



Documented Artistic Research Project
(Doctoral Thesis)

*This Untethered Buffoon or
the Trickster in Everything*

SQUIRM
the book

FRAGMENT
Nº 06.2

SATYRIC BODIES

*contemplating entanglements of the
personal, the poetic and the political
while clowning*

—
Stacey Sacks

Abb. 150.

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Cover Image

Front - Me as monkey in our lounge, Harare circa 1982.

Back - Baubo figurine from Priene, © Wikimedia Commons.

**‘To live in a country without
humour is unbearable.
But it is also unbearable to
live in a country where one
needs humour.’**

SCHECHTER
(1985, p.62)

1997. For the very first stand-up comedy gig I did in my early twenties, a spot at The Grand West Casino & Entertainment World outside of Cape Town, I learn my lines the way every good actor should. The room was packed with about 200 Afrikaans men wearing two-toned shirts. ‘It’s a corporate gig for farmers,’ I remember thinking immediately. I didn’t know much about the context, my acting agent had organised the work because she thought I was hilarious. There was an overwhelming scent of both stale and fresh beer, and the atmosphere was thick with the laughter of heavy-set men in short-sleeved collared shirts. They were chatting loudly over each other and the noisy din of the casino outside the conference room. Even though I’d lived in South Africa for several years, their language still felt alien to my Zimbabwean ears. I found the whole scene disconcerting, and was immediately worried about how my white/Jewish/lesbian/Zim material would go down. This didn’t feel like the kind of audience that was into identity politics.

In that instant, I remember being thrown back to family holidays at Kariba dam in the Zambezi river basin between Zambia and Zimbabwe. Holidays when inevitably some drunk Rhodie¹ boy would point and laugh at my pale skinny knock-kneed and hairy twelve year old legs. I was never the popular girl anyone pursued but rather the one they’d feel safe to drunkenly confide in, declaring their love for my best pretty friend, and would I organise them a date? The smell of beer puke and cruel laughter was all over those memories of family holidays at Kariba.

¹ A derogatory word for white people in Zimbabwe who still think of themselves as ‘Rhodesians’.

The MC introduces me as ‘the VERY FUNNY Stacey Sacks!’ and I wobble my way up steep stairs to the big empty stage, smiling graciously. Reach the mic, take it out its holster. Make eye contact with one of the rounded red-faced men in the front row. He’s looking at me directly, a questioning furrow in his brow. And I go blank. Totally, completely blank. I cannot remember the first line of my script, and because of that I can’t remember anything after it either. Having learnt it parrot-fashion (my entire British-based school education in a nutshell), everything went with the first line.

In these moments on stage, time extends. Each second stretches to an interminable horror. The panic. The true sense of panic. They are looking at me, I am looking at them. Even the waiters have paused and turn expectantly to look at me. I know in the expected script of this moment I’m supposed to make everyone laugh, this is a stand-up comedy gig after all. But. Just. Panic. And then, I don’t know why, but I start to do this very strange thing. It’s the thing that just bubbles up in my body and soul. I have no other ideas emerging, the seconds are becoming aeons, and I know there’s no easy way out of this traumatic moment, for any of us. The ‘very funny’ Stacey Sacks starts squawking like a chicken. My whole body goes into physical theatre mode and I become at first a very small, knock-kneed chicklet, buc-bucking my way hesitantly across the stage. Elbows jutting out at angles. Head bobbing back and forth, more like a pigeon, but thankfully no one’s judging the specificity of this bird impersonation.

‘Buk buk buk.’ No one laughs. The chicken grows more confident. Furrows grow deeper, the men are confused. And of course so am I. But I don’t know what else to do. I’d hoped the words would come but nothing’s happening. Realising the painful truth of the situation, I carefully place the microphone back while keeping the clucking going. As I edge towards the other side of the stage, heading for the steep steps down, the sound gets more intense and starts building towards a loud rooster’s, ‘KU-KU-RU-KURUUU!!’ At this moment I step off the stage and bob, jerk and peck my way along the incredibly long path between and around the tables, buk-clucking the whole way until finally I exit the room through the back doors, to no sound of laughter nor applause.

Upon entering the main hall of the casino, the sound of those machines magnifies tenfold. The deafening blips and bleeps, bongs and bells seem to mock me from every angle, the multi-patterned carpets loom up and down, zooming wildly in and out, I feel faint. In the horror of this hallucinatory moment, I feverishly turn to the blaring sounds of a gambling machine to the side, and am greeted there by the shining neon flashing sign on the screen: ‘GAME OVER!!’

Now I know that sounds like a constructed punchline, but it’s not. I have not fictionalised this story, not one tiny bit. With hindsight, I can see it’s all about context. If that was a different audience, another suburb, the cock would have gone down a treat. I would have received the laugh I was after, and jerked off a happy chicken. Ummm. That came out wrong, I meant off the stage, but I’ll leave it there as a dodgy yet unintentional joke. Immediately after that traumatic GrandWest experience, I remember not remembering driving home that night.

Soon after was the realisation that if ever I wanted to pursue a career in comedy, it was imperative to go up on stage again, and quick. Which I did, this time at a much more queer-friendly, multi-racial spot – well, comparatively – called the Armchair Theatre in Observatory, one of Cape Town’s bohemian areas. There the crowd understands and appreciates my actual material which I learn not to learn off-by-heart. Only years later I discover the connections of the rooster with historical notions of the Fool, particularly from William Willeford’s *The Fool and His Sceptre: A Study in Clowns and Jesters and their Audience* (1935, p.12):

And the ‘cock’ with which fools are often identical is also a figure of the phallus, as in the mad Ophelia’s, ‘Young men will do’t, if they come to’t; / By Cock, they are to blame’ (Hamlet, IV. v. 57-58).

Contemplating my first stand-up experience from the vantage point of this research, it's easy to see how the trickster was at play. Lewis Hyde (1998, p.7) has written that the 'trickster is the embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox'. Dwelling within and across boundaries, the trickster opens up spaces for surprise. As a recurring figure in human cultures and mythologies, this makes it a perfect ethnographic and transcultural symbol through which to explore the transformative powers of clowning and play, especially when confronting such heavy topics as cultural decimation, colonial wounding, and collective and personal trauma.

Clown pedagogue and teacher Giovanni Fusetti has a lecture-performance entitled 'The Sublime Stupidity: Theatre Clown and the Essence of Physical Comedy' (2008), in which he calls the clown 'a very precise and rigorous poetical dis-order'. Here, in the university, I wonder if it's the most ridiculous notion to produce knowledge through clowning? And the answer comes: yes, it is, and that's why I trust it. Not that I'm working in any puritanical way with performing clown. I think of my clowters as performing hybrid bodies, as 'complex, networked, and political assemblages, which extend beyond the human as a distinct, sovereign figure' (Condit & Kellokumpu 2019), but also as receptacles or containers of human history, of other epochs and temporalities brought to this present of the current encounter. As much as I like to play and connect, I've been trying to undo my comedy learning – habitual patterns, which demand that I entertain the audience in some way, or at least make them laugh. It's painful to be a comedian and to shut up the desire to make your audience laugh.

In *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*, Henry Miller (1948, p.46) writes:

A clown is a poet in action.

Paraphrasing Miller, the clown is the story she enacts. It is the same story over and over – adoration, devotion, crucifixion. When it comes to an excavation of W(w)hiteness, sacrifice emerges as a necessary element. What would it mean to give up one's speech, for example, one's right to speak, for a while.

Contemplating Miller's line 'a clown is a poet in action', I wonder how the shape or gesture of a clown is a poem in space? Can their silhouette activate a visceral response in the body, a knowing or quickening, the way poetry does? Succinctly sharp and distinct in its structure, yet dark like a shadow must be? Given the same quality of light, all shadows – of trees, insects, rabbits or cyclists – have the same shade on concrete. Can poetic comedy occupy a structural, dependable space in materiality as well as our psyches? Are the tongues and temporary, soft and disappearing sculptures emerging through this exploration poetic and emotional objects in space? Are they clowning poetically, sculpturally, politically? The poem as the infinite imaginary and generative space, capable of shape-shifting and manifesting polyphonic forms without losing political agency. In the essay 'Poetry is not a luxury', writer, feminist and civil rights activist Audre Lorde (1984, p.37) writes:

I speak here of poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word poetry to mean – in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight.

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action.

I like to believe poetic registers produce politics through encounter, engagement and play. But still, how do satire and parody count as political resistance, and can resistance in this case be poetic? What does mockery of colonial logic actually do and how or when is parodic distancing a contestation of authority and power? When my parodic performances generate laughter, am I using humour as a ‘device of subversion and protest’ (Boskin 1997, p. 38)? There’s little way to tell.

For almost two decades now I’ve been birthing poetic clowns through this particular hump of flesh, this little lump of muscle, gristle, veins and memory, this lumpy bit of humanity held together by skin labelled ‘me’ a short while. As a performer engaging with trickster and buffoon, I must ask, what harm does offence cause? Contemporary satire has as its general rule to ‘punch up’, not down. This relates to a phrase I encounter while performing with *Clowns Without Borders* – Swedish chapter: ‘comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable’.²

But comedy doesn’t always punch up; there are always stand-up comedians like Andrew Dice Clay in the late 1980s challenging political correctness, pushing the boundaries of the right to freedom of expression. David Chappelle launches a special on Netflix in 2019 called ‘Sticks and Stones’ where, in traditional trickster style, he consciously and expertly navigates uncomfortable territory. Unapologetically labelling himself a ‘victim-blamer’, he hacks through political correctness, impersonates Chinese people, disbelieves Michael Jackson’s rape accusers: ‘Well what were those kids wearing at the time?’ And reinforces all kinds of dodgy ethical perspectives: ‘I know more than half the people in this room have been molested in their lives. But it wasn’t no goddamned Michael Jackson, was it?’ Audiences love it while critics despise the show. If anything, D.T.’s America has made offence great again, paving the way for the rollback of political correctness, which isn’t necessarily a bad thing for comedians. Thankfully there’s also Hannah Gadsby whose astute and healing comedy provides the antidote and balance to this negating form of humor. Gadsby’s sense of humanity, ethical clarity and radical kindness, primarily to themselves, offers a healing serum to counteract Chappelle’s necessary poison.

But back to this artistic research project which conjures trickster energy as it attempts to widen the clown genre in this geo-political context, questioning how or when or if poetic gestures can become political with ramifications affecting the so-called ‘real’ world.

Apparently 20,685 papers on academia.edu discuss ‘Philosophy of laughter’. It will do this project no good to regurgitate all that here, everything is freely accessible online. But particularly important to this excavation is Mikhail Bakhtin’s argument that parodies are latent in the original, as he says (1981, p.53):

It is our conviction that there never was a single strictly straightforward genre, no single type of direct discourse - artistic, rhetorical, philosophical, religious, ordinary everyday - that did not have its own parodying and travesty double, its own comic-ironic *contre-partie*.

I’ve been exploring parodies as shadows of the original in all these multi-modal forms, trying to understand in a deeper embodied way what parody and mimicry really feel like, from inside the praxis, within this particular body of maker/receiver, while simultaneously searching for methods to escape the narrow confines of ‘representation’. Here parody emerges as a potential experience of ‘being with’, or walking alongside, in this way disrupting these normative notions. But clearly it’s not only about being alongside, it’s also in some cases a question of being possessed by that which presents itself, finding space to dwell within it as well as negotiating methods to move out of its way, making space for organic evolutions. This synthesis of being simultaneously container and contained, host and guest, emerges as a fertile conceptual framework for my thing-ing. There is a multi-directional polylogue at play here.

² A version of that quote was first used in the 1890s by satirist and writer Finley Peter Dunne referring to the duty of newspapers to the people. In 1997, justice warrior Cesar A. Cruz popularised the quote once more.

Susan Stewart (1993, p.104) situates this ambiguity succinctly:

The body presents the paradox of contained and container at once. Thus our attention is continually focused upon the boundaries or limits of the body; known from an exterior, the limits of the body as object; known from an interior, the limits of its physical extension into space.

The grotesque of Bhaktin's carnivalesque offers a release from this bondage, freeing the human body from the boundaries ordinarily prescribed by social etiquette, releasing the lower body – the belly, genitals and anus – from their subjection to the intellect and the spirit (Bakhtin 1984, p.21). Stewart's (1993, p.105) reflections on Bhaktin's notion of the 'body in the act of becoming' (Bakhtin 1984, p.317) are worth quoting here as I try to more deeply understand the resonances of my clowning in its myriad manifestations:

The grotesque body, as a form of the gigantic, is a body of parts. Those productive and reproductive organs which are its focus come to live an independent life of their own. The parading of the grotesque is often the isolation and display of the exaggerated part. ... This scattering and redistribution of bodily parts is the antithesis of the body as a functional tool and of the body as still life, the classical nude. ... But the grotesque presents a jumbling of this order, a dismantling and re-presentation of the body according to criteria of production rather than verticality.

For Bakhtin (1984, pp.11-12), animosity and derision are key features of carnival's festive laughter: 'this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival.' But perhaps enough from Bhaktin right now, it's possible he's received enough attention in academia. In the spirit of re-centering womxn's deep sensual knowledge and pleasure, and in the spirit of reclaiming comedy as womxn's domain, for the purposes of this moment, rather let's thing with

BAUBO.

Baubo is the original comic.

Baubo is the dirty goddess.

Baubo makes you laugh until you're wet.

Everyone should know about Baubo.³



Greek terracotta figurine of Baubo with a torch.
Photo: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource NY

³ I am indebted to artist and film maker Sarah J. Browne for re-introducing me to Baubo during our collaboration on her film *The Shambles of Science*.

Martini Fisher (2018) explains how Baubo was discovered:

In 1898, a group of German archaeologists working in the Demeter sanctuary at Priene unearthed a peculiar set of Hellenistic female figurines. The head of each of these figurines sits directly on her legs. Each figure also has long hair that drapes around her back resembling a lifted veil. These figures represent Baubo, sometimes referred to as lambe. Homeric legends identify her as a daughter of Pan and Echo.

The summary of Kaela Kory's 1999 PhD dissertation *Baubo: A Depth Psychological Study of a Female Fool* briefly situates Baubo's relevance to both the healing and discomfiting aims of my project:

Baubo, is a crone trickster figure unique in Greek mythology. Old, sexually bawdy, and comically lewd, she has been called a belly goddess of obscenity. Yet Baubo appears in the myth of Demeter and Persephone as a vibrantly alive and compassionate nurse, the only character with the wisdom to understand Demeter's needs and the transformative ability to shift the fixity of the paralyzing depression which the goddess suffers after the loss of Persephone, her maiden-daughter-self. It is Baubo's jokes and bawdy gestures, which combine a feminine, Dionysian loosening power with a comic, trickster, transformative energy, that reverse Demeter's despair. Baubo's actions cause a belly laughter that provides a distance from ego concerns and a comic' affirmation of hope. The figure of Baubo reflects three particular aspects of human existence: old age, female sexuality, and transformative personal power. Her image portrays an archetypal wild-woman energy that simultaneously represents the comic Dionysian crone, the non-procreatively fertile vulva, and the transformative trickster.

The reason I include Baubo here is for the way she synthesises the transformative and healing possibilities of the comic and the obscene. Perhaps buffoons and tricksters are the perfect bodies for exploring monstrosity and grotesque structures like the capitalist empire, systemic racism and White supremacy. Queens of ambiguity and kings of paradox, boundary dwellers, happiest in the in-between, that space academics love to call liminality. Buffoons as bodies of mockery, parody and satire combined. Buffoonery as clowning in anarchy, clumsy and sharp at the same time.

But again, still the question rises to the top, whose ends does mocking power truly serve?

In *Cheeky Fictions*, Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein claim that '[h]umour is a key feature, laughter a central element, disrespect a vital textual strategy of postcolonial transcultural practice' (2005, p.8). But what has emerged from humorous postcolonial critique to prevent the current proliferation of xenophobic, nationalistic, White supremacist belief?

In the introduction to *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*, Enid Welsford (1935/1966, p.xi) writes, 'Does comedy act on the spiritual system as a vitamin or as a narcotic?' For me, it's a bit of both.

Lecoq said, 'The clown needs no conflicts because he is in a permanent state of conflict, notably with himself (1997, p.159).' Perhaps these experiments point to an attempt to undo inner oppression, the most difficult habit to quit of all. Throughout this artistic research project, imagine this performing of memory, history and trauma as performing a necessary auto-healing that I'm hoping has wider resonances, an operation on a rotting tooth, a step towards removing toxic pus and sepsis, attempting to uproot and dislodge deeply embedded and decaying hegemonic structures.

Sad and deeply ironic is how these ideas of removal and purification could just as easily lend themselves to fascist logic. As Shirley Bassey (1997) sings, 'It's just a little bit of history repeating itself.'

Is this tautological PhD just an opportunity for sanctioned lunacy? Well, why not a bit of madness? Apparently the Venetians have a proverb:

**‘If they aren’t crazy,
we don’t want them.’**

MAZZONE-CLEMENTI & HILL
(2013, p.89)

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