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RESEARCH ARTICLE:

Crossing Disciplinary Boundaries and Extending Participation through Film and Applied Theatre Techniques: Reflecting on the Umzi ka Mama Oral Histories Project

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Abstract

Scholarship on African women has progressed from mainly focusing on royal women, political struggle heroines, and activists to include more stories of domestic workers, farmers, mothers, and daughters. Over time, feminist oral historians gradually moved from research with rigid traditional approaches to update their approaches to include creative methodologies that can enhance and extend interlocutor participation. Through a feminist lens, the paper articulates how a creative and alternative methodology extended interlocutor participation in the Umzi ka mama *oral history project. The project explored unreported stories of seven African women who have owned family property in Fingo Village, Makhanda since pre-1994. The article explores how a multidisciplinary methodology spanning over three disciplines, history, drama and film, helped gather data using interviews, video, forum, play-back and image theatre inspired techniques. The results revealed how extended participation beyond oral history interviews presented more opportunities for shared authority and negotiations throughout the process. Additionally, the results show how accessible dissemination can be achieved. Although history, film and drama methods pair well together as cross-cutting approaches, there are disciplinary tensions that are embedded in multidisciplinary studies. The paper highlights these tensions to show why negotiation is a necessary part of multidisciplinary research.*

Keywords: *multidisciplinary; applied theatre; oral history; documentary theatre; feminism*

Introduction

This paper explores how the *Umzi ka mama (my mother's house)* multidisciplinary project addressed oral history methodology critiques through a unique method. It argues for multidisciplinarity as a creative opportunity to experiment with extended participation in oral history interviews. The paper discusses how multidisciplinarity allowed space to record and interpret African women's oral histories creatively. The *Umzi ka Mama* project is a practice-related research project exploring stories of seven ordinary women. It highlights African women's challenges and successes in acquiring family property in Fingo Village, Eastern Cape, South Africa through inheritance, against the backdrop of lingering colonial and apartheid policies and customary practices. One of the few cities in South Africa with a lengthy history of African urban title deed ownership, dating back to 1855, is the suburb of Fingo Village (Roux and St. Leger, 1971). Having faced the same challenges as District Six, Cato Manor and Sophiatown, the suburb survived the misfortunes of the 1950s Group Areas Act (Davenport, 1980). Territorial wars, colonial, apartheid, and exclusionary policies made urban land acquisition impossible for African women. The goal of the *Umzi ka mama* project was to encourage further discussions regarding the untold tales of Fingo Village women navigating the formal and informal domains of property ownership, acknowledging that the discussions needed to go beyond the traditional methods of gathering oral histories and reviewing government documents.

Oral history seeks to preserve life stories by systematically recording verbal testimonies of participants (Starr, 1996). However, these interviews take time. The researcher might not have the time to build "organic relationships with the community at hand when there are a lot of informants to interview" (Kean, 2013). Furthermore, Kean (2013)

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argues that oral history and other public history techniques have frequently lacked genuine shared authority. Frisch conceptualised the term "shared authority" in the 1990s to refine the methods and ethics of oral history research (Shopes, 2003) after realizing that top-down methods used by privileged researchers in their oral history studies positioned the researcher as being better informed than their subjects. For this reason, developing collaborative techniques to interact with individuals and their life experiences is essential in achieving shared authority. As historians adopted the idea of shared authority, they ensured that oral histories or public history studies addressed power inequities engrained in research interviews. Kerr expanded on Frisch's ethical concerns by highlighting the significance of historical consciousness and the researcher's need to fully immerse themselves in the participants' world to develop a deeper understanding. According to Kerr (2003), immersion enables the researcher to establish a more meaningful and morally compliant connection. This bottom-up method can assist in avoiding assumptions and inaccurate portrayals of participant narratives.

Furthermore, the oral history method's one-time character makes it ineffective for "creating venues for discourse about history" with the public, even though there are follow-up interviews (Kean, 2013). Interviews and historical record consultations are frequently the sole methods for gathering data, and once over, the researcher doesn't engage further. Although the follow-up interviews provide accountability, I argue that more participation is needed for knowledge exchange opportunities through extended interactions with participants, to close a gap in oral history research. I propose applied theatre strategies as additional participatory tools to the oral history interview method to help increase respondents' involvement in the research. This study used applied theatre techniques as new methods of research in Fingo Village. Applied theatre is a broad theatrical production category that brings participants, audiences, and performers into non-traditional theatre settings, like community centres, hospitals, prisons and classrooms (Prentki and Preston, 2009). Practitioners such as Boal and Heathcote pioneered this method. One of its main principles is considering the ethical implications of participants regarding issues of shared authority, active participation, and recording of marginalised people's voices (Rifkin, 2010). The researcher needs to address these issues at every stage of the research.

I use a feminist lens to guide the proposed methodology, and the notion of shared authority nested in public history discourse. One of the central foci of feminist scholarship within the oral history field is that researchers adopt methods validating African women's experiences and narratives. Accordingly, feminist historians are encouraged to update their methods and approaches (Ntwape, 2016). The *Umzi ka mama* research is a multidisciplinary strategy and response to African feminists' call offering a counter methodology that addresses oral history critiques. The paper demonstrates how multidisciplinarity can enable the exploration of several approaches to research with African women through methods fostering knowledge development, data collecting, and analysis. I also discuss the disciplinary challenges that interfered with interdisciplinarity.

Framing Oral History Research through a Feminist Lens

To distinguish the study from other studies on Fingo Village (see Memela, 2020, and Kingwill, 2013), I approached the *Umzi ka mama* project from an African feminist lens, and here present arguments for an African feminist approach in oral history research. Broad consensus amongst scholars affirms that the term 'feminism', irrespective of its varying perspectives, remains relevant, describing a social justice movement that exposes women's oppression. By the 1990's there was a growing trend on how historians ought to respond to women's issues in research. Practitioners such as Leydesdorff, Passerini and Minister paved the way for feminist oral history practices in a western context. Leydesdorff and Passerini co-edited, together with Thompson, an international yearbook of oral history and life stories titled *Gender and Memory*, which set women's stories to the fore (Leydesdorff and Passerini, 1996). According to Sanger, feminist historians "aimed to use oral history to empower women by creating a revised history" (Sanger, 1998: 92), working tirelessly to document previously omitted women's stories. Minister was one of the few feminist historians at the time experimenting with how a feminist frame could help improve oral history interviews between female researchers and participants; her contributions are collected in *Women's words: the feminists' practice of oral history* (Minister, 1991).

Arguably, the developing trends at the time were women's memory, public and private life, and how these can be excavated to make women's stories visible. One thing that came up repeatedly was that there were differences between how women and men remember events. This view was informed by early oral history feminists like Gluck. There existed a consensus that in oral history interviews, women participants articulated their stories and events in more detail (Leydesdorff and Passerini, 1996), hence feminist historians pushed for more recording of women's stories, both home environment stories and public life participation. This framing of women's memory as different

to men is reductionist, and favours biological determinism arguments. Sanger posited a different view regarding gender and memory, writing a few years after the aforementioned scholars. Her view was that women's memory in oral history interviews is not influenced by gender alone but by race, class and ethnicity as contributing factors (Sanger, 1998). In the latter part of the 20th century, black feminists coined the inclusive term 'triple jeopardy' to critically articulate black women's experiences (King, 1988). 'Triple jeopardy' refers to the triple layers of oppression that women face, namely class, race, and sex. The term validated race as a layer of oppression, previously omitted from the double jeopardy theorising done by western feminists in earlier centuries. Collins's book, *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) is a critical text in the analysis of western feminism's shortfalls, foregrounding the work that influenced African feminism. Early feminist historians re-worked history, inserting women's stories by writing the female historical subject anew (Morgan, 2009). Therefore, it is fitting to lean into Morgan's work on the image of the female head of household for the development of the argument towards an African feminist framework.

Collins' view acknowledged the "minds and talents of grandmothers, mothers, and sisters who have alternative ways of thinking, documenting, and interpreting their experience" (Collins, 1998: 31). This approach addressed silenced women's stories, often left out of feminist discourse and feminist history writing. Arguably, the more African American feminist history developed, the more the scholars moved away from comparative methodologies and analysis that wrote about African American women as opposites of African American men in gender discourse (Morgan, 2009). Sanger believed in embracing a feminist framework that considered the way researchers interpreted women's stories of domesticity, motherhood, and activism. For her, this ethical consideration was necessary because it made researchers consider how dominant ideologies such as politics, religion, and culture shaped women's thinking (Sanger, 1998). Although feminist oral historians were putting western women's stories at the forefront of history research, they were theorising women's experiences within the three traditional schools (radical, liberal and social) of feminism which offered limited representation of African American and African women's experiences. They focused on concerns of the middle-class, with little consideration of how this approach excluded those living in rural areas, the lower class, and communities of people of colour. Smith posits that black feminist thought endorsed self-interpretation and self-definition, helping challenge traditional stereotypes (Smith, 1979). The African American matriarch image was under reconstruction; Black feminists redefined this image in a new, positive light, not only for African American women but also for women of colour across the globe. Collins urged theorists to celebrate the African American matriarch for her ability to keep the family together. However, she warned against romanticising her role as a submissive and supportive partner to an African American man (Collins, 1998). For African women, their perspective on the 'matriarch' was more nuanced, as multiple factors impacted female-headed households.

Accordingly, Mekgwe criticised black feminists for being cultural neo-imperialists. In her view, because African American women had overcome some of the challenges that African women still faced, they saw themselves as enlightened sisters who brought knowledge to less enlightened African sisters in the third world (Mekgwe, 2006). Their research methods had the colonial influence of western thought, viewing historical knowledge and experiences of African women through a western lens. As Mekgwe (2006) asserts, the careless assumption that African women needed liberation, without an understanding of their social, political, economic, and cultural context, committed the same offence as white feminism. Mazama (2008: 388) defines culture as a system of "shared perceptions, attitudes, and pre-dispositions that allow people to organise experiences in certain ways". Cultural identity was the epicentre of black knowledge and definitions in African feminism. However, as Mekgwe (2006) cautioned, cultural identity was not a complete form of belonging because it remains unfinished, not fixed or uniform, because Africa consists of various ethnic groupings. Within this definition, African culture served as a system of shared experiences of black Africans (Mekgwe, 2006). Arguing from an Afrocentric view, Mazama posits that African society operates from a core value system advocating collective unity over individualism (Mazama, 2008). Therefore, African women's experiences were viewed not as individual cases, but rather as collective narratives relatable to women across Africa. As Amadiume states, African women, whether in Africa or Europe, offered diverse voices articulating their cultural experiences (Amadiume, 2001). Their writings provided exciting and sophisticated ways of understanding feminist discourse in Africa. African feminism, to put it succinctly, is a decolonial philosophy dedicated to subverting patriarchal hegemony to shed light on alternative knowledge forms and knowledge possibilities (Griffiths, 2022). African feminism addressed representation and African women's lack of visibility in academia when it first started in the 1990s (Bennett, 2016). African feminist writers from the 1990s onwards unearthed some of the excluded experiences of African women, re-centring these accounts in the discourse surrounding African women's history, and cautioning against methodologies in academia that misrepresent African women through biased writing. Despite the criticism of African American feminism, its

developments have led many scholars to find intersecting notions of other feminisms such as African feminism. African feminism builds on African American feminism as much as it has built on western feminism, which creates a space for African women to speak and make their voices heard.

Feminist research gave researchers an opening to tell women's oral testimonies in multiple and unique styles (Canning, 1996). *Alice Hoy is not a building* is an international ethnographic case study serving as an example of feminist theatre exploring women's past and present experiences in academia at the University of Melbourne, Australia (Bird et al., 2010). The performance drew from oral history interviews on women's "lived experiences [personal and professional roles] as academics and graduate students in the university at a time of change" and twenty-year-old historical data from the archives on Hoy, a pioneering researcher in education (Bird *et al*., 2010). The director used verbatim theatre to create the script, which had exact quotes from the transcripts of the interviews with women at the university (Bird *et al*., 2010). As a collective memory project, the performance gave the story and the research a personal character. Due to the importance of representation in feminist research, the researchers meticulously interpreted Hoy's historical facts while embracing the responsibility of negotiating how they tell the subjects' stories (Gibson, 2011). In South Africa, drama or theatre methods in history research continue to grow. Recent examples are *Isidlamlilo (The Fire Eater)* and *Songs of the Women Migrants*. *Isidlamlilo* resulted from an oral history project by the Urban Futures Centre at the Durban University of Technology in 2022, scripted by playwrights Neil Coppen and Mpume Mthombeni. The play emerged from "the political, black-on-black violence that engulfed townships of (KwaZulu-Natal) KZN during the heightened African National Congress (ANC) and Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) conflict in the 1980s and 1990s in the Gauteng Province" (Moncho-Maripane, 2023). The one-woman play explores stories of women assassins, drawing on interviews of 30 African women, ten from the local Thokoza Women's Hostel in Durban (Moncho-Maripane, 2023). The story follows a Zulu grandmother who goes through a journey that "reawakens parts of her identity and past that she has spent a majority of her adult life trying to suppress" (Empatheatre, 2022). Through this depiction, local South African and international audiences experience a repressed history of African female assassins.

The Songs of the Women Migrants, now a book, is based on women's performance groups in Northern Province, researched by James in the 1990s. Her focus was primarily on how the women used the traditional music genre *kiba* as "invisible ethnic subjects" existing under the ethnic identities of men, to make themselves visible through complex dances, songs, and attires to form migrant identities rooted in ethnic customs in urban townships (James, 1999: 72). Twenty migrant women's life histories emerged because the *kiba* "defined their origins and destinies" (James, 2019: 257). The performance led James to inquire more about the lives of women society deems invisible, leading to an academic recording of these women's stories. The *Umzi ka mama* study adds to the growing literature and practice of using drama methods to record African women's stories and expanding interlocutor participation in oral history projects.

Research Methods and Design: Crossing Disciplines

The *Umzi ka mama* project is a qualitative research study spread across two disciplines: history and drama. The study is inherently multidisciplinary, drawing on multiple data collection strategies. Bakar and Mohd (2017) note ethnographies, case studies, in-person interviews, focus groups, and life narratives are just a few techniques used in qualitative research to collect data on beliefs, experiences, and behaviour. As a case study, the *Umzi ka mama* project focuses on female property owners in Fingo Village and on a multidisciplinary methodology of drama, history, and film techniques. Nicolescu argues multidisciplinary research refers to researching one topic across several disciplines simultaneously but "in the exclusive service of the home discipline" (Nicolescu, 2014). However, the study has an interdisciplinary element because it promotes the mixture of two fields that create new knowledge, professional roles and methodologies while drawing on dual theoretical frameworks (Repko, 2008). I employed the oral history methodology from the history discipline, and used methods drawing from drama and film studies to enhance interlocutor participation. This approach rested on the understanding that drama strategies pair well with history topics (O'Neill and Lambert, 1982).

The study occurred in Fingo Village, an urban suburb of Makhanda in the Eastern Cape. Established by the British in 1848 as a separate area for black residents, it was called 'Fingo Location' before it was renamed Fingo Village (Kingwill, 2013). The area is known for its historical significance as one of the earliest places where African males had freehold rights to urban properties (Manona, n.d.). My research focused on female interlocutors: Thobeka Ralo, Lizeka George, Margaret Spencer, Grace Ngcethe, Dezo Planga, Ntombizodwa Donyeli and Noluthando [Noli] Shelle. I conducted two preliminary interviews with women who inherited ownership of family property in

Fingo Village, and they suggested additional women to interview. However, there were two reasons why it was difficult to find more participants. Firstly, Makhanda residents are wary of university academics invading their private spaces. As Makhanda is a university town, there are historical issues regarding research participation apathy (Hellemann, 2019). The participants' apathy results from the 'town and gown' divide, a term coined by Chenoweth to define extractive research methods (Hellemann, 2019). According to du Toit (2023), oral history methods are extractive and non-empowering. Secondly, people in Fingo Village are unwilling to talk about title deeds given the suburb's erratic Groups Areas Act impositions and threatened evictions that forced property sales and relocations (Menato *et al.*, 1979). Therefore, building trust with the interlocutors, and ensuring that the methods used empower participants, were crucial from the beginning.

I collected data over 12 months in 2018. The first phase involved sourcing literature and archival material that captured Fingo Village's history, difficult because Fingo Village registers are in the Cape Town Deeds Registry and are not easy to access, as Kingwill noted in her study (Kingwill, 2013). Studies by Roux and St. Leger were crucial in furthering research on the historical relevance of female-headed homes in Fingo Village (Roux and St. Leger, 1971). Kingwill's 2013 study contrasts family inheritance and customs in Fingo Village. Both sources guided my interview questions. I used a Fingo Village exhibition and history project, curated by Dr Ashley Westaway with the help of Gadra Matric School students to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the town of Grahamstown. The second phase included oral history interviews with seven female participants who have been living in their current homes in Fingo Village since before 1994. I developed interactive interviews that focused on the experiences and coping mechanisms of the individual women, using the life history approach of interviews to trace participants' life experiences and histories (Bakar and Mohd, 2017). Semi-structured interview questions helped the women talk about how they overcame the difficulties of being African women property owners during apartheid and against the backdrop of traditional customs that disadvantaged them. The interviews became dialogical because I positioned the women as expert storytellers of life in Fingo Village pre-1994. Bakar and Mohd (2017) consider this an excellent approach when conducting one-on-one personal interviews.

I collaborated with Thingo Mtombeni to video-record the women's narratives, which she edited into a brief documentary. 'Documentary' is a nineteenth-century film genre, using true stories interpreted and technologically edited (Aufderheide, 2007). The documentary followed a storytelling pattern recounting informants' stories and capturing my research journey. Participants watched the first draft to validate the findings. This member-checking approach guarantees that the researcher accurately represents participants' views (Butina, 2015). Video documentation that combines "thematic and analytic engagement with relevant topics, characters, and circumstances is virtually unexplored" in oral history research (Frisch, 2010: 223). The project's third phase focused on two applied theatre techniques, forum theatre and image theatre, increasing interlocutors' participation. These became data analysis and additional data sources. I created a 10-minute one-woman forum theatre play called *Kwa Nomathemba* with Ntomboxolo [Nox] Yafele, an experienced Makhanda-based performer living in Fingo Village. Nox played Nomathemba's character. The script drew from interview testimonies and emerging themes from the literature on African women and property ownership, representing the coding stage of the research (Kim, 2015). As suggested by Denzin and Conquergood in Ackroyd and O'Toole (2010: 24), the emphasis was on using performance as a means of inquiry "rather than staging or re-enacting the events". The playback method inspired me to turn the women's stories into a performance for further inquiry.

Kwa Nomathemba deviated from the conventional playback theatre format, which is episodic and improvised on-site. Instead, it served as a narrative data processing method that enabled me to interpret the data creatively and play it back to participants (Kim, 2015). I made some changes to the transcripts, but not enough to make the women's stories unrecognisable. I consulted two participants to confirm that I had captured their version of events correctly. In feminist theatre initiatives, researchers often gather women's stories and discuss their narratives with them (Canning, 1996). This strategy allowed my participants to speak back to how I represented their stories, thus making a valuable contribution to the data analysis stage. I employed Boal's forum theatre dramaturgy strategy to encourage audience interaction and extend the informants' participation. Forum theatre dramaturgy focuses on how the play and the text convey the "protagonist's ideology, which has to have at least one political or social 'mistake' that may be discussed during the forum session" (Boal, 2005: 242). Nomathemba, the protagonist, challenged the audience to give their opinions in a monologue-type conversation. She made controversial statements regarding women's involvement in family property inheritance practices and reflected on fictional news on the radio about women protesting to the housing department about their title deed registration progress. The audience engaged with her after she finished performing.

In the fourth phase, I used image theatre technique whereby actors and viewers typically utilise their bodies to create three-dimensional installations or images conveying social issues or personal experiences (Boal, 2005). The audience analyses these, expressing thoughts and feelings evoked. The generated images are employed as discussion starters to "show subjects' positions and power dynamics, laying the groundwork for the participants to evaluate their experiences further" (Kaptani and Yuval-Davis, 2008: 6). Initially, I wanted to implement traditional non-verbal image theatre but adapted this to fit the context of my case study. I hesitated to push participants radically out of their comfort zones, because they were not drama-trained, came from conservative backgrounds, and were not ready for non-verbal engagement. As Kaptani and Yuval-Davis (2008) state, methodological choices should be modified depending on the participants 'cultural' backgrounds. Arguably, choosing verbalisation went against the intended use of this Boalian technique, but I wanted the participants to communicate their feelings and emotions in a way that felt comfortable. I used the Fingo Village exhibition to overcome the challenge of not using conventional body images, because it contains pictures of people and notable locations in Fingo Village. The exhibition is a well-researched resource that details the political and emotional turmoil between 1970 and 1994.

Through an interpretivist lens, I used thematic and narrative analysis which supported the storytelling technique. I drew on multiple data sources and African feminist theory to triangulate findings by examining and interpreting the relationship between theory and data collected from participant interactions (Carroll, 1996). Alhojailan (2012) posits that thematic analysis is about classifying and presenting patterns emerging from the data. Thematic analysis was helpful writing the script and thesis, while narrative analysis informed how I presented the stories in both the film and performance events. The narrative method recognises that the interviews are unprocessed, rich data that may be used to understand more about "the narrator's culture, historical experiences, identity, and lifestyle" (Butina, 2015: 190). Relying on word of mouth and referrals to source participants, I identified seven willing African women homeowners as living participants residing in Fingo Village. I conducted the study before the introduction of the new ethics application review system in 2019, but followed the History Department's ethical protocols and procedures, as the women gave written consent to participate in the study. Ukaegbu and Ewu (2010) warn that following copyright laws is essential when working with participants. The participants signed a documentary release form, permitting me to record their stories using their full names and locations and giving me (and the university) full rights to use and share the film. Although the women agreed to having their real names used in the study, I have left out personal details and accounts that might make them vulnerable to family and community criticism. Additionally, the film and all the details shared were checked by the participants, which Butina (2015) notes as an essential step researchers should take to ensure that the researcher presents and represents participants and their ideas and narratives ethically. The women received copies of the documentary film, so they could keep sharing their stories with audiences beyond the limitations of conventional theatre. Their stories are now known, and are in formats that have long-term sustainability and security. In this way, the documentation of the women's stories will not 'die' in archives.

Figure 1: Four of the seven interlocutors sitting amongst invited audience members watching Kwa Nomathemba play.
Source: Thingo Mtombeni

Findings

The findings yielded information on unconventional customary family property transfer practices and unusual ways in which western legal practices empowered African women to be homeowners. I focus here on findings relating to the methodology, highlighting how the methodology extended interlocutor participation beyond the interview phase, uncovering more details and stories about Fingo Village's title deeds history. I argue how the method allowed for creative and innovative way to present and represent women's stories of family property transfer practices in an accessible way. The images come from the *Umzi ka Mama* documentary, available on Figshare (link available under data availability statement). Participants seen in Figure 1, got the opportunity to tell their stories to a broader audience beyond the interview phase and to answer questions through organic conversations about their experiences of living in Fingo Village during the apartheid era as also shown in Figure 2 below. Participants watched their stories in a forum theatre and playback theatre-inspired play, which was a crucial tool in the fourth phase of the research, allowing invited members of the public to witness the women's stories. In making the private stories part of the general discussion, people could confront their prejudices regarding gendered property access, and share their challenges regarding family property transfer practices.

Figure 2: Mama Grace and invited guests at the Exhibition and Image theatre event, sharing more knowledge and insight on the history of Fingo Village properties.
Source: Thingo Mtombeni

Figure 1: All seven research participants were present at the documentary screening event.
Source: Thingo Mtombeni

The idea behind the documentary screening followed the same principle as the playback strategy. Research subjects watched their own stories and heard each other's stories for the first time as shown in Figure 3. Here, the women had more to say regarding the gendered nature of family property transfer practices and why the legal route presents a better option for daughters-in-law and widows. It was necessary for the women to witness their own stories and to connect them to the stories of other women and the community conversation over women's rights to family property and title deeds (Allern, 2001).

Discussion

During the interview phase, all the participants kept their answers brief. It was in the extended participation activities that the conversations became more nuanced and explored themes of culture and gender in family property acquisition. Drawing on forum theatre and playback-inspired elements, I used the *Kwa Nomathemba* play as a tool extending interlocutors' participation in research, bringing out gender and culture themes. To demonstrate this, I draw on Schechner's three laws of participation in theatre to discuss extended successes and challenges:

1. For the play to be authentic, the audience must be in a live setting.
2. If the facilitator invites participation, then they need to accept that there will be negative and positive responses because the audience can make the play stop, go on, and go on again in a new way with participation.
3. Participation should not be gratuitous. (Schechner, 1994: 78)

The *Kwa Nomatheba* play addressed the first rule of participation by using a live conversational performance in a home-like setting. The make-believe real-life setting became a charged, familiar space, making 'breaking the fourth wall' easy as I invited the audience to interact with Nomathemba through hot-seating. Breaking the fourth wall is a technique whereby the invisible 'fourth wall' between the performer and the audience is 'broken' by the performer addressing the audience directly and vice versa (Boal, 2005). I transported the viewers into Nomathemba's world through a secure, thought-provoking forum that allowed them to discuss whether Nomathemba's neighbour's advice about family property disputes was sound. The hot-seating exercise prompted the audience to question the character in an interview-style manner to comprehend the topics brought up (Jackson, 2011). Boal's metaxis (2005: 31), was a helpful framework that gave the women the confidence to respond to experiences. Metaxis means "participating in a world of reality through fiction". This engagement is made possible by combining the fictional, the real and the imagined world. Through metaxis, the women observed one another's lives and took part in discussions about potential future obstacles and problems pertaining to title deed registration and family property inheritance. As a reflection exercise, metaxis positioned the participants as problem-solvers demonstrated that while families valued their traditions and customs, the women valued the title deed documents' legal protection, particularly in situations where there were disagreements over family property.

As a researcher and facilitator, Schechner's second point on participation played out well in the hot-seating interactions. I had to embrace the audience's' positive and negative responses (Schechner, 1994) and used those responses to encourage further interaction with Nomathemba. I did not try to convince women without a title deed to pursue formal documentation; they arrived at this realisation themselves. Having heard and witnessed each other's stories, they acknowledged the importance of pursuing formal documentation as a way of feeling truly secure in the complex world of competing values concerning gender roles and cultures. The responses got them thinking deeply about family property inheritance as daughters or wives in the case of customary marriage. The hot-seating activity helped the participants "speak of their reality…from a safe distance" through Nomathemba (Kaptani and Yuval-Davis, 2008: 7). Gender prejudices embedded in customary practices and family property inheritance did not deter women from applying gender equality in their own future family property transmission decisions. Boal (2005: 243–244) explains this interaction as an "artistic and intellectual game played between actor and spect-actors" where, the audience takes on the performer's role and expresses their views through that lens. The audience is informed that, in this rerunning of the play, the first step is to take the protagonist's place whenever they make a mistake to try to find a better solution. All they have to do is shout 'Stop!'; the actors must immediately stop where they are, without changing position. With the minimum delay, the spect-actor must say where they want the scene taken from, indicating the relevant phrase, moment or movement [whichever is easiest] (Boal, 2005: 243–244).

The above resonates with Schechner's view that participation should not be gratuitous (Schechner, 1994). This description of participation, which emphasises the value of actively participating in a conversation, aligns with this

paper's objectives. The documentary viewing and performance event of *Umzi ka mama* yielded dialogue and reflection, with participants discussing the value of formal property registration in light of western policy and customary law. Using a participatory research methodology helped facilitate genuine conversations with the participants about customary patriarchal practices that disadvantage women's land and property rights. I observed how the primary participants and audiences engaged in open dialogue and exchanged opinions about why some aspects of culture are oppressive. Given how open-minded applied theatre methods are, the women interchangeably moved between opinions and perspectives as they gained more social consciousness from listening to other women's testimonies. Initially, in our preliminary and follow-up interviews, some women had reflected common social gender values and prescripts about married women who inherit the family home, but perspectives shifted as the study progressed. The biggest obstacle I encountered was that some women could not attend the sessions because of personal or professional obligations. Only four out of the seven could attend both the performance and the documentary screening, but all received DVD copies of the film.

The film and the one-woman performance script are two creative outputs that emerged from the project, serving as additional documentation to the thesis and helping to disseminate research findings in accessible and innovative ways. The film served as an accessible tool capturing Fingo Village family histories of 'everyday people' (Stevens et al., 2003). The film is a timeless resource that families can revisit to understand parts of their family history shared by their mothers, aunts and grandmothers. The performance script is available to those interested in learning more about how historical events are interpreted creatively. Fleishman (2009: 116 and 120) explains performance tools such as scripts are "sites of knowledge" because they expand on the content researchers are exploring. They enhance the interpretation of events and engagements with history and memory work. As creative artefacts, films and performance scripts are evidence of how new knowledge and interdisciplinary ways of working can lead to creative explorations, especially where drama and history methods intersect (Skains, 2018). A researcher can craft a progressive method that extends civic engagement by encouraging dialogue and interactions that gather information about a topic, as shown in the Fingo Village case.

Recognising the significance of creating historical records that capture African women's stories is not enough. These stories need to be accessible to the public to increase visibility and knowledge of these stories. The *Umzi ka mama* stories add to the documentation of Fingo women's stories and challenge the "gendered nature of the archival enterprise", which has predominantly been prone to advancing men's stories while excluding records "about or by women" (Schwartz and Cook, 2002: 16). Copies of the performance script of *Kwa Nomathemba* and the two video recordings of the documentary film *Umzi ka mama* are available on three platforms. The videos are freely accessible through the Rhodes University online research database, Figshare. Physical copies of both the videos and the script are housed at the Rhodes University Cory Library, where they have been appraised and acknowledged as valuable sources contributing to the collection of Fingo Village history in Makhanda and South Africa. These platforms create much needed visibility of women and their stories, reaching a wider audience across the country and globally. As sources that help preserve local women's history, the materials are educational, offering accessible engagement with local history. Videos provide quick and neatly packaged information, which can be a starting point of interest for people to engage with the topic.

Subjects such as history follow traditional guidelines for academic writing, characterised as more rigid and impersonal (Hyland and Jiang, 2017). Scholars from more conventional backgrounds hold emotional distance in high regard, discouraging first-person pronouns in academic writing. However, this view has evolved as new academic traits, like using first-person pronouns, emerged across disciplines. I refute the notion in my thesis that historians are more objective when they write in third-person, contending that it is impractical and even presumptuous to expect a researcher to be objective because it prevents historians from locating themselves and their positionality in the writing. The first-person pronoun in academic writing became a "key role" in constructing my voice and authority as a scholar (Lorés-Sanz, 2011). Though it is a rare quality in the history field, not all historians eschew self-reflexivity in their writing. Because I work in applied theatre and understand how important self-reflection is to my writing, I use first-person extensively when I reflect on my research efforts, roles, and researcher positionality. First-person pronouns positioned me to take responsibility on how I represented the women's stories' and cultural aspects. Self-reflection helped me challenge my own assumptions about their experiences, and I was able to demonstrate how first-person writing did not always impede formulated arguments or the calibre of the knowledge generated (Milner, 2007).

Conclusion

The paper presented an argument on the critique of the one-dimensional nature of oral history interview methodology as a standalone method, suggesting applied theatre strategies as complementary techniques. Although Kingwill and I arrived at different conclusions, it is nonetheless important to highlight the parallels in our research topics and the different techniques used. To use Gheondea-Eladi's term, our studies share a "surface similarity", which in qualitative research indicates an "identification of the characteristics of the target population to which a generalisation is sought" (Gheondea-Eladi, 2014: 177). Because our targeted research participants shared comparable backgrounds and places, there are clear commonalities amongst our research, but our approaches to methodology are different. I believe that my extensive immersion approach adds a crucial complement to other Fingo Village research findings. As shown throughout, I used a multidisciplinary methodology with Fingo Village women to unearth the silenced stories, feelings, and knowledge of female property owners. I achieved shared authority, extended participation, and encouraged deeper dialogue using activities inspired by forum, playback, and image theatre. This way of working positioned my research participants as co-knowledge producers of social content about Fingo Village. My recommendation for other feminist researchers in public history or oral history research interested in multidisciplinary approaches, that want to take research participants beyond traditional oral history interview methodologies, is that they consider working with trained applied theatre practitioners to form research communities of practice within the history discipline committed to embracing methods that encourage shared authority and extended participation with their sampled participants.

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