tradition of izigiyo.[16] When sung by women, izigiyo can act as healing conduits for the everyday distress and injustices faced by Zulu women in their communities through "vomiting" or "purging" one's irritations through cathartic song, especially when performed amongst other women (Gumede 2009:105-107). Modiga's centring of her own presence and experiences, alongside those of her companion dancers, through

traditional song and dance forms like izigiyo, affirms Zondi and Gumede's findings by foregrounding song and dance as a vital component in the expression of their liberation as Black women in the music video. By extension, Modiga not only illustrates liberated beings but also how, through song and dance, the Black woman's body and voiced expression can become a living metaphor for how one must remain agile, flexible, fluid and loud through changing times. These aforementioned characteristics are posited as essential in the ongoing survival of Black women in a racialised world where Black bodies, in the words of Tavia Nyong'o (2019:3), were 'never meant to survive [and] perhaps also never meant to appear'. *SINENKANI*, thus, points to and celebrates the flexibility, ingenuity and resilience of Black women.

Modiga not only uses Afrosurrealism to negotiate 'the invisibility and trauma of Black women' through costume and dance, but also to index, order and archive Blackness in the face of material and spiritual loss (Neal 2022:7, 47). It is also through costume and dance that Modiga primarily presents and carries her cultural identity in *SINENKANI*. The video focuses on Modiga's face (Figure 3) as she stands in front of a plain, isolated white backdrop, proudly exemplifying African material culture through the incorporation of aspects of Zulu culture in her choreography, attire, and elements of her African spirituality. When the song begins, a viewfinder materialises, positioning the viewer as a collaborator in the unfolding of the video. The staging of the music video is, first, aimed at the sky and then at the indeterminate location atop a building. In Zulu culture, much like in Afrosurrealism, there is an understanding that 'beyond this visible world, there is an invisible world striving to manifest' (Miller 2013:115). Within the invisible realm, analogous to lived reality, are the ancestors, deities, and the Almighty (uNkulunkulu), who inhabit it (Adeyemi 2012:438-439). MR Masubele (2009:63) also contends that terms like uNkulunkulu (the Great-Great One) or even uMvelinqangi (the First-to-Appear) predate interactions between traditional Zulu communities and European missionaries by a long time. Pointing out that such religious orders would go on to distort already existing conceptions and language pertaining to worship of a Supreme being. Therefore, the understanding of an otherworldly realm that exists in tandem with a lived reality makes African peoples sharply aware of the presence of the spiritual world in the everyday (Mbiti 1969:197). By placing a headshot of herself against a clear blue sky in the opening of her music video, Modiga openly references her cultural and spiritual origins, forging a link between herself and the music video's ecosystem with that of the Zulu nation, also known as the 'People of the sky'. The word "Zulu" translates directly to the English word "sky" (Mbiti 2012:440).



FIGURE Nº 3

Zoë Modiga sings wearing an isicholo, 2022. Screenshot by authors.

As mentioned, the camera centres on Modiga's face, highlighting her distinct African features, multiple piercings, and adornments, as well as her isicholo (also known as inhloko or sometimes referred to as inkehli), a traditional Zulu headdress typically worn by married women. However, neo-traditionalist Zulu women have adopted wearing the traditional headdress in various contemporary styles and for purposes beyond simply signifying marriage (Xulu 2002). Additions made to the isicholo, such as the use of varied colours and patterns of beadwork, have led to the transformation of the traditional headdress to an item of fashion (Xulu 2002). The combination of western and Zulu material culture in the music video's wardrobe alludes to a more recent use of the isicholo.[17] Modiga's choice of wearing the isicholo as a fashion item, however, should not draw away from her conscious self-representation. Through the recognisable headdress, which holds international significance due to its inclusion in blockbuster films such as Black Panther (Coogler 2018), Modiga signifies to local and global audiences that she is a proud Zulu woman. [18, 19]

In line with the intrasubjective and intra-communal gaze, the significances of Modiga's creative choices, both in their traditional and less-conventional renditions, are only fully understood by those with knowledge of their origins and current uses. Although many of the stylistic choices in the video's choreography and costume design may be selected

for their aesthetic qualities, the centring of Modiga and her companion dancers, along with the impactful lyrics, elevates the music video to communicate a productive politics of Black female spirituality, resilience, and strength.

## Conclusion

The article employed Womanist and Afrosurrealist approaches to interpret the work of South African artist Zoë Modiga. More specifically, we analysed Modiga's music video, *SINENKANI*, as a unique South African Womanist perspective within the post-Apartheid context. Modiga's use of Afrosurrealism in *SINENKANI* prevents fixed readings of Black women's bodies by placing Black women outside the Eurocentric hegemonies that shape and guide present reality. Furthermore, the Afrosurrealist aesthetic and thematic features allow for the exploration of spirituality and the existence of another world beyond our conventional one that produces multifaceted and dynamic dimensions to Black cultural identities, especially amongst women. Modiga's music video develops a multifaceted view of Black femininity (Mazibuko 2022:41) that is grounded in historical inscriptions of the resilience of Black women who have faced marginalisation in apartheid and continue to face challenges related to race, poverty, safety and security even within a democratic South Africa. Through the powerful relationship between dance, costume, and song in African culture, SINENKANI reminds viewers that in analysing any type of popular culture that speaks directly back to identity, there must be an awareness that it 'thrives on, and indeed demands, nuance, … ambiguity, and contrapuntality as it resists fixedness in its moves' (Iton 2008:11).

Resilience, obstinance and selfhood are all qualities of post-apartheid Black womanhood, illustrated through Modiga's Afrosurrealist visuals, bodily movements and sounds. In highlighting scenes, costumes, and movements associated with Zulu tradition, and in particular, the movements of African Black women, Modiga generates a productive, intrasubjective and intra-communal gaze for an audience primarily composed of Black African women. In line with Afrosurrealism, the audience is led into brief moments of absurdity that both break away from limiting representations of Black women and produce intrasubjective and intra-communal perspectives unique to the community of Black women in South Africa. Modiga's *SINENKANI* showcases her ability to produce a Womanist experience; for her story is affirmed through the eyes of those who understand, and importantly, acknowledge her reality.

# Acknowledgements

A portion of this article was included in Obakeng Kgongoane's doctoral thesis *We're digging the future: Afro-future mining in Africa* completed in 2024, at the University of Pretoria under the supervision of Prof. Rory du Plessis. We declare no conflicts of interest.

# Notes

1. In a recent study on how emerging Black artists adopt digitally centred strategies to promote their music, Williams Nwagwu and Ayobola Akintoye (2024:670-671) examine the synergistic and often amplifying relationship between popular social media platforms, such as YouTube or TikTok, and music streaming platforms, like Spotify or SoundCloud. Specifically, they highlight how the interplay between these sites enables a more comprehensive, yet equally targeted approach to engaging with audiences (Nwagwu & Akintoye 2024:671). The interactions of these technologies allowed for a greater audience engagement and reach for emerging Nigerian artists.

2. "Thot" was originally conceived as a misogynistic term that grew in popularity on social media through its proliferation in rap lyrics. It is also often accepted to be an acronym for "That Hoe Over There" (Tyree & Kirby 2016).

3. *Ngud'* (2016) by popular South African musicians Kwesta and Cassper Nyovest, for example, shows close-ups of the female back-up dancers' buttocks and the use of bikinis to show the women's bodies despite a body of water being present (Mpetsi & oyedemi 2018:98-99).

4. However, these shortcomings should not discount how the genre of Kwaito, as well as the lifestyle, aesthetics, and the messages transmitted, serve as a crucial post-apartheid dais for young Black South Africans. The sometimes explicit and challenging themes of Kwaito test the previously unexplored boundaries of a newly established social and political framework. If anything, these sexist and misogynistic depictions could simply be viewed as mirroring the long road to a "new", more equal South Africa (Livermon 2020:3).

5. Mugambi (2008) explores the works of the Zimbabwean Kapiya Weya women artists, highlighting how they portray the rich domestic lives of the often-silenced voices of rural Zimbabwean Weya women. Simba and Davids'(2020) interpretation uses Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of the Third Space to show how Nandipha Mntambo's works problematise traditional western subjective positions and point to spaces "beyond" the habitual categories associated with African female identity.

6. Although *SINENKANI* was released on the *INGANEKWANE* album in 2020, the music video came out in 2022.

7. Mthandeni Patric Mbatha (2018:4) argues that Zulu identity has been pigeonholed into the realm of being static, consequently flattening the concept of the Zulu nation and the cultures it houses (often because of colonial and then subsequently political interests). Mbatha differentiates between the 'Zulu tribe' as opposed to the 'Zulu nation'. Namely, that 'Zulu' tribe signals colonial powers encountering an "uncivilised" people. Whereas Zulu nation better encapsulates the expansive and nuanced nature of the Zulu people as a whole - especially in the wake of its expansionist exploits during the colonial years of the early-1800s. For that reason, our discussions around Modiga's Zulu identity are cognisant of the nuances inherent in Zulu culture, and do not in any way seek to instantiate a monolithic representation of 'Zuluness'.

8. The inception of this style of music, which blends African and American jazz, rhythm and blues (R&B), and soul, can be traced back to the mid-1950s and was also popularised by the likes of Makeba and Hugh Masekela.

9. While there may be a slight degree of overlap between English and Zulu folktales, there are also stark differences in their overall structure. Importantly, in his article, "Sequential depth in Zulu folktales", Noeverino Canonici (1986) affirms in the strongest terms that Zulu folktales possess their own unique, complex form that was historically belittled in contrast to their western counterparts.

10. On *SINENKANI's* official YouTube page, Modiga labels the song a 'tribute to the South African youth of 1976 who led a revolution with their sacrifices and all the young all over the world that have been a part of watershed moments in history. It is also a celebration of how the present youth embody and fortify these revolutions'.

11. Umsamo is a space in traditional huts, generally in the uppermost part, where ancestral spirits are invoked during spiritual or customary rituals. Within the context of song, the word *SINENKANI* is more closely akin to "possessing an undying resilience".

12. According to Paul Hawkins (2021:649), borrowing from Modernist art movements such as Primitivism and Cubism, European Surrealism was also highly influenced by African art and sculpture. Surrealism's reference to Africa was barely acknowledged, if not completely erased (for example, the *Surrealist map of the world* (1929) that appeared in the Belgian periodical *Variétés* does not include Africa). The movement's appeal to African art, sadly but not surprisingly, was limited to its plastic qualities, its mystery, and apparent irrationality.

13. Seen in the introductory footage is fashion designer and stylist Nao Serati Mofammere. While not visible in the video, key collaborators in building Modiga's aesthetic design and recording for the video are director of photography and editor, Tseliso Monaheng, choreographer and dancers Lulu Mlangeni and Karabo Lekoane, make-up artist Tammi Mbambo, and photographer Tatenda Chidora.

14. During apartheid, although individuals from many races enjoyed African township music, such as Marabi and Kwela, in shebeens, the intermingling, dancing, and merrymaking were subversive and illegal. These gatherings were often raided (Martin 2013:136).

15. This style of dance (which employs dramatised modelling poses and struts) was pioneered by the Black and Latinx LGBTQIA+ community as a form of cultural resistance during the AIDS epidemic. The dance style and the movement it inspired were popularised in the 1980s and 1990s through various documentaries, but can be traced back to the 1970s (Winsor 2003:76).

16. Izigiyo are solo dance songs sung by both men and women, and are considered to be more poetic variations of the genre (Zondi 2023:60).

17. Katlego Motubatse and Sakhiseni Yende (2023:1352) make similar assertions about the dynamic nature of such Zulu attire, particularly how certain modifications have come to be applied due to exposure to Western-style fashion, ever-evolving global fashion trends, as well as renewed pride in exhibiting one's Zulu heritage.

18. Modiga's full name is Palesa Nomthandazo Phumelele Modiga. She was born and raised in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, with her paternal side of the family, who are amaZulu. While her surname, Modiga, stems from her Batswana maternal family, Modiga identifies more closely with her Zulu heritage.

19. It is noteworthy that one of the earliest broadcast depictions of this traditional headwear occurred through the series Kwakhala nyonini, which first aired on South African television in 1987. This iconography is linked to the storylines, which often involved the lives of individuals from Nguni communities (Mjoli 2022:32).

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