

"Reclaiming the P...Word": a reflection on an original feminist drama production at the University of the Western Cape

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"An emotional rollercoaster – one moment I laughed and the next I cried when the reality of the story struck me." – Audience member

From 14 to 16 September 2005, the Gender Equity Unit (GEU) at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) hosted a conference, "Feminist Intellectual Activism – Within and Beyond the Academy", in acknowledgment of the different sites of feminist knowledge creation. The contributions delivered at this conference examined knowledge creation by black women both inside and outside the formal confines of academia. This gave impetus to the idea of promoting the importance of feminist teaching and learning beyond the formal classroom or workshop training contexts in order both to reach wider audiences and to broadly expand feminist knowledge and consciousness.

Among the issues raised at the conference was the fact that post-apartheid South Africa has seen an escalation of violence against women in different forms, ranging from the raping of girl babies, the girl child and women, femicide, and the brutal rape and killing of black lesbians. It was obvious from research and reports that violence in South Africa had a very specific gender, race and class context. Contributors discussed the myths surrounding violence against women, from the belief in "virgin rapes" of babies and young women as a cure for HIV/Aids, to the "curative" or "corrective" rape of black lesbians in order to transform them into "real" women.

Both the conference contributions and the recent national statistics on violence against women profoundly influenced the programme design at the GEU in 2006. The GEU has long realised that the university environment is merely a microcosm of broader society and a reflection of what is happening in our communities. With a significant community of UWC students in

residence (approximately 4 000 of the almost 15 000 students) and with the majority of the administrative and support staff still living in historically black residential areas, we felt it was important for the GEU to take cognisance of how societal violence impacts on the lived realities of the majority of the campus community and its external and domestic relationships.

The new programme development at the GEU also took into account the fact that the country was celebrating major historic events during 2006. The first was the 10th anniversary of the democratic constitution with its progressive stance on women and gender. The second was the 30th anniversary of the Soweto Riots. The third was the 50th anniversary of the historic Women's March to Pretoria on 9 August 1956. The underlying premise of the programmes developed at the unit was to use these anniversaries to measure the advances made by women in South Africa since 1994.

However, what was started as a celebratory and commemorative year soon led to the realisation that the gains afforded to women in this fledgling democracy were marred by daily instances of violence, perpetrated not only by ordinary citizens but by senior political office bearers. Court and disciplinary proceedings of the alleged transgressions of senior male political figures dominated both the print and electronic media and overshadowed the planned activities and celebrations. It was within this framework of celebration overshadowed by loss that the GEU conceptualised a play that would bring black women students and staff together specifically to raise awareness about the othering, objectification and sexualisation of black women's bodies. These national developments presented an opportunity to put the feminist maxim "the personal is political" into action by focusing on the corrupt public morality and the impact that it had on the private and domestic domain.

At first it was thought that a staging of the US drama *Vagina Monologues*, by Eve Ensler, would be an appropriate way to highlight the violence against women in South Africa. But some students could not relate to all the locations and experiences of the US characters in that play. Also, it was impossible to obtain the rights to stage a performance under local conditions.

These problems turned out to be a blessing and a challenge. It was subsequently decided to send out a campus-wide invitation for auditions and to host a series of workshops and discussions in order to produce a "homegrown" South African play by university staff, students and the women from the wider community. These workshops included talks and discussions pertaining to bodily integrity and dignity. Participants were

encouraged to speak about or write down their own experiences. This process took approximately four months and included the sharing of life and lived experiences; the building of confidentiality, trust and respect, and developing the process within the principles of feminist praxis and theory. A play was developed on the basis of the workshop productions, with a flexible script that had multiple elements: feminist education and teaching, the evocation of empathy with the experiences of the cast and characters, the raising of awareness, and shock about the statistics on violence. The play aimed to provide humour and laughter, to present audiences with the reality of life for black South African women in a truthful manner and to capture and hold the attention of the audience for approximately one hour.

UWC is in a part of greater Cape Town usually called the Cape Flats – far away from the economic hub and carefree social activities usually associated with university student life. The residential areas surrounding the university represent mostly the poorer working-class community; violence, drugs and gangsterism form a large part of socio-economic realities. The play would come to reflect these realities.

As the play began to take shape, a performance date was repeatedly postponed because there was no final physical script. Some initial group participants found great difficulty in dealing with the intense personal issues and experiences that cropped up continually. Some of the participants who had been initially interested also found it difficult to write their own personal experiences and lived realities, and preferred to use the scripts of others; one participant felt that the proposed ideas were not sufficiently spiritual; another dropped out because she felt that the proposed script had no artistic value. The main challenge was to convince a group of women to move beyond and confront their own biases and prejudices.

A date was eventually set for the first performance. Three weeks before the play was due to open the scripts started to roll in. Staff and students wrote their own pieces, and eventually eight monologues, one dialogue, one poem and one song were selected. We had to come up with a title that was provocative and truthful, and I proposed *Reclaiming the P...Word*. The “P” stands for *poes* – the Afrikaans term for the vagina. The term has a very specific context and connotation in South Africa, especially among Afrikaans-speaking communities, and is often used in a derogatory sense. The premise of the play (and the use of the term) was to examine such social ideas of embodiment and to provoke debate and raise consciousness about the female body.

The cast was eleven women: it included two staff members, one woman from the community and eight UWC students. A theatre, which we named The Black Box, was specially created in a UWC venue to enhance the intimacy of the performance. The props were minimal, consisting of four chairs and a piano. The first two performances were staged in September 2006 as part of the Learning Cape Festival and the university's annual "Life-long Learning Indaba".

The first performances of *Reclaiming the P...Word* were an overwhelming success and it was decided to stage another two performances as part of the Sixteen Days of Activism Against Violence Against Women Campaign. The following performances were on 25 November and 1 December 2006.

A video of one of the performances was subsequently forwarded to the committee of the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, and we were invited to perform at the Festival. In July 2007, *Reclaiming the P...Word* had five performances in Grahamstown. The official festival newspaper reported:

A vibrant and commanding production, which forces the audience to hear the stories of women that have experienced some sort of sexual abuse, but who have never been able to speak out. The acting is impeccable. An eye-opening experience. – Hayley Richardson, *Cue*, Tuesday 3 July 2007: 12.

Reviews by the audience favorably compared *Reclaiming the P...Word* with the *Vagina Monologues* and put it in the class of the choreopoem *For Coloured Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* by Ntozake Shange. Our play includes stories of incest and domestic violence, and comments on violence in the public sphere without apology. In the process it teaches about embodiment and reclaiming bodily integrity, and the importance of reclaiming the self. It uses personal and local experiences and expresses itself in unpretentious language understood by both the educated and semi-educated, and by non-South Africans. It has a universal message that holds importance in a post-colonial era where women's bodies are still under siege in various forms.

As part of the consciousness-raising objective of the play, the cast interacts with the audience immediately after each performance, and the audience is invited to write comments and give feedback. Here are some excerpts from these comments:

Awesome work! Thanks especially for X sharing her pain, X's wit and red tie, X's toys and X reclaiming our heritage; from taxi queen to hetero prude: awesome work! Tour EVERYWHERE please. Long overdue!!!

Very powerful, extremely thought-provoking and although I always hated the word "POES", I'll definitely view it differently from now on . . . with PRIDE!! Thanks ladies, keep up the brilliant work.

Thank you for being brave enough to share your stories.
Beautiful, inspiring!

At last! I've been waiting for South African women to start sharing their own stories. We are unique in many ways and hence our stories will be as well. Well done to the cast and production team.

Challenges

As of this writing, we, the cast members of *Reclaiming the P...Word*, have celebrated our first anniversary. We performed several times at the University of the Western Cape; at the National Arts Festival and the University of Cape Town. We had bookings for the 2007 Sixteen Days Against Violence Against Women Campaign, and have provisional bookings to perform during 2008.

However, taking part in the rehearsals and performances posed numerous challenges to the organisers and cast of the play. Part of UWC's history and continuing reality as a disadvantaged university is that it has no drama or performing arts school, and rehearsal and performance space is difficult to find. Secondly, the whole process was an extracurricular activity that took place outside formal course work and teaching times. The students did not receive any academic credit for taking part. Finally, because this was a voluntary activity, nobody received any remuneration.

These conditions of participation placed enormous pressure on cast members, especially students already overloaded with academic work. Some were also working part-time to pay their university fees; only two students had their own cars, while the rest were dependent on unreliable and often dangerous public transport to and from the campus. Though the rehearsals lasted until eight or nine in the evening, public transport only operates until seven. This meant that extensive transport arrangements had to be made for students to be dropped off all across the peninsula – and the organisers were on the city roads until eleven or twelve at night. In the beginning, rehearsals also took place on Saturdays.

There was no institutional support either for transport or for providing food for the students who had to stay on campus for long hours at a time. Everyone

involved made tremendous sacrifices in terms of resources and time. The play was made possible by the sincere commitment to the process from both the cast and the organisers. The first director of the play was an exchange student from the University of Stavanger in Norway. She was also able to raise funds from the Norwegian Peace Corps for the construction of the space of the Black Box. The current director is a UWC student, who is also working for no payment. The success of the performances can be ascribed to the sheer willpower and drive of the cast and their determination to have their stories told.

The rehearsals formed an integral part of building camaraderie, but it also offered the opportunity to teach about embodiment from a feminist perspective. On many days there was no real rehearsal, because the cast used the space to share their experiences of the different forms of violence perpetrated against themselves or women close to them. For some it was the first time that they had ever shared these painful experiences with anyone. There were many occasions on which we could only hold and comfort each other. These were emotional times. Sometimes there were fears that performances could not take place, as the realities of the stories struck home and stage fright became overwhelming.

The ages of the cast ranged from nineteen to fifty years old, but for everybody this was an excellent learning and teaching opportunity. These experiences found reflection in the wonderful monologues that were produced. For all of us, a new kind of awareness and respect for women's bodies was born.

Although much of the healing processes took place during the rehearsals, these sessions could not replace formal counselling. Cast members were encouraged to make appointments with psychologists. During the first few performances, counsellors were invited so that both cast members and the audience would have access to immediate counselling if the need should arise. After the first performance, counselling sessions at the campus health centre were organised for group and individual debriefing as it was the first time that some of the women had shared their personal experiences on a public platform.

The script

The opening piece connects the public with the private by commenting on the current corrupt morals of public figures and the effect of these incidents on the lives of ordinary citizens. Current national and provincial statistics on violence against women are used throughout the script to emphasise the prevalence of misogyny and sexism.

The different monologues that made up the overall script miraculously complemented each other, and not much editing was needed. One of the cast members wrote a song that was sung during two of the performances, and the first two verses epitomise the message of the play:

"I'm a woman
My spirit is free
And the person that I love
The most in the world is me

I own my own body
I love what I see
I love every body...
But most of all
I love me" (Johanna Booysen, 2006).

The piece about sexual molestation written by Wahseema Roberts (2006) takes the audience on an emotional rollercoaster ride. Here is an excerpt:

"I love it when my lover takes his time. Gently he blows into my vagina, unfolding multiple layers of velvet in there, looking into the binoculars of my intimate self. He looks, touches gently, kisses: he respects...

I hate it when you forcefully lifted my dresses looking into the binocular of the beast my vagina had come to represent. Ashamed. You stared at it, grabbed, bit: did not respect. My vagina – A beast of burden. You are free 'cause they say you were "mad". You are the victim. *I do not hate you*. But I remember. I am the beast. I am a statistic. Here are my statistics..."

Each piece is intimately connected with the others by the thread of tracing the effects of physical and emotional violence on women's bodies. After each show, somebody in the audience is able to comment on how she could relate to each of the pieces. The performances challenge the audience to connect and reflect by offering both sadness and humour.

Reflections of the cast

An important factor in the process of writing and performing the play was the establishment of new friendships and understandings across age, class, sexual orientation, religion, race and nationality. For many of the students, it meant discovering that they were not alone, and that there were other young women on

campus who had experienced gender-based violence. These women also took on the responsibility to educate other students and community members about the effects that violence against women had on individuals and the community.

For a number of the cast members the whole process was a tremendous healing journey. There was a spirit of support and understanding. For most of the women, this performance offered the opportunity to share for the first time with family, friends and peers their lived experiences, and that was also the reason why there was tension before every performance. However, there was always the appreciation that there was support for each other, as one of the cast members observed: "The whole cast, even this year (2007), cares and supports each one. We feel as if we are one. I've learnt a lot from the process and the play."

Another cast member said: "This has been one of the most intense and extraordinary experiences of learning and teaching, and it is evidence that the most powerful teaching happens outside the classroom."

More than one woman expressed the idea that this was a time when they "got their voices back". The more the play was performed, the stronger their confidence became to talk and share with the audience.

Prior to the tour to Grahamstown in July 2007, the cast were given exercise books to record their feelings about performing far away from their own comfort zones and about their understanding of their characters. Again, some had great difficulty in writing about their feelings and did not hand their diaries back. Others explored their past and present experiences in depth. Permission was gained from the writers to use some of their thoughts. Here are some of the entries:

Being around the cast of *Reclaiming* has helped me heal in more ways than one... watching X stand up in front of friends and strangers and say, "Thank you for bringing my body back after 21 years!" gives me a strong sense of hope. That one day I too will be able to take ownership of my own life. I too have hope to have the confidence and strength to one day speak with the same voice... and I see that day coming soon.

One of the women used the diary as an alter ego to talk with a young abused woman, and wrote:

Reclaiming the P... Word has brought up many issues. One of which you faced and tackled head-on – molestation.

Yet another, who took the role of one of the original cast members, wrote:

I love the performance. The crowd seemed to love it too. While I was on stage I got so lost in my piece, I forgot about the audience! It's an amazing feeling when I no longer feel like I'm reciting a poem but actually speaking about my life! I feel as though I wrote the piece.

The theme throughout the journals is one of hope, of growth and of understanding themselves for the first time.

In conclusion, involvement in *Reclaiming the P...Word* has enabled cast and audience to partake in a journey of healing. The play illuminates the particularly painful experiences of black South African women who experience disrespect and misogyny on a daily basis in a democracy that is supposed to be woman-sensitive and protective. As a teaching tool, *Reclaiming the P...Word* can be regarded as a textbook for the oppressed.