nora chipaumire in conversation with Jay Pather

When I was asked to invite an artist for a talk at the 2022 Facing Drag conference, it was absolutely clear that nora chipaumire would be that artist, someone who has located her work in issues of social justice consistently while at the same time pushing boundaries of form. Her work challenges status quo through the use of fertile approaches to performativity, what one can term within the contexts discussed in this book as dragging. chipaumire's choreographic work explores with a fierce intensity the body as performative of race and gender. Her film Afro Promo #1 King Lady (2016) is described by chipaumire as "an Afro-feminist manifesto beautifying bodies to claim the right to life," as a statement around magnifying beauty in response to the negation of and invisibilizing of Black bodies. In portrait of myself as my ~~father~~ (2015)—performed in a boxing ring, chipaumire embodies a specific critique of hypermasculinity and emasculation. It is these methodologies of dragging in chipaumire's work and particularly their relationship to an ongoing challenge with coloniality that I wanted to bring attention to in our talk.

Jay Pather

JP: Thank you nora for taking this time to reflect on your performance work within this provocative framing of Facing Drag set up by the University for Music and Performing Arts Vienna. Let's begin by thinking through an early film of yours *Afro Promo #1 King Lady*.

nc: In *Afro Promo #1 King Lady*, I wanted to figure out how we could create a superhero that was promoting Africanness as well as Blackness as ways of being. I appeared as King Lady, because I am a lion (laughs)—operating from an animist point of view. The lion is the king. And I am a woman when it suits me … When I made this work, in 2016, the Marvel movie *Black Panther* and the like with Black superheroes, that made any sense to me, had not come out, so I made my own.

JP: There is a hyper quality to this piece as in a lot of your work. You are dragging. You expect us to pierce through your use of typologies and to reflect on your obsession with stereotypes.

nc: There *is* a lot of hype around Black bodies! I create a hyper space around African Black bodies. My method of dragging or of augmenting the body expands it so that it becomes hypervisible in a specific way.

When I moved to the United States, I could pass for whatever Black there was anywhere. But since I am African, I was also interested in ways in which I could distinguish myself from just this flattening of Black skin, while always aware of not hijacking another's experience as my own, or for my own benefit. However, I am born and raised in Zimbabwe. The animist way of being is something that is truly a part of my DNA. And in this realm of animism, the question of gender is also very hyper. So in some ways, the expansion of the body in *Afro Promo #1 King Lady* is informed by animist thought and the current discourse on animism. It explores what the body is capable of and how it is able to change form. So, when I say I am a lion, the possibility of being one, of transforming, exists in the right circumstances and with enough alcohol (laughs) and the right kind of sound. To shapeshift into that beast is very much what my clan is after … I come from these spectacular ways of imagining the body.

The question of gender may be boring to an extent. In *Afro Promo #1 King Lady*, however, I was like let me beef this up. I was interested in working on how masculinity is viewed. In the instances of both, my performance *portrait of myself as my ~~father~~* and my film *Afro Promo #1 King Lady*, the performer obviously read as male appears with this big old bow and stuff and in very pretty colors. I am in less pretty colors. But I have the longest penis (uh, that I'm wearing). It is kind of dragging on the floor. I also augmented my shoulders with these pads from American football—dragging along the stereotype of

the loudness and hypervisibility of the Black male body, especially when it is read as an American body. But I am not American. I am, in fact, African. So this work is trying to put together stereotypes of the African as the animist and of the hypervisible Black, the North American, specifically African American. In the US everybody talks about the radical Black space. What is radical? What is Black? I am African, not only Black. Black is also a drag for me. In this new world we take that on and it has become part of everybody, not just Black bodies. Everybody seems to be Black to the extent that they're listening to Elvis Presley.

JP: With regard to hypervisibility: in your acclaimed opera *Nehanda* (2022) opacity is preeminent.

Figures 1 (p. 221) and 2 (p. 223). *Nehanda* (2022) by nora chipaumire, presented at Espace Cardin during the Festival d'Automne in Paris, France. Photo: Laurent Philippe.

nc: Hypervisibility and opacity are similar, really. They do the same awesome work to inspire questions. *Nehanda* conjures up the great female spirit of Zimbabwe. But when we perform we all show up in regular dress. So in fact we are dragged in many ways. You would expect that in a work like *Nehanda*, we would show up in our tribal outfits, but we did not. We showed up in our township outfits, in regular clothes. We looked like we were just hanging out, not doing that particular historical or traditional work. But it was the spirit of Nehanda that I intended to rise—slightly obscured, no visual cues help you to understand that.

In the talk after the performance in Amsterdam, the moderator complained about not getting all those things that they expect to see in Europe, when a work is so-called from Africa. The people on stage looked like they could be just from down the street. And then they were doing what should have been opera. We created a series of false expectations. I think that is similar to drag and similar to being hypervisibilized. It is just approached differently. In *Nehanda* you're supposed to open your ears and you don't have much guidance, with anything more than that.

JP: Well, let us talk about the dexterity of dragging at the colonial encounter, the double consciousness that emerges in the minds of colonized peoples who now are forced to take on a whole other culture. And what emerges is multiplicity and sophistication. This, for example in the use of kilts, seems to be a backdrop of *Nehanda*.

nc: When the British were marching north from South Africa they had drummers who were Scottish, dressed in their kilts. It is said, the native combatants who were waiting to fight these invaders thought they were women. Since they would not fight women they would let the British army come close until it was too late. The kilts have remained as part of the memorialization of a misreading of the body.

The flair and the swag within which the kilt is worn in that part of the world is heck of a cool thing, also in my own family … My grandmother was the first to really encounter white people—colonization. So, you know, it's only three generations removed. And looking at the kilts: I have always been very curious, about the way we defend Western dress. Several years ago, there were some guys who thought, oh, let's do a political act and put on some animal skins and stand in the middle of the city center in Harare. They were quickly arrested for indecency and have never been heard of again. Which is very scary.

I was also very intrigued by the way women are encouraged to wear the *durag*, the cloth tied around the head to cover exposed hair, which seems to me to come from the "downstairs" population, you know, like in the English houses with their upstairs and downstairs. The workers, the keepers of the house are downstairs, and they're the ones who cover their heads, they're not supposed to be sexy. They're supposed to have aprons, it's functional, but the upstairs people, they show off their hair. And here we are, all are covered women of a certain age. It is the norm. These are very recent acquisitions of a cultural language. But they are so much a part of who we are.

JP: I am interested in the shapeshifting in your works such as *portrait of myself as my ~~father~~*. This performance considers the African male through the lens

of capitalism, Christianity, colonialism and liberation struggles, and how these political and cultural traditions impact the African family and society on a global scale.

nc: I think, people like me who were born in a colonial situation and came through the colonial education system actually understand the specific difficulty with family relations. We are consciously aware of what is wrong on a minute-by-minute basis. And that fact is that the men in my own family all die young through alcoholism or any kind of disease—whatever, you name it. In my work, I was very curious to understand: what is this kind of constant destruction of the family and its genderedness. At the very end of this work, I carry my father on my back since I pretty much surrendered to this as a lifelong work. I have to carry my father, or at least the carcass of my father, who could be every Black man, because without the ability to carry him, which also means the ability to forgive him, we all would be dead. In my work, I wanted to find a way to deal with what ails our families when somebody is absent.

In Senegal, we were performing this work in many Western spaces. The work is loud. It encompasses many languages, whether it's Wolof from Senegal, or Patois from Jamaica, or sometimes Shona and English, accompanied by inaudible mumblings. In Saint-Louis, pretty much by half an hour into the work, all the white people had left. The work was too much for them. It smelled bad. It was too loud. Because whenever we transgressed the boxing ring, we actually talked to people. And the rest of the public started to talk back to us, which is the most beautiful thing about any kind of living act in Africa. It becomes a conversation. In Senegal, it became a congress. It was a conference where everybody who stayed could pretty much have their say. Those who didn't like it left. The young Black Africans stayed till the end. What should have been an hour-and-a-half performance became a four-hour piece—an event that would not stop. It went to the point where it is not about putting on an act. In this moment, we were alive and so was my father, because to say his name within that event was to make him live.

JP: However, it is not just about carrying your father at the end. By the end, there is a sense of you refusing to perform and to objectify your own body.

nc: I want to go back to the fact of knowing the conundrum that is the African Black experience. Or I would even be more specific as to the Zimbabwean Shona experience. One can't escape. I make work that calls me or demands me to do it. Even though I have done my own *Rite of Spring*, I quoted Stravinsky making it about me and about being consumed, you know, which is how I feel. If I am on the subway, on the street, anywhere in the world, I am always looked at.

So, how to hyperextend that lookingness in my performative work, so that you really have nowhere to look but the thing implicating myself. As an aside, I am often mistaken for something other. If I could get paid for the number of times I am called *sir*! I start to almost enjoy it, you know, like, oh, I could pass. I could pass because this person is paying so little attention, which is also hurtful in a way. Of course, I draw the line at male customs officials patting me down. I'm like, oops, can I get a woman to do that?

So, my work is to bring that feeling in this moment with the public. And I will speak collectively because everyone in the team is asked to really go far. That means allowing yourself to go into spaces that are fragile. To bring to consciousness a specific rigor and a surrender.

JP. Lindy-Lee Prince[1] talks about the tension between drag as a perpetuation of heteronormative definitions of gender and drag queen performances as acts of subversion and transgression. You are working with an external kind of visuality with one of the performers: Pieter van Heerden, who is a white South African actor, reads as cis male and very often gets singled out in an artist conversation afterwards even excluding you! There is a nod here towards what can be seen as kind of an obvious form of drag.

nc: Well, Pieter is a tall Afrikaner dude and somehow he makes the fifteen Black people disappear! In *Nehanda* he has no clothes on except for an Elizabethan wire skirt. He is Elizabeth. He is Empire. He is Cecil John Rhodes. I wonder if it could be called indigenizing the white settlers in drag. Pieter is tasked to arouse compassion in the native African. I'm coming at it from a very Zimbabwean attitude: we have not recovered from colonization and we have not had any reconciliation meetings, and we probably will not. How could this white body carry this? And I think because Pieter surrenders to the pain and to the obtuseness, perhaps even the joy of being absolutely naked with just this wire skirt. Plus, the nudity is such an affront to the Shona sensibilities.

Yet, Pieter is also taking on this power of empire, of Elizabeth, the Queen. He gets singled out because he surrenders totally. Perhaps he sacrifices himself, which white South Africans kind of do really well. We witness Pieter hurt himself to maybe say the thing that hasn't really been said: that, you know, we're fucking sorry and we're criminals, and this shit should have never happened.

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1 Lindy-Lee Prince, "Creating Personas, Performing Selves—Gazing Beyond the Masks of Drag and Neo-burlesque Performance," thesis presented for the degree of doctor of philosophy in the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cape Town, 2021.

JP: I am interested in the tension in your work between what is quite obviously dragging, a kind of dragging the past along, and this very contemporary, very present burning, being vulnerable in the present.

nc: I think history isn't in the past. It's in our bodies. And on the daily exchanges with Pieter as a South African and me being Zimbabwean we talk about other Africans in South Africa. That is the continued dialogue we have—that is because of the past, but we have to deal with it now, and we have to figure out how to be human and how to care for each other.

JP: Could you maybe expand a little on how *Nehanda* works? Also, with regard to the use of orality?

nc: I am working with an archive of the Shona *Bira* ceremony. The instruments, the guitars, the drums help this mirroring of the call on ancestral spirits for intervention, central to the *Bira*. The guitars push the language of this mirroring into another sphere altogether and the drums are there to remind us of the quantum physics held in the drumming culture. The voice is throat singing—it is vibrato. The language is primarily Shona with some English in it, thinking through what court arguments could be because the text is built from a colonial court case that really happened, commencing in March 1898. It is called Elizabeth or the Queen versus Nehanda and actually appears in case law. I used it to think through the voice about: what is law, what is jurisprudence, what is jurisdiction? The arguments are all sung approaching something that Puccini or Wagner could never think of. However, since there is no talking and it's all sung, it is still opera. And I dare anyone to challenge that. It is all told in song. It ticks all the boxes for opera. And it is 5.5 hours long …

JP: That qualifies already.

nc: Well, it is actually very short because in my work I was thinking of Zimbabwean songs which are all night long rituals, which I describe as revolutionary parties. They go on from sunset to sunrise. So that is longer than 5.5 hours. The initial proposition was to do an all night long piece. Of course, nothing has prepared the European culture industry as it exists for such a work. I mean, unless it's Wagner's *Ring* cycle. Then people can sit there for days and weeks. But when it comes from southern Africa, calls itself an opera and is a 5.5-hours long work in a language the audience does not understand … as if everybody in Europe understands Italian.

I would say, it should be taken as an opera that, instead of some archaic work, defines what opera should be today. My opera is a legal court case. It

is about reparations, about restitutions. It demands a return of all the dead bodies. Because the African people of whom we speak—the people who were involved in this court case: their bodies remain in London's Natural History Museum today. So this work is not just about "the spirits," but a provocation to think around how canned bodies can be brought to rest. And until they do not rest, we cannot rest.

JP: Your work has been described as disruptive by commentators. However, the disruption had been already there. It is a violent context that you are speaking to. So, it's not like you are disrupting what is already profoundly disrupted.

nc: I am here because of a disruption. We are here because of a disruption. The disruption has already happened. The work that we do is to bring us to a conversation, but definitely not a disruption. I think, when people say that it stems from a Eurocentric lens of what an operatic work looks like. You know, how the performers move, how the audience is positioned … I am not aspiring to appropriate a specific use of space, a use of gesture, a use of the body, a use of the public. I am thinking of this work as a congress, an *indaba*, in which everyone has a space to speak. It is always better when the public does speak and engage with what is happening. My desire is to do that kind of work that provokes the public to either get up or talk back.

JP: I think that is a good point to open this discussion to other delegates. Chris?

Chris Standfest: Thank you very much, nora. I would be interested in who you create your work for?

nc: I lived in so many different spaces. But when I am in my village, where people really don't care about what is happening in the urban spaces, there is just that. And that is real too. Zimbabwe is so massive that there is an urban elite, there is a township elite, and then there is a rural reality. And I am blessed to have the possibility to be in all those spaces. Or maybe not blessed. Maybe that's the curse.

This art thing we talk about—dance, whatever—was not designed for a person like me, an African girl. I come from a working, poor family, so I have no bourgeois thing, you know—no urban thing either. Being the first person in my family to go to university, I am inserting myself as the first public. But I would really prefer if my grandmother understood it. I am not saying other people cannot understand my work, of course. Thinking beings will get something, but the fact that me and mine were never supposed to come into spaces like this is an important reckoning for me, and something that perhaps allows me

to keep this burning fragility that raises the question of if I am even allowed to be in here. And then there's the question of who or what am I, if I *am* in here. So that may answer your question to whom I am speaking, to what public. I am not excluding anyone, but I am really zoning in on: what would my mother say? What would my grandmother say to all my nephews in the village? Could they recognize themselves in my work? They would understand the language, whether it is the gestures, the subversion or the sonic interruption. I would not need to translate. The people who are asking for translations are generally the gatekeepers: *Black girl from Zimbabwe, well, explain to us what you are doing?* My work, however, has to be complete in and of itself. I should not need to translate. Perhaps it is time that the world understands that an African body can speak or act and we are not obliged to translate.

Zimitri Erasmus: Thank you, nora. When I was watching your work and listening to you and Jay, I thought of call-and-response rituals. And just linking this to the previous question on who do you do your work for: Could you give us a sense of ways in which the audience responded? I am asking this because you were saying any thinking, and I would add, feeling, being, would not need translation, right? The layers of communication in your performances are so multiple that there is a window for almost anyone to respond. But it depends on ways of knowing that enable response or provoke withdrawal. You say that you are the first public, but you are also calling, aren't you?

nc: You are quite right: when I say, I am my first public, I mean people like me. People like me, not just me. Sometimes I am the only person in the room to carry this dilemma of being looked at or of being the first in one's clan to speak English …

I think your obligation, once you buy a ticket, is to stay through the course. You are obliged at least to think with the artist. Also if it becomes uncomfortable, if it feels like: this is not for me. I think, if people buy a ticket, they have already made a contract. They have agreed to spend time with this thing. However, privilege works like: oh, I don't have to sit through this because it doesn't affect me. You can leave, when you are challenged in the way you relate to the world, because you are privileged.

JP: What are you inviting to be present in your work?

nc: Presence is a good word instead of representation to describe my work, the methods, the process, the practice. We really work physically, in a daily research mode, stressing the body to a point where we can be totally in surrender to what the gesture needs to be. Training the body emotionally and

mentally, so that we can do this every day. For many in the team, the ancestors are always present. So they are having to negotiate that hyperspace of owning their physical body, but also surrendering their physical body in different moments of the work. Presence. You're there. Yeah.

JP: I just want to end by thanking you for the sheer exhaustion of being that shapeshifter, because you gave us everything from the hyper drag, from the evocation of drag in its most accessible common form to undoing dragging in a spectacular way.