

SUGAR & SALT, LIKE LICKING YOUR MOTHER-TONGUE ¹:

translation and intergenerational humor in the work of South-African artist Lerato Shadi

“The video SUGAR & SALT shows a mother and daughter who are licking sugar and salt from each other’s tongues. Sugar being licked and consumed off the mother’s tongue and salt off the daughter’s tongue. The backdrop is of a romanticized ornamental pattern. The scenery acts as a vanishing point for the camera lens, at the same time the pattern creates a border between the two generations. The video looks at inter-generational relationships and narratives while using two substances – one a carbohydrate and the other a mineral – that look the same but are structurally different to thematize the interaction off screen.” Lerato Shadi (1979)² The artist’s own notes written to accompany the 6-minute video seem an apt introduction to this work with the title *Sugar & Salt* (fig. 1-6) produced in 2014.³ In order to articulate the complexity referred to by the notions “inter-generational relationships”, by “interaction off screen”, or even “carbohydrate” and “mineral”, *Sugar & Salt* needs to be embedded in a larger narrative by unraveling the dialogue it is part of and by contextualizing it within South-African contemporary art and literature.

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EQUIVOCAL HUMOR IN SOUTH AFRICA

Scholarly attention to humor in the larger South-African context has developed a habit of quoting one of the famed comic strips produced in South Africa. Depending on the analyst’s intent, he/she will refer to either the more “nation-building” cartoons like *Madam & Eve*, or the political satire by Zapiro, both notorious portraits of South African post-Apartheid society. More narrowly, within the contemporary art field, “humor” has come to denote an attitude creating daredevil misunderstandings⁴, either by satirical image or by play on words. These pranks provoke the gullible public into over-reacting as soon as the word “race”⁵ is pronounced, or narcissistic political figures are tricked into threatening with censorship⁶, upon which the question of freedom of expression can be debated yet again; both concerns have as a result obtained wide media attention. Works of this genre, feeding on puns and parody, strike the viewer as most tragically unfunny. They even seem to betray signs of essential lack of humor and deliberate quarrelsomeness on all sides.

Less provocative, humor is an often-used tool in search of identity questions.⁷ South-Africa counts several extremely successful works by artists with a great gift for the comic situation⁸: language-based satirical comment on local or global questions⁹, the art field¹⁰ or the paradoxical situation of South Africa on the verge of toppling back and forth between the status of a third world country and/or a player on the neo-capitalistic global scene. These works bear all the defining features of comedy, but they are inextricably caught up in the political.

SUGAR AND SALT, A BINARY TO BE SUBVERTED

In this context, then, why show a home video by a young artist, Lerato Shadi, and her mother, licking salt and sugar off each other’s tongues? The humor, of course lies in the literal interpretation of the expression “mother tongue”, the uncomfortable witnessing of the absurdly comic exercise of tongue licking accompanied by the protagonist’s facial expressions, reflexes triggered by the stimulation of their taste buds, and provoking involuntary grimaces. The performers themselves are sharing giggles, poking fun at each other, enjoying the absurdness of the situation. The primary colors of the clothing, joyful stripes and blocks, the bonnet, the colorful patterned background tell the viewer that this is a pleasant situation; it feels as though laughter is allowed. The spontaneous individual



fig. 1-6) “Sugar and Salt”, video-stills, Lerato Shadi, (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) – 2014

reaction is laughter with empathy; it seems impossible not to imagine the taste of a mouth-full of salt, or sugar. Slapstick comedy in cinema or in theatre has made ready use of the comic potential offered by the circumstance that the two elements look alike but taste radically different and provoke opposite gustative reactions. The comic effects and suspense created in anticipation of startled reactions when sugar is inadvertently taken for salt (or vice versa) are endless.

Widening the metaphoric scope covered by the two incompatible substances beyond humor to other cultural expressions¹¹ brings the awareness that language (meaning all speech acts or the faculty of language in itself) has sensed a great wealth of idiomatic expressions linked to sugar and salt. Language has enriched itself with uncountable nuances expressing the perfidious discrepancies between appearances and intrinsic identity, or

fallacious reasoning provoked by things that don’t meet the eye.¹² The complexities and the richness of these idioms are augmented by the fact that they coincide with questions of taste and all the subjective connotations accompanying it: gustative, aesthetic, sentimental, choice of agency, values etc.

Sugar and salt seen as raw materials have a historical dimension. The historian cannot do other than remember that wars have been fought over the possession of salt-mines.¹³ The economy of nation-states was based on the wealth coming from such resources. A large part of the colonial quest was that for the acquisition of land, for the plantation of crops such as sugar cane. In South Africa, the history of the Natal province is heavily under the shadow of this aspect of colonization.¹⁴

Playing on an awareness of all these registers, Shadi, in her introductory notes quoted above, references the

chemical composition, carbohydrate versus mineral, which means that they are radically different on a molecular level stemming from opposite elemental sources. The two condiments are nondescript, colorless, odorless, inconspicuous, minute, neutral looking: an undefined mass of uniform granules – the individual grain loses its identity in a chemical all-over effect of sameness, almost like atoms before planets were formed. The only way to know which is which is by taking a leap of faith, and actually, physically tasting. In this playful video, can the viewer deduce that the “values” of sugar and salt are erected into monumental importance by some kind of nonsensical mocking “universal” wisdom? By the same gesture mocking the notion of “universal” itself? One minute colorless and inconspicuous grain of conglomerated atoms is able to subvert questions of planetary dimensions.

LIKE LICKING YOUR MOTHER TONGUE

Subversion comes in many different forms in Lerato Shadi’s work. Wording, for example, is in Setswana, her mother tongue. Throughout the years she has consistently explored the literalness of the idiom “mother tongue” by a long series of performances with the title *Leleme* (2014).¹⁵ In these performances – sometimes referred to as dance solos – movement, skin, the entire body seems to become a tongue-like organism. Shadi speaks of the physical experience of language in the colonized situation – the experience that she describes as the obligation to “use foreign language to write yourself”.¹⁶ She has enacted extreme performances where the body is put to the test as to its ability to stretch and bend to the demands of such an exercise. These writing performances last for several days, and sometimes oblige the viewer to

perform the same gesture.¹⁷ In other performances Shadi has enacted and materialized the gesture of breathing by capturing six hours of her exhaled breath in balloons. The balloons or breath (supposedly also the breath of the speech act) progressively invade the space shared with other humans.¹⁸

One recent video work, *Moremogolo (Go betlwa wa taola)* (2016)¹⁹ juxtaposes three striking images: the artist swallowing earth to the point of gagging on it, a red figure, the dancer/choreographer Sello Pesa, a spirit of resistance in skin-tight costume erring in a landscape, and, thirdly, the artist winding a length of red thread around her tongue until the mouth is filled with it (fig 7 and 8). Just when the onlooker fears that she will not be able to breathe, the artist spits out the formless mass of thread. Thread as a metaphor for language has come up in a great number of Shadi’s works. The trilogy of images in *Moremogolo* references practices for punishing and dominating slaves and their cultural identity, of which mouth and language are central. Shadi had read that slaves had been known to swallow earth in order to commit suicide. The slave owner would endeavor to prevent this loss of capital by covering the mouth of the slaves with a mask. In *Moremogolo*, questions of mother tongue acquire dramatic connotations, but, as announced right from the start in Shadi’s abstract introducing *Sugar & Salt*, this dark side is left “off screen”. This space beyond the frame is where Shadi positions a noteworthy part of the interaction.

In the video *Sugar & Salt*, Shadi does not provide a translation for the words a smiling mother and daughter speak to each other. The first images of the video show only the red symmetrically patterned background and we hear the voices of the performers, before mother and daughter enter the frame. The film ends with a similar empty image and the same off-screen voices. This is what Shadi refers to as the two “vanishing points”. By not translating the dialogue, pronounced in a language that the major percentage of the general art-going public does not understand, she confronts the spectator with an unmediated situation (a form of interaction that Shadi has developed in a performance she calls *u’titled* (2013)).²⁰ The onlooker might experience this gesture as violent: a violent exclusion. Or, at any rate, he/she will feel excluded if his/her opinion is that art is supposed to do everything in its power to be understandable, to communicate clearly and deliver an unequivocal message. Within the complex cultural landscape of South Africa, a country which since 1994 counts 11 official languages, a country where the choice of language as teaching medium has lead to protests with lethal consequences in 1976 and which since 2015 experiences a resurgence of the same frustration in the form of country-wide student protests, the concept “mother tongue” holds connotations of pent up emotional exasperation.²¹ Within this turmoil Shadi positions herself resolutely as a member of the Setswana culture, staging her point of view from a humorous inter-generational perspective.

Recent contributions by two unrelated bodies of research by Barbara Cassin²² and Carli Coetzee²³ have explored the fertile phenomenon of the untranslatable. Coetzee identifies the gesture of enduring and tolerating the untranslatable as an activist attitude, interpreting a gesture resisting the impulse to translate as a brave stance, admitting the underlying frustration held in the incompatibility of culturally loaded situations. The true work of “ending” Apartheid can only begin if we admit to these mutually incompatible needs inherent in use of language. Cassin’s latest book has the title “*Éloge de la traduction*” but is actually a treatise in praise of the untranslatable and the unknowable.

Lerato Shadi puts it more bluntly: “You do not get to demand an explanation”²⁴, signifying that you do not get to colonize²⁵ the meaning of this piece. It is a question of power relations: the colonizer has always reserved the right to define culture and knowledge, and to oblige his subjects to express themselves in his idiom. In this case the receptive onlooker may read that, if a translation is not forthcoming, he/she will then have to pay attention and do the guesswork. In *Sugar & Salt* the absence of translation does not have an aggressive undertone, conveying instead an atmosphere of tenderness and togetherness, it is possible to imagine the meaning of the words: gentle complaint, poking fun, tasting. *Sugar & Salt* takes the question of language specificity to the home front; Shadi insists that the textile background should reference an indoor situation. She actually chose this exact red tissue because it is one used by both herself and her mother.²⁶ She could not even remember who had owned it first. The dialogue (and fun-making) operates over the generation gap while it also seems to feed on it. Each protagonist inhabiting one half of the frame becomes a mirror image of the other. Identified by Shadi as two vanishing points, this choreography introduces the idea of a perspective that might span several generations. Shadi has spoken of her great-grandmother in this context²⁷, becoming aware of the fact that her ability to celebrate world-acclaimed personalities like Nelson Mandela is for her subject to the fact of celebrating her own ancestor, who is of the same age group as Mandela. In the video the artist and her mother stand for the long line of female ancestors who carried the lineage over generations and through the very daunting years of Apartheid. Shadi is very conscious of the fact that she would not have been standing here if it were not for the courageous day-to-day survival of her ancestor. Lerato Shadi specifies that sugar is being licked off the mother’s tongue, and salt of the daughter’s, giving the more daunting task to the elder family member. Obviously the plot of this film was the daughter’s idea, but the mother seems to take advantage of the situation by slipping in advice (... about nutrition? ... some philosophy about sugar and salt? – The non-Setswana onlooker can only guess). At the end of the six minutes it is the mother who assumes the role of the director, adopting the language of cinema she announces “cut”, the daughter acquiesces “cut”.

REDNESS

Seeing that the non-Setswana onlooker does not understand the meaning of the verbal exchange, the comical does not rely on the wording – even though the protagonists poke fun at each other, the wording or their wittiness does not add to the funniness of the situation. In absence of semantic understanding the onlooker pays more attention to other forms of expression, turning to something that overrides spoken language. As mentioned above, he/she is obliged to depend on body language, facial expression, previous gustative experience and known language idioms. Attention is drawn to the signification of color.

Asked to contribute remarks on her consistent use of the color red in her work²⁸, Lerato Shadi points out that red is connected to the corporal, the physicality of the body and, thereby, to blood. This aspect connects it to violence. She means violence in many forms: everyday racism, common misogyny, when we feel discrimination as a violent physical blow. This violence goes like a thread through work and thought. It is the same violence that prompts Shadi to resist translation altogether, when it is not possible to translate the lived experience behind a specific word.

Another South African, Zakes Mda (1948)²⁹, has used red as a consistent metaphor throughout the novel *The Heart of Redness* (2002). Mda opposes “redness” as a metaphor of African traditional culture and identity to the colonizer’s unmindfulness and translates it into a positive affirmation of African identity and, on the representation level, into a self-image. Humor in his novel bears many parallels with Shadi’s approach. Society in *The Heart of Redness* is split amongst “Believers” and “Unbelievers”, carrying their deliberate obstinate disagreement to a high level of absurdity. The two fighting family factions disagree throughout the complex history of pre-colonial Africa, the colonial period, Apartheid (which Mda refers to as the “middle generations”), and finally post-Apartheid South Africa. Maintaining the rancor spanning several generations, Mda exposes nonsensical systematic opposition as unsustainable within a changing society as a steadily argued point of view may have the opposite effect two generations later (crossing it out so to say). By this interweaving gesture Mda operates a systematic breakdown of dualistic thought patterns.

BEYOND BINARIES

After all this, can we still speak of sugar and salt as a binary? Comically speaking: is it not a false binary, seeing we cannot tell them apart? Dualisms are of course at the heart of the segregated Apartheid society, and today’s South Africans still carry this legacy. But young artists seem to work at perfecting the art of transforming dualisms into triads, triangulating past feuds, working at an enacted, embodied form of wisdom³⁰. *Sugar & Salt* starts from a binary witticism (mineral versus carbohydrate) and progressively disrupts the power of language, making nonsense abound with sense in an embodied comedy



fig. 7 and 8) “Moremogolo (Go Betlwa Wa Taola)”: video-stills, Lerato Shadi, (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) – 2016

(body-language and facial expression). Humor in Shadi’s work relies on three elements: generation, language, and “redness”. Shadi seems to say three things within the interwoven interplay of these three, not one of them can be removed without the comic collapsing. To achieve this triangulation or multiplication, this essential complexification, Shadi joins a long line of female artists who are aware of the revolutionary power of laughter.³¹ Laughter becomes a metaphor for radical transformation: the

viewer must want, at least briefly, to emancipate him- or herself from “normal representation”. Laughter is first and foremost a communal response. Humor is used as a trigger, a method to startle the onlooker out of his/her own personal cultural comfort zone: values and tastes are passed from one generation to the next – in *Sugar & Salt* this is acted out literally, almost as though it were a cultural misunderstanding: a way with words is put to the test by gustative taste, an essentially bodily experience. ●

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Lerato Shadi, Johannesburg/Berlin – 2017 | studio@leratoshadi.art

1. This phrase is an adaption of an expression by Lerato Shadi quoted by Kwanele Sosibo: “literal licking of one’s mother tongue”. See K. Sosibo, “A history of violence - Lerato Shadi’s work asks: Are we really a ‘post’ colony?”, in: *Mail&Guardian*, 14 Sep 2016, see: <https://mg.co.za/article/2016-09-14-00-a-history-of-violence-lerato-shadis-work-asks-are-we-really-a-post-colony> (last accessed 7 June 2017).
2. Artist’s notes to accompany the Video *Sugar & Salt*, published as a PDF-file available on Lerato Shadi’s website: <http://leratoshadi.art> (accessed 10 July 2017)
3. Shadi herself seems careful not to give interpretations of her short filmic essay beyond what she has written in this abstract. Telephone interviews with the author 7 June 2017 and 5 July 2017.
4. This tendency can be observed even in works form pre-1994 see R. van Wyk, “The (Non)sense of Humour, Art, subversion and the quest for freedoms”, in: *Visual Century, South African Art in Context*, Volume Three, 1973-1992, M. Pissarra (ed.), Johannesburg, 2011, p.156-179.
5. A work by Willem Boshoff with the provocative title *Racist in South Africa* (2011) created such a scandal when it was shown at the 2015 Venice Biennial.
6. This remark refers to painting by Brett Murray, *The Spear* (2011) caricaturizing the President Jacob Zuma and creating a media scandal in Mai 2012.
7. Particularly well-known humorous explorations of identity questions have been created by Athi-patra Ruga, Tracey Rose and Barend de Wet.
8. For example Robin Rhode
9. For example Moshekwa Langa
10. Donna Kukama has enacted post-colonial analysis of the art works of the world’s greatest at several Biennial openings.
11. J. Chevalier, A. Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire des*

- Symboles, mythes, rêves, coutumes, gestes, formes, figures, couleurs, nombres*, Paris, 1982, p. 858.
12. A very sensitive discussion on a translator’s forum, about the richness of these expressions, see: <https://www.quora.com/What-does-this-saying-mean-Dont-trust-everything-you-see-even-salt-looks-like-sugar> (last accessed 10 July 2017).
 13. As far back as the oldest accounts of the region, trade routes though the Sahara have been known to be established according to mythic sites like Taghaza, Taoudénit where salt mining and gold trade is closely linked to slave labor. Successive waves of wars have been fought over the possession of these mines these conflicts still persist today. See for example J. Jolly, *L’Afrique et son environnement européen et asiatique*, Paris, 2008; and J.-C. Hocquet, “Travailler aux mines de sel. Réquisitions, corvées, travail forcé et esclavage”, in: *Revue historique* 2006/4 (no. 640), p. 779-811.
 14. For a readily available source on the sugar industry in the Natal Province see: <http://www.sahistory.org.za/rise-sugar-industry> (last accessed 10 July 2017) - Literature on the central role played by sugar trade paired with the history of forced labor and slave trade in the history of empires and imperialism is prolific. Research by Elizabeth Abbott suggests the implication of Mahatma Gandhi into questions of human rights of indentured workers in the sugar plantations of Natal as the initial turning point in imperial history (E. Abbott, *Sugar: A Bittersweet History*, Toronto, 2008).
 15. See: <http://www.rdb.org/onfire/> (last accessed 13 June 2017)
 16. Public conversation between Lerato Shadi and Manori Neelika Jayawardane, “The beautiful ones will not be erased”, 8 July 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/LeratoShadiArt/> and <https://vimeo.com/180144606>, (last accessed 10 July 2017. Within the 90-minute interview, the remark is made at

- [00:22:15])
17. See *Seriti Se* (2016) and *Makhubu* (2014 and 2015), PDF published on http://www.leratoshadi.art/_files/LShadi_DocCV.pdf (last accessed 10 July 2017)
 18. See L. Shadi, *Hema (or Six hours of out-breath captured in 792 balloons)* (2007) in: *Mine*, A. Fourie, K. Gentric (eds.), Revolver Publishing, Berlin, 2013, 2013, n.p.
 19. http://www.leratoshadi.art/_files/LShadi_DocCV.pdf (last accessed 10 July 2017)
 20. *On u’titled* K. Gentric, « Project Mine », *afrikadaa, Be/National* hors série, 2013, p. 65-69, see: <http://issuu.com/afrikadaamagazine/docs/be-national?e=4280787/6664408>. (last accessed 10 July 2017)
 21. K. Gentric “Traduire comme pratique artistique, cinq propositions-interfaces en Afrique du Sud”, in: *Globalismes, Marges, Revue d’art contemporain*, no. 23, Paris VIII, Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2016, p. 74-85.
 22. B. Cassin, *Éloge de la traduction*, Communiquer l’universel, Fayard, 2016.
 23. C. Coetzee, *Accented Futures, Language Activism and the Ending of Apartheid*, Johannesburg 2013.
 24. L. Shadi Telephone interview 7 June 2017.
 25. Jayawardane uses this expression in the public conversation (L. Shadi, N. Jayawardane, 2016 [00:53:20])
 26. L.Shadi Telephone interview 7 June 2017.
 27. L. Shadi, N. Jayawardane, 2016 [00:25:10]
 28. L. Shadi, N. Jayawardane, 2016 [00:46:07]
 29. Z. Mda, *The heart of redness*, 4th impression, Oxford University Press South Africa, 2001.
 30. L. Shadi, N. Jayawardane, 2016 [00:28:19]
 31. J.A.L. Isaak, *Feminism and contemporary art: the revolutionary power of women’s laughter*, London, New York, 1997.

Sugar & Salt (2014), a video by Lerato Shadi, shows the artist and her mother, licking salt and sugar off each other’s tongues. The humor, of course lies in the literal interpretation of the expression “mother tongue”, the uncomfortable witnessing of the absurdly comic exercise of tongue licking accompanied by the protagonist’s facial expressions, reflexes triggered by the stimulation of their taste buds, provoking involuntary grimaces. Wording in Shadi’s work is in Setswana, her mother tongue, Shadi does not provide a translation; she confronts the spectator with an unmediated situation. Within the complex cultural landscape of South Africa, a country which since 1994 counts 11 official languages, a country where the choice of language as teaching medium has lead to protests with lethal consequences in 1976 and which since 2015 experiences a resurgence of the same frustration in the form of country-wide student protests, the word “mother tongue” holds connotations of pent up emotional exasperation. Within this turmoil Shadi positions herself resolutely as a member of the Setswana culture, discovering the revolutionary power of laughter, staging her point of view from a humorous intergenerational perspective. Humor in *Sugar & Salt* in a paradoxical contradiction aims at the complexification of binary thinking patterns.