



Ngiyabonga belungu bami

By Phumzile Twala | Peer Reviewed

Abstract

Considering how Black People are often seen/unseen as a monolith of 'Black Bodies' in township spaces in South Africa, I attempt to unpack what it looks like for Black People to blend into or stand out from contradictory, collective-led definitions of who/what Black people are in these spaces. By exploring where the individual Black Self meets the collective and how this delineation is blurred, I aim to delve further into notions of individuality and how these seep into a real or

imagined whole. What does it take to be 'kasi'? Who wants to be known as 'kasi'? Who is 'uDarkie ekasi'? As an arts practitioner developing an interdisciplinary praxis, I'm keen to explore these kinds of identity politics through the lens of translanguaging and township-based experiences and expressions. My aim is for this text to offer alternative insights into the intersection of 'Black Bodies,' the various notions associated with how 'Black People' are perceived, and their self-perceptions within township spaces..

I want to begin this paper by sharing an anecdote about an experience that left me simultaneously amused and confused. It's essentially an invitation to search in between the margins and gaps that exist in the interrogation of gestures of a resistance towards rigid definitions of the Black Self. I am entering a re-imaginative space that mediates conceptions of Black personhood, the Black gaze, language, and the translation of the conceptual. I am offering some assertions, rather than fixed conclusions. The main idea I am grappling with is one of an unlanguage world of Blackness, an existence that defies strict definitions.

It's the social absurdity of it all (see Ndebele, 1984). That's what comes to mind when I recall the scenario. Except that unlike Njabulo Ndebele's assessment of violence and brutality that captures the imaginations of spectators, my reading of the scenario is mostly comical. Some of the contradictions of Black personhood in South Africa defy logic. Social activist and feminist bell hooks reminds us of the power in looking. Thinking about this scenario has made me look beyond the superficial and deeper as a way of understanding how some of these contradictions manifest in daily life.

In 1964, the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe wrote: 'For an African, writing in English is not without its serious set-backs. He often finds himself describing situations or modes of thought which have no direct equivalent in the English way of life.'

This is my problem exactly with this scenario. Some things just don't quite translate.

There I am, travelling from Emndeni to the Joburg CBD in a purple Quantum minibus taxi. The driver is a boisterous white man full of jokes. This scenario isn't very common and my sense is that I'm not the only one grasping for some kind of normalcy as I struggle to wrap my head around what I'm witnessing. I've seen him before as taxis whizz past one another as they near Booyens on the Soweto Highway – one arm dangling out the door, wearing ispottie (also known as a bucket hat in urban lingua franca), speaking loudly, and cursing at fellow abomageza¹ as they expertly weave the taxis between lanes. I'm at the edge of my non-four-four-masihlalisan² seat, anxiously waiting to see if it's going to happen. In a typical taxi trip scenario

in this context, what is generally used as a term of endearment from our beloved mdrayiseni³ when he wants to be polite and gracious is to refer to his paying customers as 'belungu bami'. Loosely translated, this means that he is referring to his passengers as 'my white people,' but in this context it alludes to the idea of people with power and financial muscle – bosses who are in control.

Now I don't know if I was surprised or sad when umjita⁴ didn't fulfil my fantasies. What I know for sure is that it made me take a second glance at the skin on my body, fully feel myself in it and soak in the lived experiences that come with it and left me pondering what a moment that I imagined happening would have looked like. I couldn't help but notice that with each story he told he kept peppering his sentences with the word 'singabantu,' as opposed to disassociating himself from a particular identity by saying 'abantu abamnyama'. At such moments, I'm drawn to the proverb 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu,' meaning that one's humanity is exalted through the grace of fellow human beings seeing one's humanity and by valuing the reciprocity of this relationship. The symbiotic bind that is forged when one sees the humanity in another should ultimately sustain the values that shape the existence of the collective. Philosopher Ndumiso Dladla writes extensively about the African philosophy of ubuntu and how it has been usurped in recent times to propel certain agendas in both academic and public discourse. He observes a pertinent and persistent trend in such discourse, which is that conceptions of ubuntu lack the recognition of *abantu*, the Bantu-speaking people whose philosophy it is (2017: 43).

What did umageza⁵ mean by the bold statement and (claiming of space) of 'singabantu'? Who are abantu to which he refers? His statement could mean, 'we are people' but it could also mean 'we are people, who are black'. The latter statement denotes a conception of a human being that author Panashe Chigumadzi (2021) describes as a social person who is always in a state of becoming. The former implies a simplified translation that is disconnected from the philosophy of Black personhood as defined by Bantu-speaking peoples. Why did umageza not identify as umlungu (white person)? Would this mean that he equates his personhood with the idea of something that is devoid of humanness – which is a perception in some African

societies. Chigumadzi also alludes to this in her article. What would this mean in this scenario? I don't have the answers but I am posing these questions as a way of probing further into ideas of the gaze in this specific context of Blackness interfacing with whiteness and its ideology.

Locating locations, the 'lokasi' and the oppositional gaze

iKasi⁶ is a place that at any given moment can be embraced or rejected. The same goes for identities associated with being from ekasi. For instance, being assumed to have limited thinking capacity because of exposure to life in only one area, being assumed to be dangerous, being poor and disadvantaged, and stereotypes such as being considered to be uncivilised and unruly. Ekasi, that which can't be expressed through the limits of language is reconfigured, reshaped and navigated anew through a different lens. The Black Self is constantly in flux. Here, the Black Self is always evolving. When seen in a certain light, ekasi uDarkie is iNgamla⁷. Here, the Black Self defines and redefines Blackness and is in a constant fight to be seen and unseen under different circumstances. Things are never simply black and white. One sees an image of who or what they are when they see another person. iKasi is a place where the Black gaze is a site of resistance, an oppositional gaze as posited by social activist and feminist bell hooks. It's a courageous navigation of the power of looking outward and inward.

In the essay 'We Blacks', activist Bantu Biko defines the essence of Black Consciousness and calls on the Black man to look inward and 'come to himself' (1978: 31). Biko's essay agitates for Black people to show the value of their own standards. This view is echoed by hooks who claims that the act of looking enables a coming home toward oneself (2003: 98). What does it mean for a person from ekasi to do this? It means enduring the unpleasant task of facing the various societal assumptions placed on their shoulders. The evergreen 'umuntu wase lokshin' is never too far from thought. This colloquial expression is laden with negative perceptions of a person from the location or township in this context, meaning one who is stifled by their conditions, limited in thought processes as a result.

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It's through such expressions that the idea of 'Black Bodies' becomes personified, a faceless amoeba of identities. The notion that the array of complexities within these spaces can be reduced to a single imagined one-size-fits-all 'being' or approach is something I find puzzling. Unlike Kerry James Marshall's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*⁸, painted on paper in egg tempera, featuring variations of black, when this limited monolithic view of Blackness occurs and Black people are not seen through the lens of multiple approaches as the people they are, but are reduced to 'Black Bodies', this well-meaning descriptor encompasses so much and yet simultaneously excludes so much. Witnessing and living through the sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit dynamic of belonging and rejection and of the individual versus the collective can be mind-boggling. As an arts practitioner developing a praxis based on community engagement and museum practice in township spaces in the South African context, my concern is the people living in these spaces and their claim to the narratives represented in historical museums in these spaces. My interest is in the idea of confinement interfacing with the defiantly uncontrollable nature of township living. My interest is in the refusal to conform to a formulaic approach that keeps reproducing a particular kind of narrative of stagnant Blackness. What happens in this space of ambivalence? How does this state of 'in-between' show up?

I'm interested in unravelling the curatorial attempts made to preserve certain narratives within these

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historical museums and how I can find ways of introducing more flexible modes of thinking around Blackness and how it is represented in these spaces. I'm interested in how this can continue to be interrogated, reclaimed and reconfigured by Black people in these spaces. How does the investment in the commodification of historical narratives of a particular kind of Blackness interface with the fragile community relations that tend to accompany the knowledge production process? What emerges when politics enforce the idea of a Blackness devoid of character, a distinguishable face or nuanced imagery? What keeps the Black Body so attractive, that it is revisited time and again through various forms of representation through art? How do we continue to language an unlanguage world of Blackness in these spaces? And how can knowledge producers avoid creating limited, static visual tropes of Blackness in township-based museums? In the taxi scenario related above, what emerges from the brief interaction is an example of how particular ideas of Blackness can influence how people perceive themselves and others.

At this pivotal moment in time, when so many people are sbaweling⁹ Black portraiture, what does it mean for the Black Self? One such example is a key moment within popular culture, when the release of the February 2022 edition of British *Vogue* magazine sparked controversy (see Mail Online, 2022). Featuring an array of black models, the cover was intended to celebrate the rise of African models and their beauty on a large scale.

The models' skin was edited to look darker, which seemed to irk many critics, who shared their negative opinions on social media. This is an indication of yet another wave of rising popularity of the representation of Black Bodies through imagery, how they are observed and how these images are both imbibed and rejected.

In 'The Role of the Writer in a New Nation', Achebe quotes Léopold Sédar Senghor's thinking, which supports the idea of Africans becoming 'producers of culture and not just its consumers' (1964: 13). This is a call for Africans to become more deliberate in using their sense of agency towards taking a more proactive role in how their personhood is represented. There's a lot that can be said about this statement regarding Blackness and the idea of Africanness, but I'd like to approach it from the point of view of the resurgence of Black portraiture's popularity. What exactly does this moment mean? Does the burden of Blackness cease to exist when Black people are creators and producers? Does Blackness become more substantive? What happens when the Black Gaze is internalised? In other words, what happens when Black people observe themselves in greater detail? hooks' theory of the oppositional gaze (2003) reminds us that there is a power in naming what is seen and interrogating it. The power in looking is expanded when this action of looking is turned inward and a courageous looking occurs, making the gaze a site of resistance – a resistance to inaccurate visual tropes and false representations of what being a Black person means. The politics of the act of looking as Black people is a complex topic, which I won't fully expand on here, but I do acknowledge that it informs the ideas to which I am drawn. My observation is that the beauty of the Black Self can't fully be captured or contained. Sitting in the potential discomfort of a space without clear definition may be exactly what is needed to retain a sense of reflexive approaches towards understanding and navigating the Black Self.

Interlude: Black is Beautiful

There's a specific image that always comes to my mind when I think of black portraiture and its many iterations within township spaces. It's an image that feels like home. It reaches out to you with warm, comforting hands and embraces you, allowing you to think that absolutely nothing can disturb the feelings

of peace and love that envelope you in that moment of gazing into it.

It's the popular mother and child image that has been revisited by the likes of artist Meleko Mokgosi. I stand corrected, but I think to this day it hasn't been uncovered who the original photographer of this popular image was. I'm left with so many questions about how this particular image ended up on the walls of so many Black homes ekasi, probably hung not too far from the portrait of a crying child (another popular one).

As a child growing up ekasi, I can't recall ever really paying much attention to this photograph because of how often my eyes landed on it when visiting different homes. I was always curious about why so many people owned it though. I think it's safe to say that I had a similar level of curiosity about the kind of frames I saw on the wedding portraits of so many elderly couples.

These images tended to all look the same to me: the oblong, octagon shaped frames would typically house the black and white portrait of the bride and groom in Western wedding regalia, showing their smiling faces (however, more often than not it would be straight-faced people staring back at you). It was almost a certainty: you would visit your friend's home and, on the mantle, or hanging above a doorway in the living room, this photograph would greet and stare back at you. Despite seeming to be uniform, each visual carried its own narratives, articulating the sensibilities and self-image of the Black populace of the time. My own attempts at finding out why the images were so popular didn't get too far, with the most reason given being that they were just fashionable. In my opinion, this points to what may be considered an appreciation for Black portraiture at the time.

Ngugi wa Thiongo (2009) writes:

'Images are very important. Most people like looking at themselves in the mirror. Most like to have their photos taken. In many African societies the shadow was thought to carry the soul of the person.'

Languages tend to carry a lot of power and are evolving repositories of customs, rituals and wisdom.

For instance, the words Ukuthwebula isithombe carry a dual meaning. In a literal sense, it means to take a photograph, but it's in the deeper meaning where one begins to understand what is meant by wa Thiongo. The intention that lies behind the word ukuthwebula is laden with undertones of darkness, taking one's essence, one's being – the taking of the soul (or perhaps, ubuntu babo).

Ubuntu bethu

My interest has been in exploring the intersection of 'Black Bodies,' and the various notions associated with how 'Black People' are perceived and their self-perceptions within township spaces. What shapes how some of these people think about themselves in these spaces? What informs how some of them see themselves? I'm interested in what that thought process looks like and how it shows up in a physical form. A typical 21st-century kasi conversation could go like this:

Darkie 1: Ey mara ntwana uDarkie uyohlala awuDarkie.¹⁰

Darkie 2: Smoko?¹¹

Darkie 1: iChiskop yasho ntwana... umn'tomnyama akafuni uk'bon' umn'tomnyama ayaphambili... mara why?¹²

Darkie 2: Fede outi yami. Yiwaar leyo.¹³

Darkie 1: Neh, ntwana... ithi ngik'lay'tise...Yazi thina aboDarkie sikhawatheke blind. Blind kabi! Iyinglamla zis'ncandele izinto ezibhaye, angali. Mara cava, ntwana nou di laas yithi esizikhawathayo.¹⁴

The conversation between these lamajita¹⁵ gives us a glimpse into some of the negative self-perceptions that one tends to encounter ekasi. My thinking is that their observations about fellow Black people ekasi are based on what they've seen, what they've lived through and what they imagine. They are both including and also excluding themselves from this narrative. Ithi ngik'layitise (let me enlighten you). Blind (To an extreme extent) but also a play on the idea of light and dark, in a sense that things are so bad that it feels like you are in complete darkness. The opening

statement that uDarkie uyohlala awuDarkie sets the scene for an ongoing lamentation festival, a dressing down of the Darkie mentality ekasi. The idea that can be articulated as a negative mentality of Blackness holding Black people back from moving forward.

There is a chapter in Mmatshilo Motsei's *Re-Weaving the Soul of the Nation* (2017) titled 'When Spider Webs Unite They Can Tie Up a Lion'. I'm drawn to this African Proverb as a way of understanding the idea of a collective consciousness. I'm keen to make sense of the idea of seeing and embracing a Black Self ekasi that comfortably co-exists within a collective consciousness of Blackness in this context. In other words, how much space is there for one to assert their individuality within the greater collective?

Musician and anthropologist Johnny Clegg writes: 'Identity in its most primitive expression is attachment' (2021). This attachment can be to family, to a community, or to an imagined nation because of shared values or ideals. Is this sense of attachment because of what one sees, recognises (and identifies with) in another? What determines the extent of attachment to or detachment from the Black Self that exists as a unit and within a broader community that is ikasi? There's a silent beauty in the undercurrents of how personhood is expressed ekasi.

My sense is that the Black Self in township spaces exudes a quiet confidence, supported by the awareness of the greater whole that exists. The Black Self embodies not only individual characteristics but carries external perceptions, gazes and assumptions. There is a lot that can be said about the persistence of whiteness even as Black people self-introspect and continuously assert themselves as they redefine their existence.

Ultimately, I am of the view that attempts at translating the conceptual expressions of Blackness and Black personhood shouldn't be limited to one perspective. It should be a continuous redefinition *in actu*. The crevices that exist in the unknown and misunderstood spaces should be recognised and utilised as prompts towards further probing of the human condition. The resistance to definition offers knowledge producers room for shifts in thinking, shifts in conceptions and shifts in modalities of creating new knowledge.

Notes

1. iScamtho (slang): refers to minibus taxi drivers.
2. iScamtho (slang) phrase referring to the act of seating four passengers per row of seats in a minibus taxi. This sometimes occurs even when the seat is designed to accommodate three passengers.
3. iScamtho (slang) word referring to a minibus taxi driver. The word alludes to the action of a circular motion, or to turn. The Afrikaans word for this is draai. The slang version is drawn from this word.
4. iScamtho (slang) word referring to a young man.
5. Mageza is a slang term in iScamtho, meaning 'taxi driver.'
6. iKasi is a word derived from the Afrikaans version of the word 'location'. 'Lokasie' has been used to describe living areas of non-white people under the apartheid administration. Kasi is a contraction of Lokasie.
7. iScamtho word referring to a white person.
8. Artist Kerry James Marshall produced the piece *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self* in 1980, when he was 25 years old. His subject matter derives from Black culture and stereotypes, as well as his own life experience.
9. iScamtho (slang) word drawn from isiXhosa slang meaning to desire something.
10. Loosely translated, meaning that a Black person will always be a Black person.
11. iScamtho word meaning: what is the problem?
12. Loosely translated, meaning that the kwaito group Chiskop told us [in their song]. The lyrics mention that one Black person doesn't want to see another Black person prospering and getting ahead in life.
13. Loosely translated, meaning: Oh well, it is what it is; that's true.
14. Loosely translated, meaning: No, my friend, let

me enlighten you. Black people are damaged. I acknowledge that white people have taken a lot from us [as Black people] but now we are the ones hurting ourselves.

15. Singular form is 'umjita', which is iScamtho for 'man'.

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