

'I don't want to die with my hands up or legs open': Public Protests as Public Potentials - Kanya Viljoen (Heidelberg University)

This paper explores the eruption of public protests following the tragic death of Uyinene "Nene" Mrwetyana, utilizing an intersectional approach to understand how these protests function as public performances that seek to renegotiate collective identity and societal narratives. In August 2019, Mrwetyana, a 19-year-old University of Cape Town student, was brutally murdered, sparking a nationwide outcry against gender-based violence in South Africa. This event mobilized a collective response, with thousands taking to the streets, embodying their resistance through public demonstrations.

Drawing on Nira Yuval-Davis's (2006) theory of identity politics as narrative, the paper examines how the protests following Mrwetyana's death serve as a site for the re-narration of collective identity and societal values. These moments of performative assembly (Butler, 2015), of epistemic disobedience (Mignolo, 2009) or acts of activism (Madison, 2010), not only gather to communicate a collective demand, but to enact it, to become it.

By analysing elements of the protests that erupted after Uyinene Mrwetyana's violent death, including the phrases, imagery and space that was engaged during these moments of assembly, this paper illustrates how public demonstrations renegotiate narratives of gender, violence, and resistance. It considers how these performative acts disrupt the temporality of violence and the narrative surrounding it.

Ultimately, this paper aims to contribute to the understanding of how public protests act as dynamic sites of narrative renegotiation and reimagination, as sites of potential.