Black Women Stage Directors in the White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage

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The Ministry of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (known today as the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture) developed the inaugural 1996 White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage around democratic ideals of inclusion, access and equal participation of everyone in South Africa's arts and culture landscape. Justifiably, the policy notes transformation of all arts and culture structures and institutions as a 'crucial' area, given considerable disparities that characterised apartheid society, arts and culture included. The policy's first revision published in 2013, indicates a clear language shift: the document scarcely refers to 'arts and culture', but rather 'cultural and creative industries', and with this semantic change, socioeconomic transformation - with an emphasis on economic growth - seems to have overtaken sociopolitical transformation, thereby indicating a neoliberal policy agenda. Revisions of the White Paper (2015, 2016, February 2017 and the October 2017 version that was adopted in 2020) have continued re-positioning arts and culture as a market-driven sector, prioritizing arts and culture's profitability. While this shift is understandable considering the enduring triple challenges of unemployment, inequality and poverty, which continue to plague mostly South Africa's Black African majority, from an intersectional perspective, it locates Black women practitioners specifically – as historically the most significantly marginalised group – obscurely, within a contemporary society still grappling with transformation: socially, politically and economically.

That the phrase 'Black women' is entirely absent across all White Paper versions, demonstrates a lack of intersectional awareness. This presentation analyses findings from a study where I investigated the number of practitioners according to race and gender that have occupied the key creative role of stage director across three of South Africa's five state-funded theatres, namely Playhouse (Durban), Artscape (Cape Town) and Market Theatre (Johannesburg), over a contemporary 20-year period (1999-2018). My findings indicated that Black women (inclusive of African, Coloured, Indian) consistently comprised the fewest number of directors that accessed these theatres over this period. While the study included interviews with selected Black women directors to understand this group's limited access to

state-supported theatres, this presentation approaches this group's under-representation purely from a cultural policy perspective.

Through a content analysis of the White Paper, specifically the initial 1996 version, the first revision of 2013 and the effective policy of October 2017, language employed in its frameworks evidently neglects to facilitate the explicit inclusion of Black women practitioners. I am not proposing cultural policy as the sole reason for the under-representation of Black women stage directors at state-funded theatres, neither am I presenting it as the only solution to solving this paucity. However, I posit that it is the first step to understanding government's perception of this group of practitioners as it pertains to their role within the political imperatives of eliminating poverty, unemployment and inequality. A cultural policy framework that neglects to include Black women as an identifiable category and does not include an intersectional analysis of their experiences relegates this group of practitioners to the margins of an arts and culture landscape in a democracy.