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Special edition by Ashraf Jamal and Sven Christian

The Thinker

A PAN-AFRICAN QUARTERLY FOR THOUGHT LEADERS

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In This Issue

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Prof Ronit Frenkel

The University of Johannesburg acquired *The Thinker* in April 2019 from Dr Essop Pahad. Over the last decade, *The Thinker* has gained a reputation as a journal that explores Pan-African issues across fields and times. Ronit Frenkel, as the incoming editor, plans on maintaining the pan-African scope of the journal while increasing its coverage into fields such as books, art, literature and popular cultures. *The Thinker* is a 'hybrid' journal, publishing both journalistic pieces with more academic articles and contributors can now opt to have their submissions peer reviewed. We welcome Africa-centred articles from diverse perspectives, in order to enrich both knowledge of the continent and of issues impacting the continent.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS EDITION - All contributing analysts write in their personal capacity

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BLACK SELF

Notes for a conversation

By Ashraf Jamal

When asked to convene a colloquium about something that, for me, defines the art world during this on-going pandemic, I thought of the obvious – revisionism in the West, and the stratospheric obsession/fetishization of the black body. Why, I wondered, is black portraiture 'a thing'? And why, of all people, was Amoako Boafo the most sought-after black portraitist in 2020? Why, at this historical moment, should the art world reclassify its driving concerns, rethink curation, staffing, education, and access? Because black art is the new frontier? Because of a seismic ethical shift, generated by the slaughter of blacks in America? Because the spectre of imperialism persists?

All of the above is relevant, but a deeper question and doubt persists: What constitutes blackness? Is it a category? Must it be championed reactively, progressively, conceived as a defining principle? Or is it not, rather, a cognitive limit: something which – despite the very real yet excessive claim to substance, 'I AM SOMEBODY' – refuses or escapes the declarative? Both Achille Mbembe and Frantz Fanon have noted a *zone of indistinction*, a terra incognita, a void, as an inextricable dimension of black being. This sensation or intuition is pervasive – it cannot be ignored in a humanist bid to reclaim black substance.

In 1980, Kerry James Marshall painted a self-portrait titled *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*. The painting is schematic – other than the white V of a vest, leering white teeth, and the whites of the eyes, the painting is black on black. The effect is crude, caricatural, obscenely vacant. 'One of the things I was trying to do was embody in a picture the concept that Ralph Ellison had laid out in his

novel *Invisible Man*,' says Marshall. 'He describes the condition of invisibility as it relates to Black people in America – this condition of being seen and not seen simultaneously.'

Marshall's portrait, and the concern it addresses, was the trigger and inspiration for a colloquium that I convened at Nirox and Columba in November 2021, as well as the accompanying publication, co-edited with Sven Christian. Titled 'BLACK SELF,' it includes a series of papers, initially delivered as talks, by Vusumzi Nkomo, Phumzile Twala, Hlonipha Mokoena, Thembinkosi Goniwe, Heather Hart, Bernard Akoi-Jackson, Nkgopoleng Moloi, Thulile Gamedze, Stacy Hardy, and Phokeng Setai. The overarching drive was to breach the divide between the void and selfhood, conditions mutually exclusive yet inextricable. Our concern: the interplay of visibility and invisibility – how and why a black person is seen by others, how black people see themselves. Much has been written on the matter, and much of it has been misunderstood, consciously or otherwise, in the bid to secure a predictive or essentialist construction of black identity. However, as Ellison's famous opening paragraph begins, 'I am an invisible man…I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fibre and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me… That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality.'

This observation, made in 1952, remains searingly significant today, not only because of ongoing inequality, the persistent invisibility of the black body within a controlling white optic, but because of the urgent interest in black art today – black lives, black bodies, black portraiture. What are we looking at when we look at black portraits? My android, attuned to my obsessions, never ceases to direct me to the latest revisionist exercise to foreground blackness, once redacted, erased from history. Is this cultural phenomenon symptomatic of the age – the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, the critical urgency for a new perception of humanity – or is it a symptom of an age-old struggle for selfhood, in a world in which black life – the black self – remains superfluous, inexistent, beyond humane cognition? It is not surprising that

> "What constitutes blackness? Is it a category? Must it be championed reactively, progressively, conceived as a defining principle? Or is it not, rather, a cognitive limit: something which – despite the very real yet excessive claim to substance, 'I AM SOMEBODY' – refuses or escapes the declara-tive?"

Marshall chose to paint his self-portrait in variations of black, a colour – rather than a non-colour – which articulates the precarity of black presence and self-presence. As Theaster Gates notes, 'If Blackness has something to do with the absence of light, does Black art mean that sometimes I'm making when no one's looking? For the most part, that has been the truth of our lives.'

And now, in a historical moment when black portraiture is being spectacularised? When it is avidly sought after and monetised? When, as though for the first time, the black body is being seen? What now? How do we address this objectification and fetishization of the black body? As for the artists of Black America and the African diaspora who are being celebrated – what do their works tell us of this moment? As for artists of the African continent? Do they exist only once they've developed a Western interface? What of indigenous thought? Is there such a thing? Is indigeneity not a variant of essentialism – an imperial, secular, and religious project, designed to globally imprint whiteness as the imprimatur of existence and being, and blackness as beyond the pale?

Is the sovereignty of whiteness in decline? Is hybridity the new norm? If so, where does this place blackness? If eugenics was always profoundly corrupt, surely any other rationale for parsing humanity according to some genetic or biocultural inheritance is equally so? Sticking with blackness, to what extent is it over-

exposed and poorly understood? How opportunistic, how authentic, is this moment of black portraiture in the art world, and can it be separated from a broader cultural life? Is the trade in black bodies durable? Can one consider black portraiture a genre? If blackness is the thing, how does it express its substantiveness, its meaningfulness? How is blackness *seen*? What of the light, denied the black body?

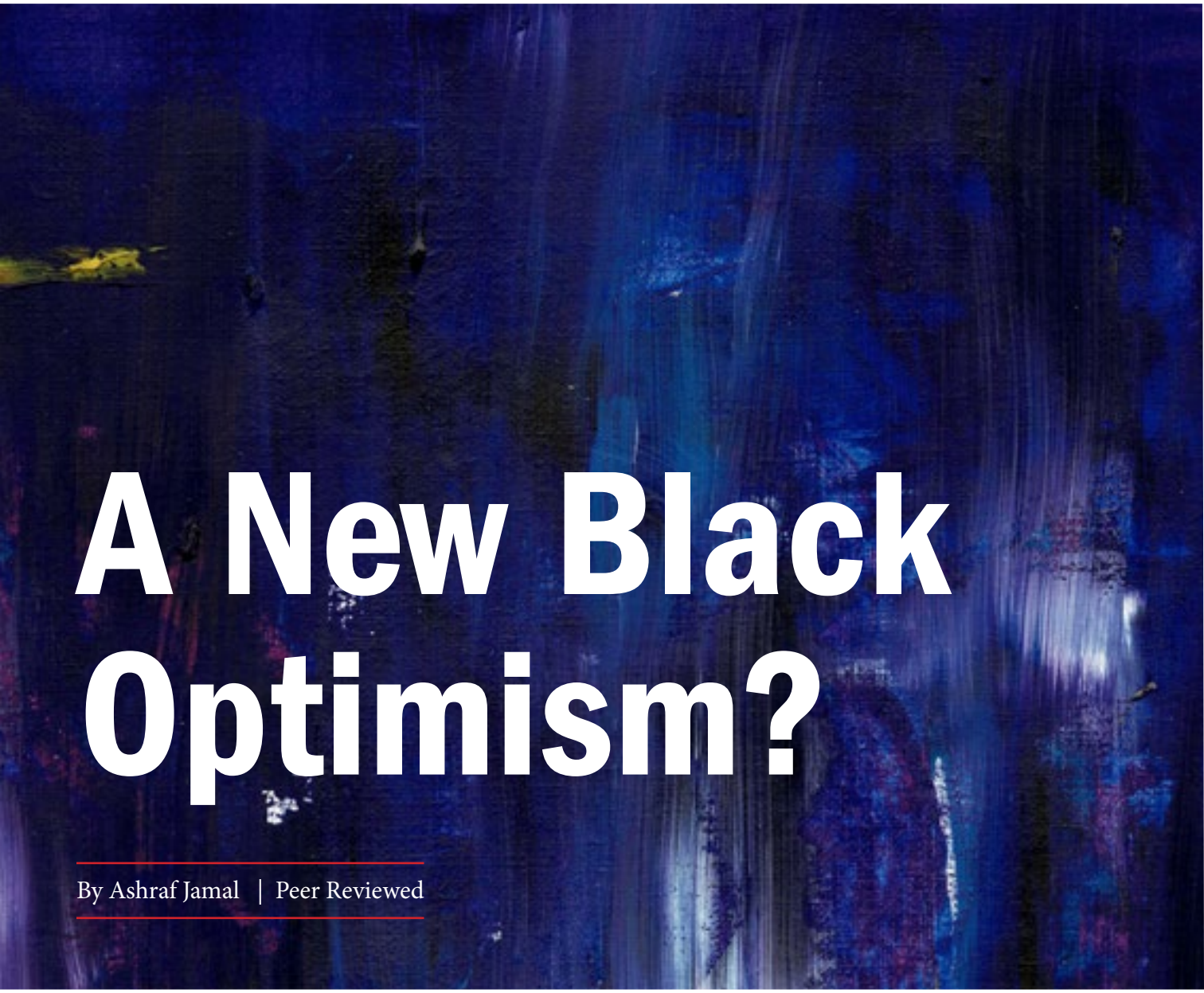
'Until we own the light, I'm not happy,' Theaster Gates resumes. 'Until we're in our own houses of exhibition, of discovery, of research – until we've figured out our way to be masters of the world, then I'd rather work in the darkness…My fear is that we're being trained and conditioned to only make when there's a light. And that makes us co-dependent on a thing we don't control. Are you willing to make in the absence of light?'

This historical moment is a complex one, especially so regarding the Black Self and its representation in art. What I ask of you, the reader, is to continue to reflect on darkness and light, the void and its imagined inverse, the black body as a thing, an idea, a dreaming tool, a possibility, and a reality. What of the veracity or continued inexistence of black being? What is the purpose of portraiture, traditionally the province of the wealthy and powerful, now in the public domain? What happens when one looks upon a black body in an art museum today? What do we see? Ourselves? An unbreachable Other? A fretwork of guilt and conscience? A liberation?

There are many artists one can turn to, amongst them Zanele Muholi, Amoako Boafo, Nelson Makamo, Titus Kaphar, Kerry James Marshall, Kehinde Wiley, Amy Sherald, Billie Zangewa, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, to name a few. What happens when one encounters one of these celebrated artists? I'd venture that our experiences are very different. This is because there is no such thing as 'Black Art', or rather, no essential category as such. In a book which never ceases to astonish me, Achille Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason* (2017), the author reminds us that 'the word "Black" refers first and foremost to a phantasmagoria… The process of transforming people of African origin into Blacks, that is, into bodies of extraction and subjects of race, largely obeys the triple logic of ossification, poisoning, and calcification. Not only is the Black Man the prototype of a poisoned, burnt subject. He is a being whose life is made of ashes.'

Is black portraiture a pile of bones, a heap of ashes? Is the project poisoned at its core? Or am I being too bleak on God's day? Then again, this is an op-ed; one is expected to think aloud, and I was asked to reflect upon what is exercising me. Certainly, I'm drawn to the profound tenderness of Yiadom Boakye's paintings, sceptical of Amy Sherald's fantasy that a greyscale amounts to some relative neutrality, moved to the core by the deepest black which Marshall uses to colour his bodies, averse to the pop and populist artifice deployed by Wiley, magnetically caught up in the deconstructed rigging of Muholi's self-portraits, in love with Zangewa's private pleasures, exposed to the world.

You, dear reader, will have a very different view. At this critical moment, I ask only that you are exacting in your analyses of the cultural phenomenon dubbed Black Portraiture. There is much that must be thought and written in our collective and singular attempts to grasp the significance and nature of the Black Self today. What are we to make of dealerships across Africa and the Western world? Are we in the midst of a new slave trade, or are we witnessing a fundamental, epistemological shift in insight and reception? How opportunistic are the changes we see about us, how real? Whatever one chooses to focus on, remember that one's focus is caught in a greater complex. You may wish to challenge the spotlight fixed upon Black Portraiture, withdraw into the night-world of a voided black identity, or, like the Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison, you may choose to 'play in the dark.'



A New Black Optimism?

By Ashraf Jamal | Peer Reviewed

Abstract

For all the opportunistic and/or pathological expressions of black life today, and the celebratory glow which surrounds it, there remains an art that is irreducible to the conflicts of its time, even when it galvanises its urgencies. In this paper I note the exceptionality of Henry Ossawa Tanner, who captured the tenderness and profundity of familial love, and the importance of mutual care—a deep humanitarian seam which ran counter to the racism of the time. I point to the missteps of Titus Kaphar and Kehinde Wiley, the ingenuity of Kerry James Marshall, the sublimity of Lynette Yiadom Boake. Finally, and fundamentally, I ask you to reconsider the persistently misunderstood and misperceived South African painter Nelson Makamo. If his children possess an oneiric quality, it is not because they are projected fantasies, but because they are dreams realised in this future-present moment—as treacherous as it is generative.

There is no doubt that at this historical moment, contemporary African art, and art of the African diaspora, has assumed a preeminent place in Western taste. It would seem that there is no greater currency in the contemporary art world than black skin. I refer here not only to the content of art – black bodies, black faces – but to the artists who are now lauded. Witness the meteoric rise of Amoako Boafo, the celebratory reappraisal of Kerry James Marshall, or the iconic stature of Zanele Muholi – none other than a Black Madonna. Interest is growing rapidly, the market expanding, with black portraiture now also infiltrating the Asian market. As to what this new economy signifies, I cannot quite say. I remain unclear and unresolved in my view, though the hyper-visibility of black artists, and black portraiture in particular, is indisputable.

A case of reconciliation? A need to right a historical wrong, reboot the art canon, ensure diversity and inclusivity? Certainly. For doubtless, we are dealing with a seismic shift in the art world, rather than a mere trend. Beneath the exploded view that is black portraiture lies an existential quest to rethink the Human. As Steve Bantu Biko declared in *I Write What I Like*, Africa would give the world a 'more human face' (1987: 47). Africa, and the African diaspora, is not the last frontier of the art world but its frontline. As such, it is a critical matter of concern, a vital way to rethink the obscenity of colonialism, which persists today. To speak of 'a new black optimism,' therefore, is to address the reconfiguration of the black body, while at no point suppressing the complexity of its emergence. Art is never a single story, never an innocent representational economy. What especially interests me – in the thicket of contesting strategies and expressions – is the work of artists able to simultaneously embrace and transfigure the burden of black history. In this regard, the painters Henry Ossawa Tanner and Nelson Makamo are exemplary. It is the stories they tell, the ways in which those visual narratives are put together, that deserve our attention. Neither is an exhibitionist, neither is a reactive or aggrieved polemicist. Rather, theirs is a subterranean force. What particularly struck me, on encountering their paintings, was their treatment of children who, historically, have suffered profoundly within a Western optic and painting tradition. In this regard, it is the painting of black children that assumes centre-stage.

I have addressed this matter at greater length in 'Giants' (2017) and 'Children of the Dream' (2022), in which I wager that the idealisation of children is all too often accompanied by perversity, certainly in their rearing in the West. The repressive cliché, 'children should be seen and not heard,' is but one of many aspects of systemic cruelty. Clear delineations of space, power, and the body (which either possesses rights or does not), are central to systemic control. Tracking systemic oppression from the 18th century onwards, Michel Foucault notes: 'Schools serve the same functions as prisons and mental institutions – to define, classify, control, and regulate people' (Saneei, 2018). This is also the case regarding systemic racism. By foregrounding the corruptive treatment of all those deemed Other – children, blacks, the insane and criminal – we begin to see the neurotic power required to standardise normalcy, whiteness, and by extension, the critical role that aesthetics – and a cultural economy more generally – plays in the consolidation of a series of punitive binaries designed to ensure the perverse valorisation and damnation of those who occupy the margins. For if children are routinely abused, they are as routinely exalted and enshrined. This paradoxical damnation of children, and their exploitation as a trope for futurity, reaffirms the insidious nature of adult authority – the child, in the circuitry of human exchange, rendered forever the surrogate, adjunct, oracle, boon, and curse of the adult. That the same can be said for the construction and representation of the black person and body is, if we concur with Foucault's economy of Othering, unsurprising. However, as I've noted at the outset, we are witnessing a profound ethical shift, a reappraisal of centuries-old economies of systemic oppression.

In my search to find wholesome or inspiring depictions of black children in literature and art, I came across two radically contrasting representations: Titus Kaphar's *Enough About You* (2016) – provoked by an 18th-century painting of Elihu Yale, his white cabal, the second Duke of Devonshire, Lord James Cavendish, Mr Tunstal, and 'an Enslaved Servant' – and Henry Ossawa Tanner's *The Banjo Lesson* (1893). Both paintings are concerned with the black child, but their renderings – *the causes for their becoming* – signal a forked path that we cannot ignore. Kaphar's painting is more reaction than inspiration, a rerouting and hijacking of a colonial painting in which white sovereignty is the focal point, amplified against the

image of an enchained black child. Kaphar merely inverts this relationship. He repaints the white cabal, then crumples the canvas, rendering the self-aggrandising white presence proportionately indiscernible, while the black child, lost in a shadow world, assumes centre-stage.

This is the received, politically correct reading. However, in Kaphar's reactive assault whiteness retains its grip, thereby challenging the integrity of the manoeuvre. The framed black boy, his chains replaced by a ruffled collar, requires its foil. We remain trapped in a dialectic in which blackness, to assume self-presence, requires whiteness. This is Kaphar's point. As he observes in his TED Talk (2017), white mythology is an inescapable dimension of black being – its doppelgänger – which is why it cannot quite be erased or redacted; why it can only be 'amended.' This supposes that art, for Kaphar, is legislative – a fairer, more accurate reflection of changing circumstances. That his painting replaced the original at Yale University signals the defining mood and ethos of this era – *revisionism*. However, in my mind, doubt persists: how effective is a strategy that remains reactive and rhetorical? During his TED Talk, Kaphar paints over a copy of Frans Hals' *Family Group in a Landscape* (c. 1648) with a thin layer of white paint, leaving the black boy unpainted. The lesson he performs is yet another instance of this reactive and polemical strategy, a further redaction, or 'amendment,' in which whiteness persists – under erasure – while blackness is viewed as a revelatory story – *because* of this erasure.

"Black portraiture is consumed by this reflexive expression of black self-presence – a presence at a remove, as though gazing upon itself, devoid of a generative essence. As Frantz Fanon and Achille Mbembe have never failed to remind us, the black body exists beyond the pale of history, unheeded, unrecognised, and, as Ralph Ellison reminded us, *invisible*."

It is the inexistence of black life across history that justifiably perturbs Kaphar. There are more books on the history of silk, he notes, than on the presence of black people in Western painting. Of the re-envisioned black boy in *Enough About You*, Kaphar remarks that he 'wanted to find a way to imagine a life…that the historical painting had never made space for in the composition,' the child's 'desires, dreams, family, thoughts, hopes' (2017). While a reasonable and sound wager, its execution remains, to me at least, a foiled exercise. The child remains a ploy. I say this because Kaphar reactively (if justly) chooses to remind us that the indistinction of the black body, the negation of its reality, is not only a historical phenomenon, but achingly current. His decision to rectify an erasure is therefore not only a critique of the past but a contemporary revisionary exercise. However, despite the artist's desire to humanise his subject, the black child remains a concept-conceit-idea. *Enough About You* may strive to shift the conversation, but, despite its error-stricken celebration, it remains little else. This is not a failing on the part of the artist alone, it is a widely deployed reactive strategy that is ideological and material and, as such, limiting.

Black portraiture is consumed by this reflexive expression of black self-presence – a presence at a remove, as though gazing upon itself, devoid of a generative essence. As Frantz Fanon and Achille Mbembe have never failed to remind us, the black body exists beyond the pale of history, unheeded, unrecognised, and, as Ralph Ellison reminded us, *invisible*. The 'negro' he writes of in 1952 is 'anonymous, and hence beyond public concern.' 'I am an invisible man,' Ellison resumes, 'simply because people refuse to see me…When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me' (2001: xxix). This is Kaphar's grievance. My point, however, is that the strategy he adopts is deficient. Consciousness is an inadequate means with which to fill a vacuum. Nevertheless, in a culture consumed by consciousness, an artist who alerts us to what we already know and presents a collective problem in a clever package – as *predictive activism* – will likely triumph.

As noted at the outset, today there is a plethora of black success stories, painters in particular who have been globally celebrated because they have

tapped our guilt and done so through formal means which are pronouncedly decorative. Kehinde Wiley's portraits are an obvious example. For all their self-awareness and calculated posturing, they are devoid of life, as ephemeral as the aesthetic they refashion – Pop/Rococo – though Wiley does make claim to Realism which, to my mind, is none other than a caricature of a Reality Affect, and, as such, in this dehumanised time, immensely and misguidedly popular. Wiley's riff on Anthony van Dyck's painting – *Charles I at the Hunt* (c. 1635) as *Le Roi à la Chasse* (2006) – typifies this manoeuvre. Sarcastically appropriative, it diminishes the tradition it inherits. Tongue-in-cheek, it reveals art as pastiche, disguises an existential disconnect with mirthless humour. Inversely, one can argue that Wiley's take is a critique of power – in this case, white imperial power. To my mind, however, it lacks (or represses), the Flemish artist's grasp of mortality. Van Dyck, unlike Wiley, was no mere court painter. He understood power's fallibility, and portraiture's ability to expose it.

This all-too-current vacuity in taste, which I associate with Wiley, runs deeper. It signals the taste of our times – the consumerist desire of the body-as-object, a thing of beauty – and, more disturbingly, despite the fetishization of blackness in the arts, the on-going incapacity to sustain a humane grasp of perceived cultural or racial difference. That we insist upon a condition we dub 'black life' reveals the grotesquery of a segregated consciousness. If Ellison's insight persists – embodied in the Black Lives Matter movement, in ubiquitous protest signage which reads I AM SOMEBODY – it is because black people are not seen, not even by black people. This shocking realisation explains the comparative absence of an organic, lived depiction of black life; why it persists as caricature, and why its hysterical self-assertion misses the mark. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. Where Wiley spectacularises black life, further amplifying an inessential and anti-essential reality – black life as surplus, as comedic folly, as travesty – Kerry James Marshall reconciles style, vitalism, and the ordinary. Then again, contrast the vacuous glamour of Wiley's work to the portraits painted by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. If Wiley knowingly punctuates the world, Yiadom-Boakye grasps what eludes most – the ur- of black life, its humanity. In this regard, it is all the more disturbing to look at Wiley's portrait of Yiadom-Boakye, in which we see the bespectacled artist, rifle in hand, dead hares all about. It is a funerary and chilling ode to portraiture and landscape painting. 'We murder to dissect,' William Wordsworth famously remarked in his poem *The Tables Turned* (1798). Wordsworth's point? That nature is a greater teacher than books. In the case of Wiley, an artist who operates at a troubling remove, nature is little more than an idea and affect, as is the black body. Wiley's is a morbid and posthumous stylisation and vision – simulacral, denatured, fundamentally cauterised, disassociated, alienated, and alienating. John Berger echoes this view in his critique of 'lifeless' painting which fails to grasp its subject – 'the result of the painter not having the nerve to get close enough for a collaboration to start. He stays at a *copying* distance. Or, as in mannerist periods like today, he stays at an art-historical distance, playing stylistic tricks which the model knows nothing about' (2020: 81–82).

It seems ironic to me that Wiley should choose to paint Yiadom-Boakye, who is temperamentally wholly unlike him, for she is no mannerist, no pasticheur. Rather, after Tanner and Makamo, Yiadom-Boakye seeks an idiom that allows for an intimacy that is irreducible to the cognates of systemic oppression, prejudicial projection, or mimicry. Theirs is a humanist art, which has received a bad rap in the 20th and 21st centuries, poopooed as a bankrupt Enlightenment notion, which it is not. In this nihilistic, Pop-driven age, I find it both fascinating and obscene that black power should emerge at the precise moment when white mythology and power exhausts itself. I cannot develop this paradox here, but I will make the following wager: Is black portraiture today a pyrrhic victory, and if so, yet another manifestation of a compromised will to life? This is a bleak prognosis. Fortunately, there are antidotes – Henry Ossawa Tanner and Nelson Makamo.

Painting in the late 19th century, Tanner's expression of black life remains an inspiring anomaly. His paintings of black people defy historical constraints. In this profound regard he is Makamo's progenitor. I make this large claim on a basis that is not technical – they paint differently, Tanner's paintings are more immersive, Makamo's more graphic – but one which is determined by subterranean forces. The link is psychic. In the work of both painters, I discern no irony, no detachment, no dissociated relationship to the body or sensibility. Both painters are wholly in the

world. One painting by Tanner in particular struck me as the grail I was looking for, *The Banjo Lesson*, painted in 1893. Indebted to American Realism and French Impressionism, the painting began as an illustration for the short story which inspired it, before transforming into a work that is singularly its own. A young black boy sits on the lap of his grandfather, banjo in hand. It is a vision of youth and old-age, the great arc of life. Most remarkable, however, is that while Tanner's painting depicts a lesson – be it of youth and old-age, the sanctity of practice, study, duty, love, protection – it does not tell us what to think. Unlike Kaphar's self-reflexive morality, or Wiley's blasé irony – both painters still locked within a pathology – Tanner liberates the beings he captures. His is an unvarnished tale, free of reactive instruction.

If, in this revisionist moment, the matter of race is vital in the painting's assessment, for Tanner it was not, or rather, not quite. This is because of the artist's ambivalent relationship to race as a category for being. 'In America, I'm Henry Tanner, Negro artist, but in France, I'm "Monsieur Tanner, l'artiste américaine"' (Khalid, 2020). This split is something Tanner could not overcome. That he expresses himself in the third person, at a subjective remove, is telling. Tanner explains his approach to the black body as one that is freed from caricature. For him, it is the authenticity of a singular expression that matters. As Judith Wilson notes, Tanner invests his black subjects 'with a degree of dignity and self-possession that seems extraordinary for the times in which they were painted' (1992: 40). Then, as now, it was far easier to stereotype and commodify blackness – in ways comparable with the diminishment and objectification of women, children, criminals, the insane – because, in doing so, the rationale of those in power, white men, could remain unchecked.

As I've noted, taking the easy, reactive route has a knock-on effect, because black artists who have inherited a constitutive vacuum unwittingly perform their inexistence in portraits which do little more than dissimulate self-presence. Kehinde Wiley's portrait of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye is a case in point. This, however, is not the case in Tanner's *Banjo Lesson*. Against the dictates of his time, he created one of the most enduring visions of compassion, care, and familial love. Immersed in sentiment, it is not sentimental. Rather, it expresses a profound lacuna in the historical representation of black life. While an anomalous vision, rare in its honesty and depth and therefore justly celebrated, Tanner's *Banjo Lesson* also provides a profound insight into the future. In brief, Tanner's painting, despite being conceived under repressive conditions, emerges as a prophetic marker for the 'new optimism.' A century later, this vision is also key to the work of Nelson Makamo, an artist who, more than any other, has grasped what we fundamentally suppress – the visionary power of childhood.

When the filmmaker and director of *Selma* (2014), Ava DuVernay, was invited to guest edit the February 2019 issue of *TIME* magazine, she chose Makamo to provide a painting for the cover. If the decision was a canny one, it is because she recognised that the artist is no opportunistic ideologue; that he refuses to treat the black body as something iconic (its idealised inflation the inverse of its caricature); that his understanding of being is irreducible to a historical burden; and that art, to thrive, needs to be free from bondage. It is this self-same energy that I see in Tanner's painting. The singularity of their respective gifts is best expressed by Maya Angelou: 'I've learnt that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel' (Tunstall, 2014). If feeling is vital, it is because reason cannot overcome our need for human connection. In fact, it is the absence of sentiment and feeling – its dismissal in the name of reason – which has proved damaging. This dismissal is the core of our continued abjection, self-hate, and hatred of others. It is also the root of a cultural phenomenon – black portraiture – which is largely attitudinal and devoid of feeling, none other than a chilling extension and symptom of a gnawing abjection. Unchecked and unguided by sentiment, this pain, often disguised as reason, is the foundation for systemic cruelty.

It is in this greater context that we must consider the significance and impact of the paintings of Tanner and Makamo. Both can easily fall victim to Kenneth Clark's indictment of Frans Hals, the 17th-century portraitist, as 'revoltingly cheerful and horribly skilful' (Cumming, 2007). However, time, as it is wont, is changing. From my vantage point, a Wileyesque cynicism is on the wane, a Kapharesque earnestness de rigueur. However, if Tanner and Makamo are deserving of our attention it is because their paintings

live on as a feeling. This was certainly the case with Makamo's *TIME* cover. The widespread enthusiasm for Makamo's painting of his bespectacled niece, Mapule Maoto, has much to do with the sanctity of its subject and the ferocity of its execution. Whether or not Maoto requires spectacles is by the by, they are a key structural feature which create the distance that affords Makamo's child-subjects their agency and 'private space'.

'While we live at a time when division is the norm; when biases and beliefs seem static and immobile… art calls to the optimism within us and beckons us to breathe.' DuVernay's opening wager in her 2019 *TIME* op-ed conveys an irresistible verve and energy. It is against 'bigotry, poverty, injustice, trauma, trouble' – against her own 'feelings of despair and doubt' – that she sets up a new creative ecology which prioritises 'hope,' 'the proverbial bright side,' a 'vital moment' that comes 'when we each must understand that the social, political and historical connectedness born of traumatic experiences can and should transform to true…engagement with one another. Engagement not steeped in fear and separation, but in shared knowledge, recognition and contentment' (2019). That said, it is DuVernay's emphasis on art, in the broadest sense, which is the crux. 'Art is worthy of our interrogation and is in fact an antidote for our times' (2019). The question remains: How does art countermand the narrowness of the time in which it emerges? In Makamo's case, it does so by refusing to succumb to taste, by-passing the political and ideological pressure placed upon it to be representative of the concerns of the time. Moreover, it is Makamo's refusal to comply with such dictates – and here he echoes Henry Ossawa Tanner – that enables him to produce a more enduring vision of the sanctity of race and youth as a lived condition, far removed from a pathology calculatedly disguised, or any projected idea or fantasy.

"'While we live at a time when division is the norm; when biases and beliefs seem static and immobile…art calls to the optimism within us and beckons us to breathe.' DuVernay's opening wager in her 2019 *TIME* op-ed conveys an irresistible verve and energy. It is against 'bigotry, poverty, injustice, trauma, trouble' – against her own 'feelings of despair and doubt' – that she sets up a new creative ecology"

If Makamo's paintings of black life exude this promise it is because the artist does not succumb to an inherited pathology, insisting that he has personally experienced no psychically disfiguring pain. Here I am reminded of Koleka Putuma's poem *Black Joy* (2017: 13):

> Isn't it funny
> That when they ask about black childhood,
> All they are interested in is our pain.
> As if the joy-parts were accidental.
> I write love poems, too.

Makamo's paintings are precisely thus – *love poems*. For him, the 'joy-parts' are never 'accidental'; they are fundamental. That he has become the black poster-child for the black poster-child is the inevitable by-product of hype, which, in this radically unsettled historical moment, is as ravaged by anxiety as it is hysterically excessive. Unsurprisingly, the doubters will see a Rockwellian sentimentality in Makamo's faces, while others, attuned to a deeper yet still emergent register, will sense their radicality – a new optimism. While self-absorbed, Makamo's children are wholly in the world. The answer to this disposition lies in an enabling communal inheritance. 'Raised in community, you get to understand community,' says the artist, who grew up in Modimelle, a rural township in Limpopo. It is because Makamo channels the strength of community that his paintings contain no existential dread, no dissociative complex, no rage or reactive grief. At their core lies the artist's desire 'to enlighten, to liberate'[1].

While it is as yet unclear, we are on the cusp of a new age. As the Mexican filmmaker Guillermo del Toro reminds us in his contribution to the *TIME* issue: 'The most radical and rebellious choice you can make is to

be optimistic' (2019). It is because we are faced with despair – bigotry, cruelty, hatred – that DuVernay, Del Toro, and Makamo have chosen optimism, a choice which, for Del Toro, is far better than 'being skeptical by default.' 'We seem sophisticated when we say "we don't believe" and disingenuous when we say "we do"' (Del Toro, 2019). This insight reveals the depth of our ironical depravity. In the midst of a global pandemic, and in the face of rising fascism and the threat of a failing neo-liberal democratic vision, it is this newly minted, radical optimism that is slowly and steadily assuming dominance. We see it in the Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements, in the active desire to rethink social systems and the cultural practice within them, in what Nietzsche dubbed *a radical transvaluation of values*, in what Del Toro describes as the 'instinct to inhale while suffocating. Our need to declare what 'needs to be' in the face of what is' (2019).

For all the opportunistic and/or pathological expressions of black life today, and the celebratory glow which surrounds it, there remains an art that is irreducible to the conflicts of its time, even when it galvanises its urgencies. I have noted the exceptionality of Henry Ossawa Tanner, who captured the tenderness and profundity of familial love, and the importance of mutual care – a deep humanitarian seam which ran counter to the racism of the time. I have pointed to the missteps of Titus Kaphar and Kehinde Wiley, alluded to the ingenuity of Kerry James Marshall and the sublimity of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Finally, and fundamentally, I've asked you to reconsider the persistently misunderstood and misperceived South African painter, Nelson Makamo. If his paintings of black children possess an oneiric quality, it is not because they are projected fantasies, but because they are dreams realised in this future-present moment – as treacherous and toxic as it is profoundly generative.

Notes

[1] From a conversation with the author.

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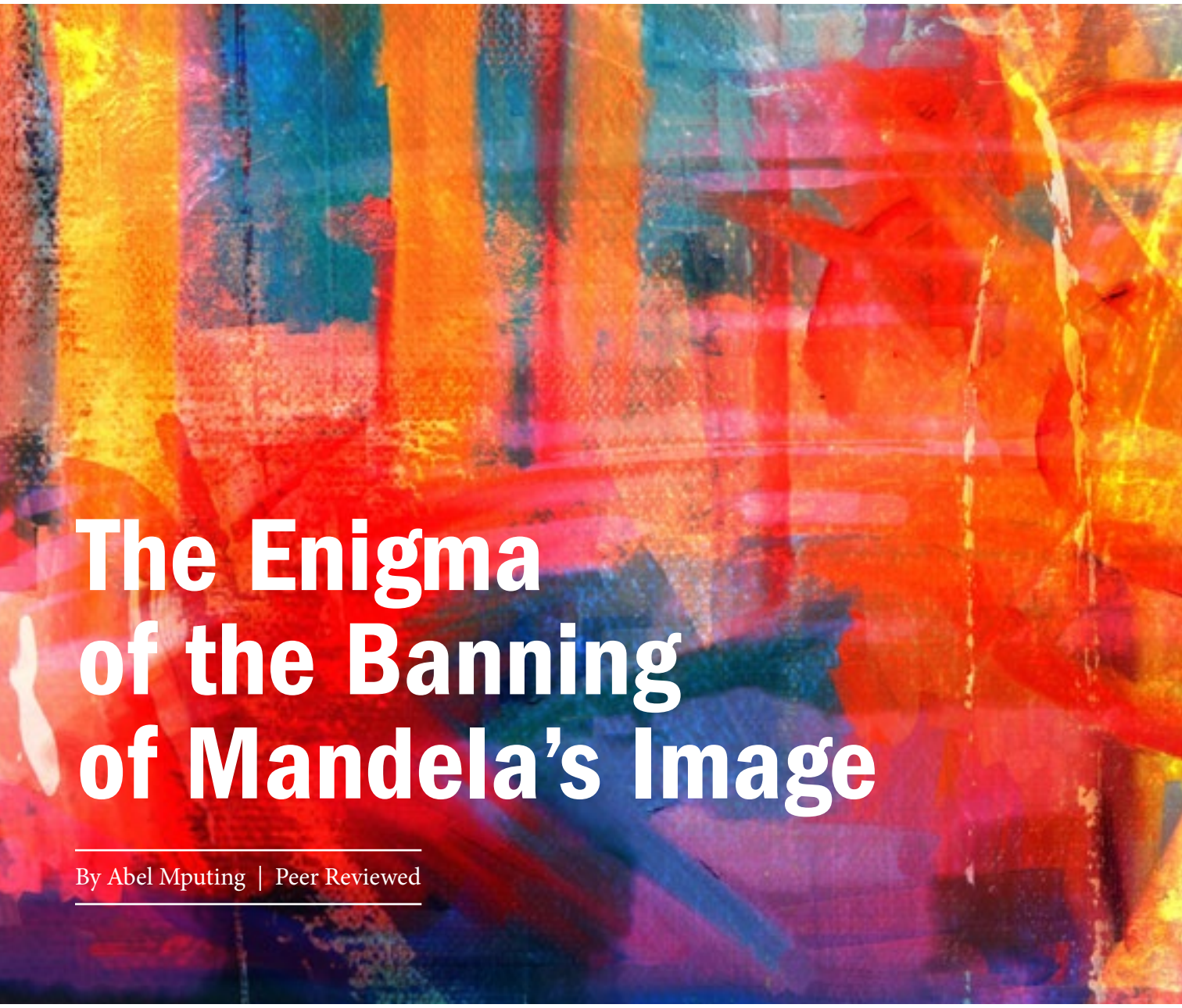

The Enigma of the Banning of Mandela's Image

By Abel Mputing | Peer Reviewed

Abstract

Often, we look at images and try to determine how and why they came into being and what they mean in our immediate presentness. And to lock their meaning and interpretation indelibly to the contemporaneous conditions of their making. But the more we look at them overtime- in their afterlife- the more they reveal themselves to us anew; the more they solicit us on different levels than our initial impulsive reaction to them. And the more we discover their deep-seated significations that were not immediately evident in our 'first looking.' Significations that invoke in our imaginations that which is left unsaid about them. That is where the enigma of the banning of Mandela's image lies. It lies in how its duplicitous representation rendered it as an art historical subject. As such, this essay seeks to examine why this image matters now as art as never before.

'Knowing robs us of wonder.' – Chinua Achebe

What is it that we are made to look at in this image and with what effect? One's response to this question will be determined by the viewing experience that one brings to bear and the context within which one geminates his/her reading of this image. As we know, images assume different meanings in different contexts.

When Mandela's censored image was first published in the 1980s in the *Weekly Mail* it, in line with its censorship code by the apartheid regime, avoided showing the objective likeliness of Mandela's identity. Because he was regarded as the protagonist of the black liberation struggle. As such, the chief enemy of the apartheid state.

Provoking any semblance of an empirical relationship between Mandela's image and its spectators was regarded as treason. As a result, Mandela, invoking Barthes' notion of *stadium*, 'ceased to register a singular face of someone who lived his life as an autonomous subject.' He, instead, signified the collective experience of the oppressed South African black majority and a particular moment in its human history. It is this iconographic inscription that fixated this image wholly to the socio-historical conditions of its making.

In 2018, it re-emerged transfigured into a cover-image of Bryan Trabold's book *Rhetoric of Resistance,* which turned its pictorial vision into a miscegenation of a graphic echo of Mandela's face layered with an equally graphic canvas of prints, fonts, motifs of themes, headlines, by-lines and disclaimers that constitute a visual binary of written and spoken words that blur its already refrained exactitude as if to nullify if not to curtail even further the remaining pleasure of looking at it.

It is this 'border-reaching' dichotomy: its transmutation of words and image into a creation of a form of a new picturehood: photo-and-graphic image that inverts what we know this historical image to be. And that's what renders it a dialogic proposition with dialogic dispositions that are, conceptually, at a remove from the ones that occasioned the image that was published by the *Weekly Mail* decades ago.

In keeping with the thematic thread of the title of this book, this transfigured cover-image has been repurposed as a mirror that reflects the adverse effects of the history of censorship on human liberties; the right to enunciate one's oppositional positions: to think and to critique without fear of censor or censure. A retrospection that accentuates the late Bishop Desmond Tutu's critical observation on history that shares kinship with the dialogic disposition of this book: 'we learn from history what we don't learn from history'. But also, or more fundamentally, this cover-image affirms the centrality of the visual to the culture of criticism which was arbitrarily and violently suppressed by the apartheid regime.

Most significantly, this essay recognises that the foregrounding of the ethical and moral inscriptions of this image is but one inevitable way of looking at it. But its overarching claim is that there are other multiple ways of looking at it that are left unsaid. That constitute its afterlife and that impel new ways of thinking about and of looking at this historical image as a productive rather than a reflective space. Ways of looking that urge the viewer to unveil other urgencies that can transfigure its fixation to a frame that locks it to a singular interpretation.

It is the 'pictorial turn' of the afterlife of this image that will occasion its reading and interpretation in this essay. One induces the notion of its afterlife because the banning of Mandela's image by the apartheid regime has, over time, turned it into an iconographic object. This afforded it a privilege of embracing multiple forms of creative processes and artistic practices of various cultural epochs while in exile. And this has in the process transmogrified it into various forms and styles that engendered it with multiple meanings and interpretations that unveiled the precariousness of its reality status. Forms and styles whose imaginative cachets can be located within art criticism. That is precisely where the cultural cachet and the enigma of the banning of Mandela's image lies.

To say that is to say there is a myriad of other ways of looking at this photo-graphic image's visual vocabularies that demand that one pays attention to the particularity of the particular characters of its pictorial elements that cannot be generalised or simply read in unison. Simply because their material structures have their own experiential and existential

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presence that impel the viewer to engage them to begin to understand, in Susan Sontag’s vein, ‘how it is what it is’.

An activity that impels the viewer to engender this image with its aesthetic discrimination to determine how its material structures suspend its judicial allegiance to a singular meaning. How that transmogrifies the historical to unveil the other of itself through these visual reflexes, its less definable style that intertwine creativity and reality with great artistic flair. Inscriptions that inscribe the imaginative portraiture premise that underlies the conception of this photo-graphic image.

An Imaginative Portraiture Premise

The conception of an imaginative portraiture premise in this photo-graphic image is underpinned by, in Martha Rosler’s vein, its ‘aesthetic-historical moment’. A moment that begins to form when one focuses not necessarily on w*ho* is pictured in it, but *how*. This can be realised if the viewer looks at it and thinks about ‘how the considerations of its sitter are collapsed into those of its form; into its material elements and formal principles’ (Rexer) and how they correlate to facilitate the generation of meaning-making mechanisms that have no historical imprints, but manifest in the viewer’s imaginations.

This assertion underpinned by the visual registers that are indicative of the fact that Mandela’s face in this portrait is not meant to overtly express the emotions of his political mind. For we are not confronted by a defiant political face that is clear enough to interpret. Instead, we are presented with a face that is as invisible as possible; that is utilised as, using James Elkins’ words, ‘the canvas for design and decoration’. A face that is gestured rather than that which is laboured photo-graphically. That is appropriated as a worked artefact: as a cultural object that is tailored for artistic interpretation. That exists not in the realm of the visible, but in the theatre of the viewer’s imaginations.

The representation of the sitter as both the subject and object of this portrait is the recurring thematic of this essay. The gnawing question is when does a subject become an object, and an object the subject in portraiture? According to John Erith, this happens when ‘the personality and character of the sitter are not allowed to intercede the visual elements of a portrait.’ This visual register constitutes one of the characteristics of an imaginative portraiture. The same can be said that the foregrounding of Mandela’s face as the organismic character or a subdued graphic element of this portrait can be postulated as a visual strategy that forbids it from obtruding what the visual elements of this portrait seek to register.

That is where the artfulness of this portrait lies. It lies in its non-character centric proposition that nudges the viewer to look beyond Mandela’s solipsistic existence. To posit his portrait not as a concrete realisation, but as that which represents presentation. As a (re) productive site in which a transfiguration of a new visual language foreign to its historical context can begin to form.

These variables that inform this portrait’s experience of being and process of becoming that occasion the reading of this image herald new modes of address that conspire to bypass old, evidential standards of its history and can be perceived as interruptive, interrogative, as the blurring of the limitations of existing boundaries of interpretation if not as a means to call into question the agency of primordial unity and fixity of meaning-making mechanisms (Meredith). As a valiant quest to pull, push and stretch them to expose other representational and rhetorical strategies that bring to bear its discontinuities: its rapture and irruptions.

It is this structural openness that ordains this portrait as a secular image. That serves as an invitation to the viewer to fantasise in its imaginative space. To provoke looking and critical reading; to subject it to its own monologues and epigraphs, to its own subjectivities.

To embellish it with the syntax, diction, accent, tone and tenor of its own vernacular language. In fact, to do more than just that – to also philosophise and aestheticize it. To, ultimately, make its feelings feel.

To invoke the multiple sensory registers of this portrait is to invoke the imaginations of a critical reader capable of deciphering its divergent propositions and meanings thereof. Because as T.S. Elliot attests: 'no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone.' The indefinite disposition of this portrait attests to that. To the field of vision that does not frame or compartmentalise its viewing experience to privilege a certain meaning at the expense of others. But instead, it impels the viewer to vouch for its own preferred interpretation to determine what is it that it is made to look at and with what effect. This is what renders this portrait a creation of a form of abstraction; that which we will not be able to fully respond to.

The possibility of contemplating Mandela as both the subject and object of this portrait – as a representation of a tenuous relationship between the real and imaginative reality – serves to show that there are many other lives of this image that encourage new thinking that implores us to reread and reposition it anew beyond its primordial impulses; to unchain it from its singular source of meaning. It is only after the attainment of this ideal that Achebe's claim – 'knowing robs us of wonder' – can make our feelings feel.

Knowing Robs us of Wonder

Wonder is a thematic carried further in this portrait by the duplicitous forms of expression invested in the sitter's veiled gaze that flirt rather deceitfully with the viewer as if implying, in Susan Bright's words, 'what you see is not what you get and what you get is not what you see.' This portrait's invocation of this inconspicuous play between what is revealed and what is disguised is a ploy to refute the tendency to place the viewer of black portraiture in a position of the 'empirical knowledge' that Achebe forewarned us about. A refutation of the threat it imposes to critical thinking; to imaginations. To the postulation of new aesthetic fictions and fantasies that underlie the subjectivities of the black body that have been conveniently overlooked throughout history.

The feeling of wonder: of amazement and admiration is evinced by this portrait's ability to postulate this historical figure and its momentous moment in South African history as an abstraction. By its capability to make Mandela flinch as he becomes impersonal and other before the viewer's eyes. Comprehending that is crucial. If the viewer fails to envision that, it would have failed to comprehend one of the most imaginative investments of this portrait.

Imaginative investments that uphold this photographic image's cultural worth and its status as an aesthetic object that draws the viewer's sensory registers to the charm of its sublimity. To its awe. That herald a marked break with the documentary concepts that always already portray the black body as nothing more than that which represents a history of its human condition that is in a state of perpetual deferment. That mirrors moments of its vulnerability and that privileges its colonial ethnic biographies at the expense of its own subjective experiences.

Tamar Garb historicises the 'primordial fixity' that informs this entrenched viewing experience of the black body in her book *Fictions and Figures: Contemporary South African Photography* (2011). Garb writes:

'From its earliest inception, photography in South Africa has depicted people. And it has filtered their representation through three dominant categories of representation: ethnography, documentary and portraiture, each carrying with it institutional and cultural associations. Frequently referenced is the anthropological and ethnographical past that has provided the conceptual framework through which Africa's people have routinely and repeatedly been pictured.'

Contrary to the agencies of these practices, this enquiry employs gestural registers to break these spells of filters of black figuration that seem to have an eternal infatuation with the affliction of its wound.

Or is the black body forever invested in its pathology? Does it have a space, a room to wiggle to say what has been left unsaid about itself? Or is it forbidden the creative licence to rethink its own thinking, to reinterpret its own interpretation, to re-represent its own representation, to rewrite its own histories, to rediscover its own discontinuities? One wonders.

The urge to rethink thinking instigated by Chinua Achebe's disapproval of the knowledge that is the

product of the tyranny of intellectual consensus that robs us of wonder is meant to posit aesthetics as the tent-pole of our common and collective humanity; a salvation of the culture of critical thinking innate in visual culture. Who better to caution us against the threat of the tyranny of intellectual consensus to critical thinking than Nietzsche:

If you are a philosopher, consensus does not always make you happy. The *consensus sapientium* – the agreement of the wise – might be evidence of the untruth. The fact that everybody seems to agree about something *isn't* always proof that we are right, it may do us good to think about the principles, the values, and ideals that underlie our agreement, not just to make the consensus more intellectually secured, but also to explore consequences we have not noticed (Appiah, 2001: 36).

The sequential concurrence of stimulus and response fermenting the thought processes of this essay that belies the contiguity of this image represents its marginal contribution to this endeavour. An endeavour that offers the viewer a reprieve to redeem, if not to reconfigure and reconsider, its blind allegiance to the authorised meaning and interpretation and received knowledge of this portrait. Not out of spite, but in pursuit of something divine: something more admirable that exists apart and beyond its historical adulteration. That posits it not as a concrete historical realisation but as a 'shadow trap' if not, using Ashraf Jamal's words, 'an aesthetics fiction.'

A Shadow Trap

The invocation of 'a shadow trap' in this portrait is premised on the echo of the shadow that disfigures the objective likeness of the sitter. Instead of being represented with a speaking face that one can relate and identify with in a human and realistic way. This portrait presents the viewer with an echo of a face as a filter of its figuration. And what the viewer is left with ultimately is a void of 'a shadow trap' that, borrowing from Rexer, 'mirrors that which it does not show'. The visual descriptor of a 'shadow trap' was introduced to South African photographic practice by Santu Mofokeng. He enunciated its conceptual premise in his seminal portrait, *Eyes Wide Shut*. Most fundamentally, through its visual strategy that elevates the tenuous relationship between the literal and the figurative.

This abstraction was valorised by Patricia Hayes in her essay, *The Violence is in the Knowing*. Hayes writes:

'There is a strong thematic in this portrait about things not being what they appear, achieved mostly through a lack of sharpness, blurring or of using exactitude to blur the very identity of things.'

Hayes's account of *Eyes Wide Shut* hinges on the sitter's gestural gaze: on its dynamic entanglement between seeing and imagining; between mindedness and absent-mindedness; between meditation and daydreaming. The viewer may have imagined the representation of the presence of absence, but not in the way that Mofokeng (pre)figured it in this black and white portrait.

Similarly, in Mandela's portraiture the notion of 'a shadow trap' is foregrounded by his sealed-off consciousness that acts like a human mask that simultaneously reveals and conceals the emotions of his mind. Mirianne Hirsch elucidates the peculiarities of this representational strategy in portraiture: 'as the sitter poses, the sitter assumes masks; as we read portraits, we project particular masks, particular ideological frames onto the image.' The interpretation of these gestural ambiguities in this portrait rely on the viewer's ability to come up with its own bodily metaphors; its own fantasies to peel off or to turn the veil that echoes the sitter's identity into account.

These filters of figuration attest to the fact that there is a way of looking at this image as that which represents representation. That which is infinitely variable. Of the photo-graphic sitter that exists apart from the homogenous whole to which it belongs. That is prefigured as an illusion; as that which exists in the figment of the viewer's imaginations. Mandela's portrait and Mohau Modisakeng's conception of self, as, using Ashraf Jamal's abstract descriptor – a 'vapour or husk' – alludes to the notion of an echo of a human shadow that provocatively turned our gaze to a creation of a form of the sitter that is a mysticism; a fliting illusion.

A gaze that renders this portrait a haunted space. There is certainly a certain kind of haunting to which the viewer of this portrait is subjected. This haunting is foregrounded by, plying Harrison's words, 'the precedent that its representation provides for a continued engagement in the context of the visible,

with that which is contingently excluded from being seen.' By the affect of the sitter that seemingly reappears and disappears before the viewer's eyes. Whose poetic gestations disavow its representation as a concrete realisation. It is this dialogic disposition inherent in this portrait that enunciates it as an impossible testimony. That is, in Tagg's words:

'Less than what we want and more than we desire, never adequate to our questions or to our demands, it hands us what we were not seeking and may have preferred to avoid. Inadequate and overwhelming compensation, impossible testimony.'

A poignant appraisal that alludes to what constitutes, in my opinion, the viewing experience of this portrait. A portrait that nullifies its own reading; that betrays the very idea of making it mean(ingful), or even before its meaning gets comprehended in the viewer's mind. Because instead of concrete particularity, it emphasises its ambiguous specificity. The suspension of the sitter's face in this portrait and its replacement with its echo echoes the affect of its ambiguous specificity; of the sitter that is trafficked as a fliting gesture of a 'shadow trap'. This goes to show that, in Djibri Mambety's words, 'visuals have no fixed roles, we give them orders to fulfil.' Similarly, the reading of this portrait is determined not by a singular experience, but by the sensory registers and multiple exigencies of various artistic and creative processes and contexts, situations and periods of life whose accumulative effects bring to bear the precariousness of the reality status of its gaze.

Despite the irrefutable historical imprints that occasion this portrait, the postulations that foreground its reading as, plying Harrison's words, 'a false consciousness in a space of consciousness', it demonstrates the capacity to evoke other meaning-making mechanisms which don't rely on the imprints of its historical origin, but on those that are manifest in the viewer's imaginations. Rexer captures succinctly the vein of this thought when he claims that 'Other images always solicit us on many levels, never make so insistent a claim and often deliberately fight against it.' It is these perplexing formulations and contingent propositions that shift and change, and of a visual proposition that is never wholly manifest that makes it impossible to confer a singular meaning to it.

"This analysis endeavoured to show this image's capability to epitomise a reading that is receptive to unauthorised engagements that are impossible to seal. A conjecture that can be construed as a strategic decomposition of its linear and idealised interpretation."

Rexer explicates the vein of this thought more eloquently. He writes:

'Our tendency is to make something of an image, to try to say immediately without thorough reflection, thorough aesthetic discrimination what it means and how it works and why it was made. Images are more disjunctive than we often thought them to be, and often frustrate our impulses. Other kinds of images always solicit us on many levels, never make so insistent a claim and often deliberately fight against it.'

This analysis endeavoured to show this image's capability to epitomise a reading that is receptive to unauthorised engagements that are impossible to seal. A conjecture that can be construed as a strategic decomposition of its linear and idealised interpretation.

Those who continue to speak of this photo-graphic image in a one-dimensional manner, may need to adopt new imaginative interpretations and aesthetic discriminations in order to comprehend the principles of organisation that are at play in it. Principles that purchase heavily on what cannot be seen, but imagined, what can't be secured intellectually, but felt. This is what makes this photograph, which solicits the viewer on different levels, a visual proposition that is beyond what some always already expect it to be: a representation of a historical record. This assertion constitutes the thread of the rhetorical strategy of this essay. And that's where the crux of its critique and cultural cachet lies.

Image-Making

Ultimately, the overarching endeavour of this analysis is to posit this portrait not as a reflective, but a productive space that represents image-making. That – like any form of visual art – prioritises sight. That urges the viewer to engage it visually and photographically; in order to, using Michael Fried's words, 'respond to it punctually, in the moment of viewing, to its internal complexities as a whole, in particular the carefully engineered structures of its gaze.'

To determine how the organisation of elements within the boundaries of its frame interact with each other to create an image. And to make its meticulous process of picturing – of alignment and manipulation of colour, space, written and spoken words as visible forms of its expression – mean.

To say that is to bear testament to the fact that there is a way of representing this portrait as a creation of a form of a visual that subscribes to art criticism. That is capable of suspending its historical account even if momentarily. For, according to Nigel Whiteley, the valuations of a historical portrait are 'often projected as a given and often they are neither discussed nor explained visually.' And, more often than not, a historical portrait serves a social or an expressed political purpose.

The same can't be said about the reading of this portrait in this enquiry. Herein one utilises a dialogic analysis to advance it as, to borrow Jae Emerling expression, 'an aesthetic experience that exists apart, without purpose, all but beyond history.' Therein lies its artfulness. Because it is claimed that the purpose of art is to be purposeless. Because it is that which we will never fully respond to. Indeed.

That said, the enigmatic lure of this portrait is its capability to defer the roots of its origins even if momentarily. Thanks to its censure, it managed to acquire methods of interpretation that are foreign to the condition of its inception. That subjected it to duplicitous, fragmented and abstract filters of figuration and forms of expression that have no allegiance to fixed interpretations. But that mutate at the speed of thought; at the speed of the figment of imaginations.

Out of its prolonged metamorphosis and hiatus, Mandela's censored image has come out of the cold of censorship to be idealised. To embrace the warmth of human thought. The freedom it engendered. To rediscover its creative voice and tell its stories that have been left unsaid. And to be eulogized for its unyielding patriotism, instead. To be extolled for enriching our visual culture and its criticism. For reconciling with its nemesis. For showing us the colour of our collective future. For being many things to many – to both its detractors and admirers alike. But most of all, for instigating, in Bailey and Hall's words, an 'aesthetic unrest' that occasions its reading in this enquiry that runs counter to the affliction of the pathology of its history. An 'aesthetic unrest' which affords it new representational spaces, and instills in it new visual impulses and idioms that hypothesize it as an interpreter of the image and culture of an age.

Most significantly, it is the compendium of duplicities of bodily metaphors, of illusions and fantasies embedded in it that serve as proof that 'a practice exists within a discourse and yet it can transform it.' Emerling's testament is the tent pole of the thesis of this analysis. Indeed, it is a known fact that this portrait is an infamous creation of South Africa's tempestuous history, but its postulation in this inquiry has managed to subvert its detestable strictures to unveil the 'other' of itself that we are yet to be accustomed to.

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Black Orpheus[1]

Black Internationalism in a Time of Blackness

By Hlonipha Mokoena | Peer Reviewed

Abstract

Although it's only been thirty years since the Berlin Wall was torn down, the term "Cold War" has become something of an antique. It is as if when Ronald Reagan pronounced those fateful words, "Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall", the wheels of history suddenly and irrevocably came to a standstill. The USA vs USSR nuclear, technology, space and innovation war came to an abrupt and unceremonious end. That at least, is one of the reasons for the global amnesia about what the Cold War actually meant and the ways in which in altered our consciousness and the world. Africa, is not even considered when "Cold War Studies" are mentioned. As a continent, we are absented from the volatile and deadly politics of that fateful period from 1945 to 1989. As many have pointed out, contrary to the popular perception that Africa was untouched by Cold War politics, the period was actually one of "hot wars" all over the continent. Whereas in North America, citizens of the United States could breathe a sigh of relief that they no longer would stand accused of "un-American activities", on the African continent the ideological fallout of the end of the Cold War still continues. The fate of African Nationalism, Pan-Africanism, Negritude and Black Internationalism was also bundled up with Cold War politics and this has in some ways resulted in the conclusion that the thawing of American and Soviet Union also led to the depreciation of these liberation and anti-colonial ideas. This aftermath has bred a certain type of continental fatalism in which all our dead, dying and barely alive utopias are inevitably read from the vantage point of Cold War politics and after. It is therefore timely that we excavate the archives of anti-colonial art and literary movements and journals whose sole impetus for existence was to ensure that the ideals of African Nationalism and Pan-Africanism would be realised in the world of cultural production. This excavation consists of many moving parts since it is at once an intellectual history of art and a social history of "little magazines". Equally important is the history of literary magazines that attempted to "modernise" and "localise" literature and thereby offer to the newly independent citizens of the continent avenues to express their "coming to consciousness" in the aftermath of colonial domination. This paper will attempt to use the concept of the "Black Orpheus" to imagine an intellectual history of art and art production through the lens of other concepts that lie in ruin — Black Internationalism, Pan-Africanism, African Nationalism etc.

> 'MR. SMITH FOSSES, the middle gentleman in the photograph on the opposite page, 634, is a resident of Kimberly [sic], South Africa. Mr. Fosses is of pure African descent and was born at Burgesdorp. He is a baker by trade, and a self-educated and self-made man. Kimberly [sic], where Mr. Fosses resides, will be remembered by our readers as conspicuous in the English-Boer war. The great South African Diamond Fields are situated there; and the population is about 45,000 nearly two-thirds of which are colored and the greater part of these are employed in the mines at 85 cents per day.' (Anon. 1904: 635)

The biography of Mr. Smith Fosses that was published in *The Colored American Magazine*[2] in 1904 is what a biography should be – it gives us a sense of place, time, local colour and above all, it is an illuminating sketch of a man who wasn't reticent in his description of himself as a 'self-educated and self-made man' (Anon. 1904: 635). Although there are many high points in this profile, for now it is important that we begin with the description of Mr. Fosses as 'of pure African descent' and the fact that his biographical sketch was accompanied by a photograph which it is fair to assume was taken in Burgesdorp, Kimberley, where Mr. Fosses lived. If his biography had simply been textual – without an accompanying photograph – then the mind would have wandered. What would a man of 'pure African descent' have looked like in 1904 and why did he feel that he had to state that ethnic/racial descriptor? Once we look at the photograph, we can apply our own training and prejudices to decide whether Mr. Fosses fits into that category of being of 'pure African descent'. This article is, however, not about our eyes and our prejudices and our training; it is about Mr. Fosses and many like him who took pride in being of 'pure African descent,' and who made such declarations on the pages of newspapers and magazines across the black and African diasporas. This article will attempt to understand the role played by magazines such as *The Colored American Magazine* in the construction and maintenance of two traditions – firstly, the black mission tradition of artisanal self-sufficiency, and secondly, the black radical movement defined as 'Ethiopianism'. The main thrust of the paper will be that both these traditions were underpinned by what has been called 'black internationalism'. Mr. Fosses, from this viewpoint, was a man of colour of his time; he didn't just believe that across the Atlantic there were men and women like him who were 'self-made'; he also believed that these other readers, also of 'African descent', would recognise in his face, posture, pride, language and repose their own faces and fates. His statements are about bridging the gap that time, slavery, colonialism, and distance had placed between himself and these other people of colour. But it should be obvious that his sensibility had also been shaped by the presence of the newspaper/magazine. Without it, he would have had no publics to address and no communities within which to imagine what being of 'African descent' actually meant. Mr. Fosses, as shall be demonstrated, was more than a 'self-made man'. He was a word-made man; his world was shaped by the history of black letters and black writing in South Africa.

The Colored American Magazine came into existence and was published from 1900 to 1909. As can be discerned from the illustration on the cover of the October 1904 edition, the term 'Colored' already had a broad meaning. We can therefore infer that Mr. Fosses and other black residents of Burgesdorp probably read *The Colored American Magazine,* not just because it addressed them in its name, but because they were already familiar with the elasticity and pliability of the term 'Colored'. It is probable that Fosses and his associates did not just read one publication, but that they read many other publications that were concerned with 'race pride'. In these publications, they would have learnt that a 'race man' or 'race woman' wasn't just someone who was aware of their racial belonging – being of 'pure African descent' is just one example – but that a 'race man' or 'race woman' was someone who conscientiously worked for 'racial uplift'. The latter term is embodied in Mr. Smith Fosses' list of what his Burgesdorp community had achieved. There is a sense in which enumeration and accounting were part of this identity of being an 'Ethiopian'. In the brief sketch of life in Kimberley, the author of the short article repeated what would have been Mr. Smith Fosses' list of his community's successes. The author wrote:

> 'Mr. Fosses gives a detailed account of affairs in Africa which is extremely interesting. Kimberly sustains 12 colored churches, 12 schools, 6 coffee shops, 5 tailor shops, 8 grocery shops and general dealers, 11 shoemakers, 1 saddler shop,

“In the case of South Africa’s people of colour, ‘blackness’ emerged on the margins of the colonial and imperial frontiers where people of colour congregated on mission stations from which they constructed multi-ethnic and multi-racial identities that were at once a reflection of the colonial condition but also its refutation, since so many of them often transcended the limitations placed on them by colonial racism.”

> 2 bakeries, 7 butcher shops, 9 fruit dealers, 2 secret societies, 2 political organizations, 1 brass band and about 25 letter carriers. The A. M. E. Church, or Ethiopian movement as it is called, is in a highly prosperous condition and has the confidence and support of the native population.’ (Anon. 1904: 635).

Schools, businesses, churches, and artisans’ workshops defined the achievement of these communities of colour, and therefore defined what it meant to be a person of ‘pure African descent’. But, these points of self-congratulation and the language in which to express this race pride predate the establishment of newspapers and magazines. In a haunting eulogy to Adam Kok III, a mourner at his funeral uttered these words:

> ‘After him, there will be no coloured king or chief in Colonial South Africa… of coloured chiefs he is the last. Take a good look into that grave. You will never look into the grave of another chief of our race.’ (Company, 1906: 638)

Thus, even before Mr. Smith Fosses’ time, being ‘black’ and being of ‘African descent’ meant more than just skin colour; it was a lifestyle, a communally-shared sense of accomplishment and a modern appraisal of what it meant to be ‘black in the world’. The latter point about ‘modernity’ requires some emphasis since it is often assumed that ‘blackness’ or ‘Africanity’ is a product of colonialism/imperialism; this is only partially true. In the case of South Africa’s people of colour, ‘blackness’ emerged on the margins of the colonial and imperial frontiers where people of colour congregated on mission stations from which they constructed multi-ethnic and multi-racial identities that were at once a reflection of the colonial condition but also its refutation, since so many of them often transcended the limitations placed on them by colonial racism. It is this dual contestation between ‘submission’ and ‘resistance’ that weaved itself into Mr. Smith Fosses’ biography. It informed the deliberate and precise manner in which he informed his American readers that he was of ‘pure African descent’ while also informing them that he was an erudite ‘Ethiopian’ who was a card-carrying member of a political organisation dedicated to the autonomy and success of people of colour. His political identification is only hinted at, and for good reasons, since colonial discourse had already marked ‘Ethiopianism’ as a dangerous and subversive ideology and so Fosses was cleverly revealing his allegiances without directly asserting his ideological bent.

There is an uncanny resemblance between the manner in which a ‘coloured’ reader of an American magazine understood himself as an African and the way in which African-Americans also accounted for their modernity and contribution to America in the 19th century. In the opening pages of his book, *We Were Eight Years in Power* (2017), Ta-Nehisi Coates cites the example of a Reconstruction Era (1865–77) African-American politician who responded to the resurgence of white supremacy by pointing to the achievements of black government. The statement by Thomas Miller, an African-American Congressman from South Carolina, enumerates the sense of accomplishment that Mr. Smith Fosses also seemed to want to convey to his American supporters. Miller is quoted as saying:

> ‘We were eight years in power. We had built schoolhouses, established charitable institutions, built and maintained the penitentiary system, provided for the education of the deaf and dumb, rebuilt the ferries. In short, we had reconstructed the State and placed it upon the road to prosperity.’ (Coates, 2017: xiii)

In citing this optimism of the Reconstruction Era, Coates makes the argument that what white supremacists hate more than 'violent black recklessness' is 'Good Negro Government' (2017: xv). As with Mr. Fosses' explicit naming of 'Ethiopianism', Coates makes the observation that it is only when black people run their own affairs, and do so elegantly and laudably, that white supremacy raises the spectre of 'black domination'. In the case of South Africa, these forms of 'black' autonomy existed on mission stations and in the communities that were formed by the descendants of black/African people who had lived on mission stations. Although this may imply a religious foundation of black autonomy, that is not the only possible conclusion. Although Congressman Miller's retrospective appraisal of American Reconstruction could be read as nostalgic and resigned, it is equally possible to read his statements as a precursor to Mr. Smith Fosses' own version of 'black modernism' – the insertion of black people into narratives of progress and upward mobility. Although such ideals may seem to have been inspired by Christian progressivism, that does not seem to have been the only reason. Fosses was a descendant – it can be argued – of men and women who had imagined themselves into a modernist narrative of history via the newspaper and via literacy. The idea that Africa and people of African descent were not outside of history but at its very centre is one of the main reasons for identifying this with the term 'Black Orpheus'.

In the context of the current preponderance of ideas of the black self as a subject of abject and optic fear, of what relevance and value is Mr. Fosses' portrait and biography? In its dignity and intentionality, the photograph of Mr. Fosses and his assistants evokes the work of the German photographer August Sander (1876–1964). The deliberate composition that showcases him as a man at work and in business would have fitted well in Sander's series, which was originally titled 'People of the Twentieth Century'. This comparison is, however, only superficial, since Sander's work only began in 1910 and Mr. Fosses' photograph appeared in *The Colored American Magazine* in 1904. This means that Mr. Fosses had other reference points and other images in mind when he posed for the picture; he was not imitating Sander. Compositionally, he was continuing with the visual traditions and styles that were already in the magazine. He was presenting himself in a way that he had seen other black subjects present themselves. Or, at least, he understood how important it was for him to foreground his profession as a baker and to do so with visual cues. Historically, Mr. Fosses identified with the 'Ethiopian' movement, which in South Africa can be dated as far back as 1884 when Nehemiah Tile founded the Tembu Church. Although there are controversies and debates about whether there was a direct link between the rise of Ethiopianism and the emergence of African Nationalism, in Fosses' biography, politics and religion are indistinguishably mixed since his mention of the A.M.E. (African Methodist Episcopal Church) preceded his description of the political movement to which we can assume he was also a member. The fact that religious affiliation seamlessly glides into politics in his biography implies that, to Mr. Fosses, the appellation 'Ethiopian' was not metaphoric but was an expression of his position in Burgesdorp's 'coloured' population. His attachment to Ethiopianism cannot be attributed solely to his reading of the biblical passage, 'Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hand unto God' (Psalm 68: 31), but has to be explored as an embodied concept which Mr. Fosses summarised in his description of himself as of 'pure African descent'. Although it is not directly relevant to *The Colored American Magazine*, Mr. Fosses' identity as an Ethiopian is a harbinger of what took place in black and African newspapers and magazines in 1936 after the Italians invaded the kingdom of Ethiopia in October of 1935. Our reading of Mr. Fosses' photograph should therefore consider the fact that there was a before and after of his adherence to Ethiopianism; he was positioned between historical epochs which make it possible for us to understand that his identification with this independence movement was not just a flourish of the pen, but a credible and historically verifiable commitment of his self and his identity. By submitting his contribution to *The Colored American Magazine,* Mr. Fosses was also indicating that he was a well-read man, he was a literary man. By choosing *The Colored American Magazine*, he was also expressing what Jane Nardal called 'black internationalism' – 'Blacks of all origins, of different nationalities, mores, and religions vaguely feel that in spite of everything they belong to one and the same race' (2002: 105).

Black internationalism is not just the name of an ideology; as a type of consciousness, it functions to name a circulation of ideas about blackness around the world. By submitting his image and his story,

> “Alternatively, we could say that in the short space that Mr. Fosses was given by *The Colored American Magazine*, he made a cultural statement about the difference between skin colour and culture; phenotype and presence; genes and accomplishments. His consciousness of himself as a self-made man of ‘pure African descent’ should therefore be read as a cultural rather than an ethnic statement.”

Mr. Fosses was essentially placing himself in this circumnavigation that at the time didn’t have a definitive destination or outcome. He was, as with other men and women in his position, submitting his thoughts, his ideas, his achievements, his bodily presence to the judgement of history. He didn’t need a soapbox on which to stand and make his presence known; the newspapers and magazines of his era made this possible. To be of ‘pure African descent’ didn’t mean certainty and ethnic chauvinism; instead, what Mr. Fosses was indexing with his self-chosen descriptor was his challenge to the white supremacists who would have made his skin colour and his phenotype a product of ‘exotic’ race mixing. By choosing to identify as an African, Mr. Fosses was revealing the already porous and expandable contours of identity in pre-apartheid South Africa. He was, we could argue, pre-empting the narrowing of the word ‘Coloured’ by the apartheid state. Alternatively, we could say that in the short space that Mr. Fosses was given by *The Colored American Magazine*, he made a cultural statement about the difference between skin colour and culture; phenotype and presence; genes and accomplishments. His consciousness of himself as a self-made man of ‘pure African descent’ should therefore be read as a cultural rather than an ethnic statement.

If membership in the Ethiopian movement is not evidence enough for the kinds of political commitments that were important to a man of ‘pure African descent’, then the closing paragraph on Mr. Fosses offers the reader undeniable proof of the political intent of his submission to the magazine: ‘The African Political movement has a membership of 3,000. They recently established a National fund of £ 1,000,000 to be used in the purchase of real estate in good localities for the erection of industrial schools’ (Anon. 1904: 635).

Although there is no need to specify which political party Mr. Fosses belonged to, the article names the ‘African Political movement’ as the party that had raised money for the building of industrial schools. It is likely that Mr. Fosses’ biography is referring to the African Political Organisation founded in 1902 in Cape Town. This organisation later became the African People’s Organisation (APO) and is historically associated with the figure of Abdullah Abdurahman, who was the first person of colour to be elected as a city councillor in Cape Town. Thus, although Mr. Fosses does not give many details about which ‘African Political movement’ he was a member of, he is likely referring to this organisation. The importance of his allegiance is that not only does it reveal one of many precursors to the African National Congress and its allies, it also reinforces the idea that Mr. Fosses was not just a baker but that he was an embodiment of black selfhood since he identified with so many of the century’s central ideas of black thought, from Ethiopianism to Black internationalism to Pan-Africanism. He was, to use the slogan of the Pan-Africanist movement, a true ‘son of the soil’. His awareness of the multiple ways that a black body could be pledged to politics, even while he seemed to be merely reporting on the successes of his community in managing its own affairs, reveals his knowledge of the genre of ‘racial uplift’ that he was contributing to. His biographical sketch was written for an audience that was conversant in the politics of blackness of the 19th and early 20th centuries; his was a succinct declaration of what a self-made man of ‘pure African descent’ could do, not just with his learning, but with his inculcation of black internationalist ideas.

Imagining a world beyond his immediate political and social circumstances is perhaps Mr. Fosses’ most visible contribution. In an abbreviated and pointed biographical sketch, the joint labour of *The Colored American Magazine*’s editors and Mr. Fosses’ pen conjoin to present to a global black audience a

snippet of life in Burgesdorp, Kimberley. The seeming innocence of Mr. Fosses' submission, however, belies a thorough imbrication in a world of black letters and black ideas. If Mr. Fosses had only been interested in advertising his career as an artisan, then the sketch would have still succeeded as a direct and visible index of his profession. However, it is the fact that Mr. Fosses moves beyond the register of professional self-representation and into the language of racial betterment that one truly comprehends his choice of words in describing himself as being of 'pure African descent'. This construction of black selfhood depended on more than just his skin colour; it depended on the enumeration of the achievements of the 'race'. Mr. Fosses was not content to let the image of himself flanked by his two assistants 'speak for itself'; he wanted to make sure that his words, his thoughts, and his pride also appeared in narrative form. His abbreviated biography matter-of-factly expressed the history of newspaper and magazine conventions that had defined the black world and given many black writers and authors access to a public they would otherwise have never reached from their localities.

Notes

1. This is a reference to the literary journal *Black Orpheus*, which was established in Nigeria in 1957 by Ulli Beier. For a review of the type of content published in the journal see Irele (1965).

2. *The Colored American Magazine* and *The Colored American* newspaper are separate publications with distinct histories. For the history of the latter newspaper, see the *Library of Congress* entry, 'The Colored American (Washington, D.C.) 1893-19??' (Washington, DC), Jan. 1 1893. [online] Available at: www.loc.gov/item/sn83027091/.

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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 unlanguaged 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 Booysens 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 abomageza[1] as they expertly weave the taxis between lanes. I'm at the edge of my non-four-four-masihlalisane[2] 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 mdrayiseni[3] 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 umjita[4] 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 umageza[5] 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 'lokasie'and the oppositional gaze

iKasi[6] 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 iNgamla[7]. 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.

"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."

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 unlanguaged 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 sbaweling[9] 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 lamajita[15] 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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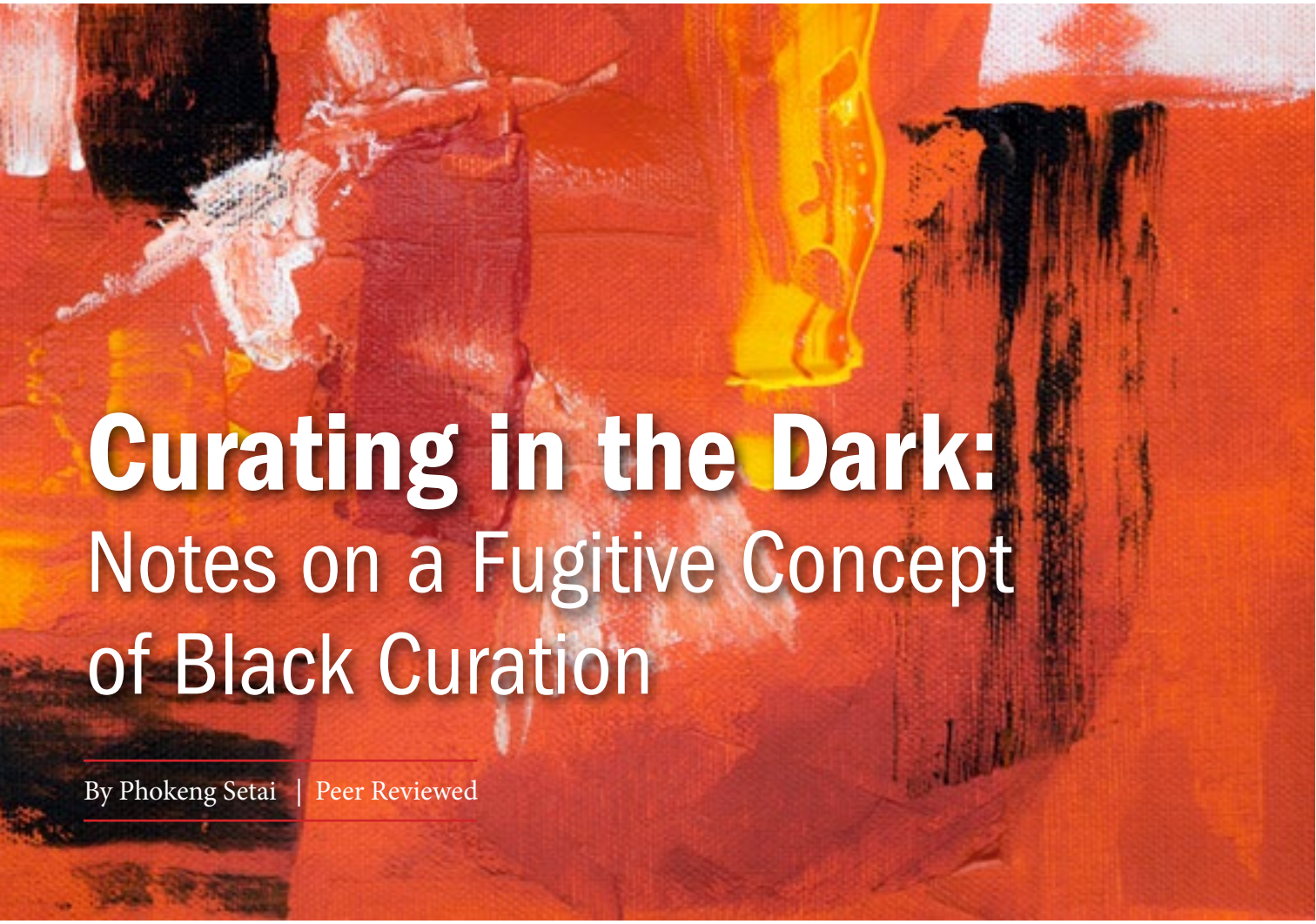

Curating in the Dark: Notes on a Fugitive Concept of Black Curation

By Phokeng Setai | Peer Reviewed

Abstract

The last forty years have seen substantial market attention being directed towards the aesthetic practices of Black African artists. Causing an exponential rise in expenditure on Black cultural production circulating in the global economy, stimulated by neoliberal interests seeking to capture extant vernaculars of Black African subjectivity. Such particularistic articulations of Black subjectivity have, over time, become commodified—instrumental to their commodification has been the removal of these practices from the cultures in which they were inherited (Gilroy, 2000:249). This paper delves into the machinations of this trend and interrogates by means of critical speculation how nascent curatorial constructs and discursive models may engender alternatives for engaging with Black modes of artistic production.. The paper proposes a method of 'curating in the dark', a speculative, multi-vocal dialogic praxis and non-linear approach that seeks to intervene into bankrupt models of curating or engaging with Black art. Curating in the dark is geared towards expanding the scope of what we understand Black art to be in the spectrum of current global artistic practices, and what it can also still become. Furthermore, this avowedly speculative inquiry seeks to disempower the neoliberal art system's modalities of capturing Black artistic practices and cultural patterns in the present.

In the 1960s, Africa had begun undergoing substantial political transition. A tide of African countries gained independence from European domination, sending shockwaves through the international community. This caused concern in the Western world[1] and stoked fears that it would have to loosen its powerful grip on political economic affairs on the continent (Okeke-Agulu and Enwezor, 2009). The decolonial momentum continued into the 1970s and reached a resounding crescendo in the 1980s, with the liberation struggle thriving in southern Africa culminating in Mozambique, Angola and Zimbabwe gaining their independence. Meanwhile in South Africa, dissent against the apartheid government led by student and worker resistance movements escalated at an alarming rate. For those African nations that had begun their transition into post-independence life, this phase presented a huge challenge to their new political agendas.

A majority of these countries liberalised their economic markets on the notion that doing so would be a positive stimulus that would enable their countries' economies to expand. The strategy proved effective in this regard, as post-colonial life in these countries heralded the promise of great opportunity, neatly sheathed in the prospect of a new post-colonial nationalism. The burgeoning market economies of these countries, and the resolute presence of neo-colonialism, had an interesting effect on the art and cultural patterns that began mushrooming in different parts of the continent. It is the period of the late 1970s and early 1980s in particular that became a defining era in the socio-political historiography of the African art and cultural landscape. So called 'African art', more specifically the art of African artists emanating from post-colonial territories, entered the global art marketplace. This fuelled a commercial spike in the purchasing of artwork produced by these artists and instigated the birth of contemporary African art.

It is at this critical juncture that the term 'contemporary' in relation to African culture started to feature significantly in global cultural discourse. The term became used to describe those emergent genres of African art-making, particularly those emanating from the postcolonial African world. In a very short space of time, contemporary African art became a highly sought-after commodity. Prior to this moment, African art had been reduced to moribund classifications which portrayed African onto-epistemology as benighted, and African material culture was used as proof of this 'fact'. The present-day phenomenon of the proliferation of Black images in international contemporary art is a direct off-shoot of the last 40 years of the neo-liberalisation of the global economy, during which time the art sphere has undergone significant transformations. Most notably, the art world has gradually deviated away from an overemphasis on representation of white European artistic subjectivities, and shifted its attention towards the aesthetic practices of Black African artistic producers. The last decade alone has seen this trend escalate even further, evidenced in the exponential rise in global levels of demand for Black art.

Financial markets operate on the basis of the principle of speculation, and the commercial art market is no different, as can be seen in how the soaring interest in Black African aesthetic modes, practices and cultural objects is inextricably connected to the commercial fixation with Black African cultural production. Up until this point, I have attempted to explain how the rapid ascendancy of Black cultural production in global economic markets is propelled by neo-liberal market forces, for whom expressions of Black African subjectivity appear merely as commodities readily available for consumption. The resultant shifts in the global economic order that occurred in the latter stages of the 20th century, from economic liberalism to neo-liberalism, coincided with the transition of political dispensation on the continent of Africa and other parts of the Global South. So extensive were these transformations that they had an invariable impact on incipient articulations of universal Black African subjectivity. Over time, the effects of the commodification of Black African subjectivities became visible in how emergent modalities of Black African artistic and cultural production started to rapidly assume the form of economic goods.

The objectification of modes of Black African subjectivity – whether it be on an ontological, epistemological, or purely materialistic basis – doesn't begin with the passage of the world economic system into the neo-liberal era. Rather, history would have it, intrinsic to the machinations of the Western imperial enterprise has been the intentional distortion and detachment of Black African cultural and spiritual components from their emplacement and their conversion into commodities assigned a

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definitive economic value (Gilroy, 2000: 249). The introduction of neo-liberalism marked a significant moment, as modes of human cultural expression and creativity became subsumed into the global economic superstructure. At present, human creative and cultural functions have developed into major economic reservoirs and powerhouses of capitalist production and accumulation. This phenomenon has proved to be a determining characteristic epitomising the advent of the neo-liberal era, namely the commodification of cultural patterns, particularly those of Black and/or other minority cultural groups into objectifiable products which are then dispatched into different parts of the globe.

This is one way in which post-colonial Black African culture has, in recent decades, been disseminated into different parts of the world. The art market, notorious for operating according to its own arbitrary rules based on subjective and symbolic speculation, has led us to this historical juncture in which Black artistic production seemingly lies at the frontier of global cultural production and discourse. What this remarkable development has unfortunately coincided with is the art market’s inundation with copious amounts of artistic representations. These commonly appear in the form of popular styles of figurative and photographic representations depicting Black African human figures according to a mimetic register denoting quotidian scenes of everyday life, and/or attempting to portray familiar accounts and documentations of the multiplicity of Black subjectivities. The amalgamation of these aesthetic representations can be seen as contributing to the repopulation of the denuded Black epistemological archival repository, which underwent despoliation at the hands of the vehicle of Western imperialism.

So copious are these aesthetic representations circulating in the art market that they are bordering on the line of aesthetic saturation. The superfluity of the Black figure in contemporary art runs the risk of homogenising Blackness and flattening its universal dimensionality. What makes this increasingly insidious is that for scholars such as Souleymane Bachir Diagne (2011: 6), who advocate certain aspects of Senghorian ideals, Black African art represents the philosophical worldview and ontological status of its people. If we were to go according to this principle to frame what constitutes contemporary Black African subjectivity, we would be led to believe that the phenomenon of the proliferation of images of Black bodies in contemporary art irrevocably essentialises Black African life and negates any of its complexities. This is the main issue with these *in vogue* representational aesthetics in contemporary art today; they perpetuate a singular understanding of Blackness and inconveniently trivialise the rising status of Black onto-epistemologies.

Nevertheless, I still believe that the excess of Black art in the art market should equally be read as an affirming statement of the space that Black cultural production has seemingly earned for itself in the broader domain of cultural discourse. Achille Mbembe, in the introduction to his 2017 opus *Critique of Black Reason*, foretold this condition, referring to it as the becoming Black of the world – claiming that Europe is no longer the absolute centre of the world (2017: 1). His viewpoint is by and large commensurate with the widening of regimes of representation. Today, modes of being that were previously excluded through colonial suppression, historical erasure and epistemic negation have become included into the expanded matrix that constitutes the broader landscape of human societies. Many sceptics see this as a regenesis of the disingenuous strategy of inclusion by exclusion. However, as suspicious as these trends may be, I see them contributing positively to the formation of global Black subjectivities.

It is important to critically engage with emergent trends shaping the face of global culture. History has

proven to us on so many occasions that the violence enacted towards marginalised cultures is a systematic consequence of white supremacy rather than merely a symptom of intermittent shifts in global patterns (Ross, 2013: 178). This makes it necessary, in my opinion, for us to implacably problematise these modes, and I use this point to further argue that it is not completely irrational to read the current emphasis on modes of Black African aesthetic representation as the residues of imperialism and grotesque manifestations of white European historical privilege intermingled with privilege (Walcott, 2018: 61). Lest we forget, white Europeans continue to have more visibility and rights of access in the art world, more than any other racial group. The global contemporary art world may be proliferated with Black art but the institution remains a bastion of Western European heteropatriarchy.

Western capital dominates in the art world and this has a corollary geopolitical impact on the circulation of capital in the global art world. This has me questioning the control that Western forces have on the imaginative faculties of Black African artistic producers? Throughout the generations, Euro-centrism has managed to successfully entrench itself in the global social imagination. Westerners scrupulously colonised entire realms of colonial and post-colonial libidinal desire tied to the imaginations of historically oppressed people (Mbembe, 2015). The overt danger of the West possessing so much power is that formulations of notions of Blackness will inevitably be to suit what the West deems acceptable. I argue that this warrants distrust of the authenticity of emergent social constructions of Blackness, as these could arise from fabricated schemas aimed at constraining vernacular personifications of the global Black experience. What if these arising formulations are in fact construed to encumber the malleability of Black onto-epistemologies?

I consider such tendencies to be reincarnations of the long-standing colonialist fixation to ethnographise the people whose life worlds are congenitally linked to the Black onto-epistemological paradigm. It is a pathology that can be traced as far back as the foundations of Western imperialism, through which Westerners endowed themselves with unbridled authoritative power over the cultural representation of the people they oppressed. Over time, this gradually engendered insular perceptions about colonized people, which then became crystallized into historical facts and finally consolidated in the constitution of colonial archives (Scott, 1999 in Kasfir, 2007: 7). I argue that the legacies of these nefarious acts are observable in the formation and sedimentation of colonial visual cultural regimes that span the post-colonial world.

There are several reasons attributable to the sudden recognition of post-colonial Black African artists. Regardless of the disparities distinguishing one artistic producer from another, they all share one quintessential characteristic: their unique political subjectivities as former colonial subjects or descendants thereof, as well as the trait of belonging to a historically oppressed group of people. An overdetermined inference emanating from this is that Black African art-making practices are in summation an assemblage of sublimated traumas carried by its producers. These assertions are not completely erroneous, as numerous postcolonial African artists have been inclined to illuminate through their art the socio-economic and political conditions prevalent in the societies that they emanate from. The circumstances in these societies can get so visceral that it is understandable why they can easily saturate and enforce themselves on the life worlds of the artistic producers – almost with the force of natural law (Ndebele, 2006: 14).

Perhaps then, due to this, the aesthetic practices of post-colonial African artistic producers can be seen as articulations of curative sensibilities employed to cope with the damaging effects of colonialism on them and the societies that they come from (Mogorosi, 2021: 29). Tumi Mogorosi (2021: 19), in his book *De-Aesthetic: Writing with and from the Black Sonic,* proposes that we adopt an approach to our field of relations that aims to de-aestheticize and unframe the structural inherency of imperial violence scaffolding our onto-epistemic and socio-phenomenological field of relations. I concur with Mogorosi's stance; just consider the fact that in the recent history of human social life on planet earth, Black subjecthood has constantly been relegated to the position of objects of total and symbolic violence. Moreover, due to it being primarily by means of aesthetic judgment that humans negotiate the onto-epistemological and empirical ground on which we stand, similar aesthetic motifs are traceable throughout the work of post-colonial and contemporary Black African artistic producers.

Most of them tend to incorporate a critical component in their work, which oftentimes is rooted in their nation's current or past socio-political status. As political subjects coming from territories riven by all kinds of socio-economic and political absurdities, I resonate with the inclination to artistically process the complex political intersections and profound identitarian connections (Goniwe, 2017: 38). The explosion of contemporary African art became solidified in the mass commodification of African artistic production. In the contemporary art world, one explicit ramification of this is the manifest instrumentalization of Black bodies and experiences to construct particularly distorted narratives about Blackness (Mombaca, 2018: 43). All the more reason why it is important for us to problematise the rise and widespread proliferation of depictions of the Black figure in global contemporary art today (Gilroy, 2000: 255). I have come to realise the immensity of the influence these artistic representations have on the cultural imagination universally. These artistic representations act as signifiers and are therefore seen as synonymous with the collective Black experience. As a result, people use them as mediatory conduits to understand the nuances of Black life without having to live with the fact of being Black, like many Black African cultural producers have to do.

Persons who are designated as belonging to this heterogeneous cultural milieu known as Black beingness, act upon and internalise social inscriptions encoded in their experiences of the social world; they then make use of these typifications to construct their social political identities (Kasfir, 2007: 11). Global Blackness has successfully interpolated itself into the present-day discourse of neo-liberal cultural production. A huge reason for this is the manner in which Black pan-African artistic producers have aesthetically engaged their life worlds and translated them into idiomatic formulations of artistic and cultural expression (Hassan and Oguibe, 2001: 22). Jacques Rancière (2004: 12) states that the system which determines how our sensibilities are distributed is what establishes the linkages of commonality and dictates the factual nature of sense perception which then discloses the respective parts that constitute our spectrum of existence. Rancière's elaboration of what constitutes our shared field of relations leads me to assert that social constructions of Black subjecthood are, to a large degree, responsible for governing considerations of the aesthetic, rational and theoretical constructs that coalesce to comprise notions of Blackness, as well as anti-Blackness, throughout history into our present time (Bradley and Ferreira Da Silva, 2021).

The ramifications of these outmoded conceptual models are widely at play in audiences' encounters with and experiences of Black African and African diasporic artistic and cultural production. This leads me to side with Rizvana Bradley and Denise Ferreira Da Silva (2021) who state that, in order to be able to reimagine possibilities in which global Black subjectivities can exist outside the structural confines engendered by Western imperialism, we must eradicate and/or overhaul the basic tenets undergirding the aesthetic framework of our current symbolic universal order of possibilities. The same can be said about the aesthetic field of Black art: it unfortunately finds itself bound inside this order of non-possibility and, for this reason, there is an urgent need for Black artistic production to be untethered from the representational schematic enclosures of our current global superstructure (Bradley and Da Silva, 2021).

I am ultimately forced to question the extent to which we, in our practices as critical Black curatorial practitioners and intellectuals, may inadvertently legitimize and reinforce the very same libidinal economies against which our work theoretically tries to push. As in recent decades, artists, cultural theorists and producers have been waging a

"Persons who are designated as belonging to this heterogeneous cultural milieu known as Black beingness, act upon and internalise social inscriptions encoded in their experiences of the social world; they then make use of these typifications to construct their social political identities (Kasfir, 2007: 11)."

protracted battle in which they have questioned the thingification of Black bodies in terms of how they have been imaged inside the locus of Western ocular-centric imagination (Hassan, 2001: 26). This is all entangled in the neo-liberal politics aimed at converting Black expressions and attributes into a wholly different, universalised configuration that can no longer be called uniquely Black.

Curating in the dark

I argue that the same phenomenon I discuss above is at play with the multiplication of Black images that we see in the contemporary neo-liberal art market. This then begs the question, which I borrow from pre-eminent Black South African historian Professor Hlonipha Mokoena (2021), who in an interview poses the question: What does it mean to be a Black artist portraying Black subjects? Secondly, as the curators of these images, the people who build bodies of knowledge around these representations and contextualise them inside a global discursive field: What does it mean to create new knowledge and discourses around these artistic reproductions of subjectivity, especially one so maligned and elusive as the global Black subjectivity? I am here to argue that Black radical propositions of curatorial practice are in a stronger position than ever to rewrite cultural discourse by offering oppositional formulations to these staid constructs and one-sided conceptual models that foster circumscribed articulations of emergent Black onto-epistemologies.

Herein, I would like to propose a speculative method of '*curating in the dark*', whose aim it is to deconstruct hegemonic ideologies intrinsic to the practice of curating and contemporary cultural discourse. Through incorporating strategies of multivocality and dialogism in the construction of interventions, this experimental methodology seeks to critically intervene into staid and obsolete models of curating and engaging with the multifarious genres constituting Black artistic and cultural production. '*Curating in the dark*' is essentially geared towards expanding the scope of analytic vocabularies we use to curatorially interpret Black art. It is a curatorial methodology rooted in the interpretive paradigm, and functions according to an approach that endeavours to confabulate new epistemic terrains that can be accessible to all (Bassene, 2018: 199). This approach draws its ideological impetus from anti-capitalist and racist genealogies situated inside the revolutionary framework of the Black Radical Tradition. Its prime modality of expression is inspired by the temporal fluidity of process-based articulations of artistic production.

This primarily has to do with trying to resist the commercial art world's tendency to privilege the object as commodity form, but rather to intentionally engage with the forces of production (i.e. process as object), and centralise this aspect of artistic production as the main site of aesthetic emancipation (Bishop, 2012: 11). Hence why I envision strategies of '*curating in the dark*' to be contemporary descendants of Black avant-gardist aesthetic traditions. Because these strategies rely on collaborative and improvisational syntheses of divergent aesthetic practices, instrumentalised to generate social and cultural models that are divisible from hegemonic societal constructs. Emphasising the dematerialisation of aesthetic production enables social processes to come into the forefront. This alone is an empowered point of departure, considering how easily the neo-liberal art market ensnares Black aesthetics amenable to the commodity form.

***Suna Lebota*: a silent refusal to the images of our time**

At the beginning of December 2021, I embarked on one such speculative interdisciplinary intervention in collaboration with the artist Brian Montshiwa at Church Project Space[2], the latest addition to Cape Town's bustling art ecosystem. *Suna Lebota*[3], the intervention that Brian and I conceptualised, was an experimental durational performance, performed by the artist Montshiwa and co-facilitated by the Church Project's production team and myself. The intervention spanned a period of five days, during which the artist repeated the action of applying red lipstick and kissing the pristine white walls of the project space. In the end, Brian amassed a total amount of 17 hours and six minutes diligently performing the action, whilst Nina Simone's live Montreal performance of her song *Stars* played on loop to great melancholic effect in the background.

The reason I am mentioning this intervention with Brian is that I undertook this project a number of weeks upon returning from participating in the *Black Self*

Colloquium[4] organised by Ashraf Jamal and funded by the Nirox Foundation. At the time of my participation in the colloquium, '*curating in the dark*' was merely an idea that I wrote a paper on and presented at the conference. My collaboration with Brian at Church Project Space presented me with an opportunity to practically experiment with this inchoate concept. Before Brian arrived in Cape Town to begin their short-term residency at Church Project Space, we held a series of conversations on Zoom discussing a myriad of topics, related to our respective practices, what we were both currently reading and the phenomenon of Black images in contemporary art, amongst other things. It is during these preliminary conversations that I related the performance method of duration as a possible approach for the artist to explore during their ten-day residency. What led me to conceive of durationality as a methodology of intervention was the thinking I had begun doing around the aesthetic practices of deceased legendary Nigerian musician Fela Kuti and the writings of the distinguished South African writer, Professor Njabulo Ndebele. From a curatorial standpoint, practical factors such as the location of the project and brevity of Brian's residency featured prominently in my preparatory thinking. In response, the everyday as a site of knowledge juxtaposed to the temporal intrusions shaping everyday phenomenologies of human stories began to interest me. In my observations, I had noticed that performance-based artistic practices – particularly those involving of Black (queer) artists – had the tendency to be spectacularised in a manner that I had begun to regard as problematic.

Analysing this phenomenon in relation to the proliferation of Black images in contemporary art, the question occurred to me again, what did it mean for Black bodies to be the centre of so much spectacle? Professor Njabulo Ndebele, in his seminal book *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture*, has this to say about the impulse to spectacularize:

'The spectacular documents, it indicts implicitly; it is demonstrative, preferring exteriority to interiority; it keeps the larger issues of society in our minds, obliterating the details; it provokes observation and analytical thought; it calls for emotion rather than conviction; it establishes a vast sense of presence without offering intimate knowledge; it confirms without necessarily offering a challenge.' (Ndebele, 2006: 41)

The spectacle flattens out the quotidian, in many ways it renders it invisible by casting a shadow over the details of ordinary life; by doing so it strips the complexity out of our life-world experiences and intersubjective encounters with one another. In the context of live performance art, the Black body tends to be super-naturalised to conform to such alienating registers, inevitably de-humanising the performer and de-contextualising the performance from its intended meaning. Therefore, as a provocation to the artist, I asked us to explore the notions of duration and ordinariness as a radical counterpoint to the myopia of the contemporary art world. In doing so, we were already working in opposition to established temporalities of the neo-liberal art world. Furthermore, placing emphasis on the minutiae of the everyday alongside the performance, we challenged the viewer to think about their complicity in the construction of everyday life. Especially because the spectacularization of certain groups of people's lived-experiences disempowers their existences in such subliminally harmful ways.

This intervention of ours derives its theoretical thrust from the curatorial strategy which I refer to as '*curating in the dark*'. Brian and I made use of this approach to puncture the monotonous fabric of everyday life. This is what makes live performance art so potent because it is able to interrupt the ordinary and simultaneously disarticulate our expectations of the everyday. What emerged from these interactions between the artist is an experimentally fugitive performance piece which became referred to as *Suna Lebota*. As the experimental piece matured over the five days and the redness of the lipstick adorned the walls, assuming a cartographical appearance, what stands out to me more than anything is the manner in which the artist, Brian, as the main provocateur, returned the gaze back to us, the viewers. This evokes Tina Campt's musings in her latest book, *A Black Gaze*, in which she discusses emancipatory regimes of Black self-representation which lie at the disposal of Black people, subverting the white supremacist gaze and techniques aimed at capturing modalities of Black aesthetic production, and more importantly the onto-epistemological expressions of Black life.

Notes

1. I am using this term to refer to various regions, nations and states, depending on the context, most often consisting of the majority of Europe, Northern America, and Australasia, also known as the Global North.

2. Church Project Space is a multidisciplinary art project co-founded by Hoosein Mahomed and Shelleen Maharaj located on Church Street, in the Central Business District in Cape Town, South Africa.

3. 'Suna Lebota' is a Sesotho phrase which in English translates to 'Kiss the wall'.

4. *The Black Self Colloquium* was a two-day workshop think-tank that took place at Nirox Sculpture Park in Gauteng Province, 4–6 November 2021.Notes

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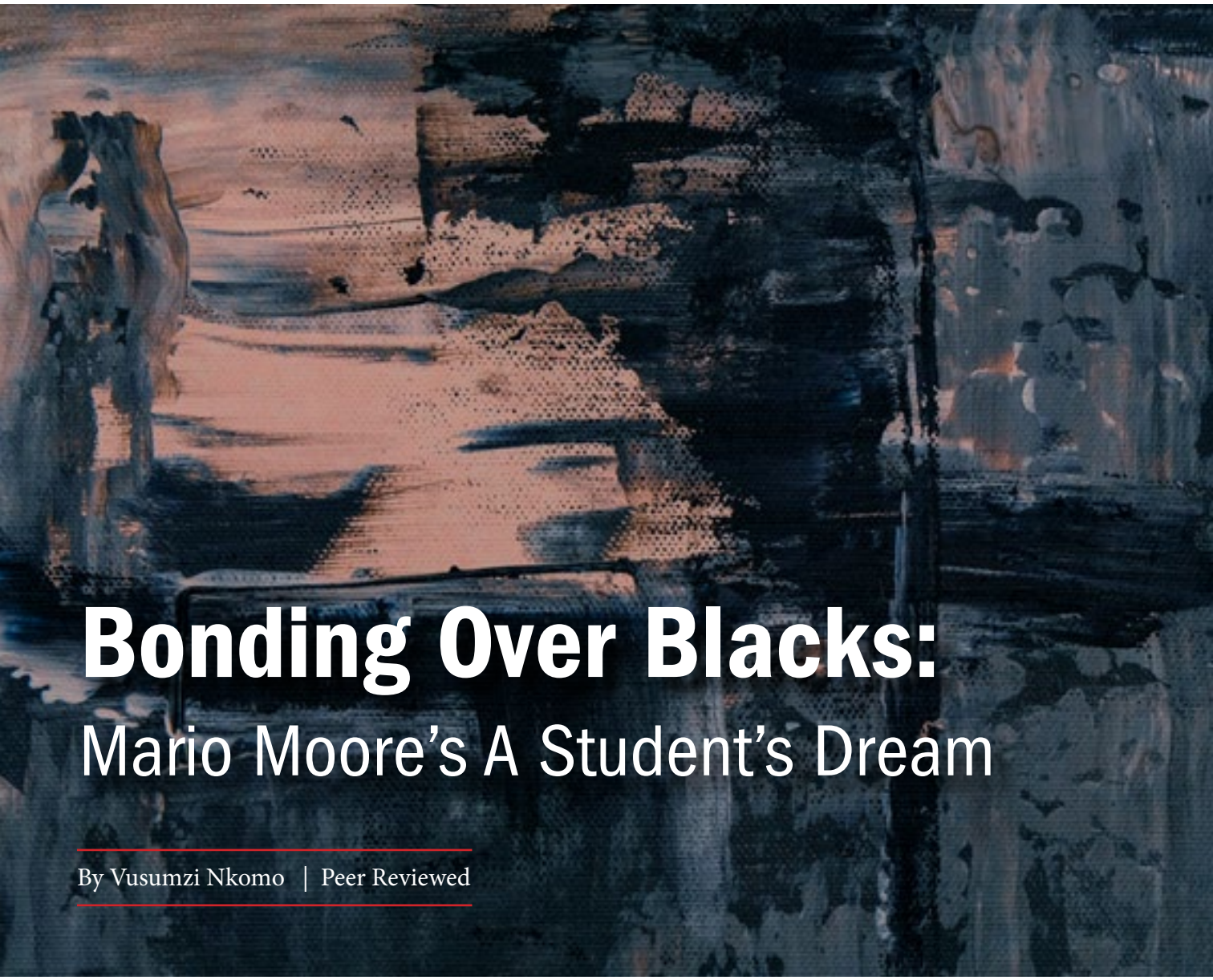

Bonding Over Blacks:
Mario Moore's A Student's Dream

By Vusumzi Nkomo | Peer Reviewed

Abstract

Through Marx and Freud, scholar Frank Wilderson III asserts that 'there is no self to be known,' owing to the notion that the conceptual integrity of the Self relies on 'outdated notions of a unitary self.' I want to think about the implications of this provocation for Black subjectivity, and by extension take seriously David Marriot's lament, 'what do you do with an unconscious that appears to hate you?' I intend to demonstrate this tragic relation between the Black imago and the Black image/portrait, as well as its dependence on a global consensus (or civil society's collective unconscious) that regards the Black as an object (rather than subject/self) of enjoyment. At the risk of pushing this argument too far, I want to consider how Mario Moore, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, and Cinga Samson's Black subjects (and the worlds they inhabit) struggle against what Wilderson, by way of Marriot, describes as a phenomenon where 'all sentient beings, Humans and Blacks, bond over the imago of the Black.'

> 'Existence might be a daily struggle for us all, but for the black his being is the effect of a war fought on at least two fronts. He must enter into combat not only with the presentiments and premonitions of a world condemning him to nonexistence, he must also enter the lists against his own image.'
> — David Marriott, *On Black Men* (2000: 88)

Through Fanon, through Marriott, we might begin to *see* the horror of the intimacy that binds together the White-Human subject and the Black object (this crucial distinction follows what Marriot (2000) calls 'the paralysing split between being black and being human'); this binding might help elucidate the nature of the fantasies and anxieties that sit comfortably in the minds of, say, White people, which is to say, parts of themselves they can't shake off and, simultaneously, help us understand the fantasies and anxieties that sit nervously in the minds of Blacks. They can't shake these off not because of lack of will, but can't shake them off for as long as White people remain White, and Blacks remain Black[1], in ways that vouchsafe not only racist performances but the integrity and intensity of racial categories writ large.

It is by centralising this drama that I seek to *look* at some paintings of Black figures by Black artists, particularly Mario Moore's *A Student's Dream* (2017), to consider what *looking* at these images entails: for me, a Black 'man/person' (here, as Wilderson puts it, 'yes the scare quotes matter' (2009: 119)), for the artists, the figures in the artworks, the world *in* the artworks, the world outside the artworks, the 'extra-diegetic' where the Black 'people' (upon which these figures are mapped and figured) are always already corporeally and socially dead and dying. The Human subjects *looking* at Black people, looking at Blackened figures. Black people *looking* at themselves, *looking* at themselves being looked at (by an act of identification, the Black person doing the looking, attempts to identify with the Blackened figure and thereby begins to look at themselves looking at themselves[2]). In what follows, this text considers the implications of reading 'Black images' by paying attention to the processes of phobogenisis in relation to the unconscious[3].

It remains unclear what resistance, exactly, can a Black image put up against a racial and racializing *imago* (see Laplanche and Pontalis, 1988) that intrudes on the (in)capacity of its figures and ~~subjects~~ (this is struck through to underscore a peculiar subjectivity that is always under erasure and dead) to *appear* in 'their own terms'. The possessive 'their own' is complicated at best and thrown out the window at worst when one considers Fanon's declaration that the Black (~~person~~ or in this case, image) has no 'ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man' (Fanon, 2008: 83). As 'genealogical isolates', to borrow from Orlando Patterson (1982: 312), the socially dead fungible objects can never have 'their own' anything, which is to say, they can't have it in ways that are essential or seem to matter in *essential* ways. 'Genealogical isolates' have no 'terms'; in the sense of (i) not only language but speech (to summon language for the purposes of naming and the full expression of a unitary Self), an uncoerced speech that can be expressed with impunity, and 'terms' as in (ii) *times* or periodicity, a temporality that is not displaced and undermined, the *time* of a 'permanently belated' Black derelict psyche that is, according to Marriott, following Fanon, 'waiting…for an imago that is already there, lying in wait for him…a moment of suspension, one that delays, perhaps permanently, the timely expression of anything that might be called one's own[4] (2000: 82). We might add, a belated Black derelict psyche that has no time[5].

'It is in white terms,' writes Fanon, 'that one [Black] *perceives* one's fellows' (emphasis mine, 2008: 126). The White-Human ocular *hyper-capacity* for perception, for *looking,* (i) invades and conquers the on-*looking* Black, and (ii) *enjoys* the Blackened ~~subject~~ that is portrayed in the Black image. The white terms are the anti-Black racist culture's anxieties and phobias about Black people that are *enjoyed* by both Blacks and Whites-Humans 'to form a bond through racial antagonism' (2007: 211), a 'sick bond' (2007: 216) that is *constituent* to the white terms of *looking* and perceiving. I emphasise this degrading and wretch-*ing looking* to highlight it as a constituent element of *seeing,* which is to say the White-Human subject does not know how else to look at Black people even if it tried, and further, how *looking*, here understood not simply as a *way of seeing* but the very privileging of the sense of *seeing* (against a Blackness that, according to Rizvana Bradley and Denise Ferreira da Silva, constitutes a 'threat to sense'), is always already an anti-Black endeavour that is parasitic on the Black object being looked at/seen.[6]

Furthermore, what is the place of Black images in the world of images, or what Barthes calls a 'family of images'? What this question is after is the place of images of ~~people~~ who have no place in the World because they have no World[7], no *people-ness,* no relationality that could resemble what is socially coded as the 'family'. What this question wants to take seriously is whether we could separate these Black images from Black *imagoes* and considers 'the place of the black imago in the white unconscious' that invades '*our*' unconscious.

Black desolation[8]

> 'As reeking tombs in the public life of culture, black men can be cannibalised, shredded and torn open because, like the living dead, they are imagined as vicious and parasitic, insatiably feeding off the lives of their living, white hosts.'
> — David Marriot, *On Black Men* (2000: 40)

Mario Moore's *A Student's Dream* (2017), from his solo show *Recovery* (2018), features three white men: two clad in clean white coats, the other in a black tux. The artist, or the figure of the artist, lies on a table with no support structure for his head, his eyes are wide open, we can see his shoulders, the rest of his body is covered with a white sheet. A dog rests under the table, closer to us a skull sits on a stool, *looking* at us. The light that lit or hits his face is not for me, which is to say not intended for my *looking* but I'll take what I can get from this blank Black face and emotionless and silent smile of a 'pained flesh' (Hartman, 1997: 56). The light is a prop and function of the operation. The absence of any surgical tools is quite curious: is his body torn open or simply accessible by virtue of open vulnerability to gratuitous violence? Are they, the white men, opening him up or just *looking* at him unjustly, looking at 'the within loss', as M. NourbeSe Philip puts it (2008: 28)? Is he numb (to it all)? We've established that the light is for their pleasure (of looking) and enjoyment (of his flesh).

> "The Human subjects *looking* at Black people, looking at Blackened figures. Black people *looking* at themselves, *looking* at themselves being looked at (by an act of identification, the Black person doing the looking, attempts to identify with the Blackened figure and thereby begins to look at themselves looking at themselves[2]). In what follows, this text considers the implications of reading 'Black images' by paying attention to the processes of phobogenisis in relation to the unconscious[3]."

The skull on the stool is him and all his deaths that he has died and will continue to die at the hands (or *seeing* eyes) of these white men. Their look(ing) is murderous; it is a 'history of [...] looking [at Black men],' writes Marriott, that 'reveals a trait of wanting to devour, to destroy and modify via the eyes' (2000: 41). This face being looked at (or experimented on), 'the living image of a dead thing' (Barthes, 1982: 79) can never die enough from this 'deadening objectification', to borrow from Saidiya Hartman (1997: 101). Listen to the painter:

> 'Mentally, looking at these images of Black men being killed, over and over, that trauma — and then a constant state of Black men having to work, work, work. This idea of resting is a mystery, fantasy land!'
> — Mario Moore (in Sharp, 2018)

Below his head is an uppercase 'DREAM.' – written in white. The end-quote mark, with the full stop sign, signals an end to a sentence, something said (the table is big enough to carry the title of Dr King's famous speech) but cannot be said loud enough without consequence. However, I'm inclined to read the (colour) 'white' of the sheet (with/and/because of the whiteness of the three men) with the visible word as 'white DREAMS' (of culture); resting is fantasy land because it is nothing but white (men) dream(ing), or white fantasies/dreams that are parasitic on and invade Black capacity for dreaming. This invasion by the white unconscious is the conquest of the Black unconscious that 'violently evacuates' (2007: 216) the self-~~subject~~; it is, Marriott argues, 'the intrusion, into [the Black's] unconscious, of phobias which racist culture project[s] onto the bodies of black people' thereby attaching to them racist imagoes.

'[T]he longer you look, the stranger it becomes.' These are the words of British art critic Jonathan Jones reflecting on Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's *No Such*

Luxury (2020). He could as easily be reflecting on Cinga Samson's Black figures. I continue to consider this 'strange wanting to look' at Black people; Jones *feels* it, the stakes of looking at a ~~subject~~ that always 'fails to escape its socially dead conception' (Marriott, 2016: 34) and so it remains (a) strange(r) and pleasurable to the 'devouring eye' (2000: 32) of others. It is as strange as Cinga's Black ~~subjects~~ whose flesh is equally *enjoyed* with equal force. I look at them, they are alive, even though it is 'specifically as a corpse that blackness appears' (Marriott, 2016: 34). These images seem to be *enjoyed* as 'corpsed' *sans pain*[9]; what we know about Black people '*in*' the World is carried by the viewer into the world of the artwork. What we could possibly know about us is already conquered and intruded upon by a racist imago and 'an unconscious that appears to hate [us]' (2000: 79).

Plantation Optics

Taking seriously the implications of a *seeing* that kills, and of looking at *things* that are killed by and when they are seen. A seeing that satisfies necrophiliac desires and pleasures, repulsions and phobias, fantasies and longings. We call this, here, Plantation Optics.[10]

One could feel that the pairing 'optic' and 'plantation' are curious phrasing. I am interested in 'optics' as (i) the study of sight and *seeing,* and additionally, (ii) the perception of events, bodies, courses of action by the public or within the codes of White-Human civil society. We want to think about optics in relation to Black corporeality, or/and bodies, and what *seeing* them *means* or rather the implications of *seeing* Black bodies. It is in the context of these meanings that we are drawn to the second definition of optics: how are these meanings (re)produced in ways that frame how the public-World sees Black people and images of Black people. The concept of the Plantation (pulled away from a definitive time and place but as the foundation of modern society) is considered here as foundational to these optics of/or *looking* at Black images-people; it is the 'onticidal terror/destruction/death'[11] of capture-captivity which finds and outlives the Plantation estate as a formal institution which informs this enquiry as much as it informs the modern World writ large, and the perceptible and imperceptible ways in which Black images-people are perceived.

Furthermore, *looking* in the Plantation, *looking* at the Plantation, can't escape the practice of 'overseeing' (a yoke so inescapably real for the Black bodies it oversees): the brutal exercise of force over Slaves, a terror that is foundational to what we know as policing. This power, vested symbolically and otherwise in the hands of all White people, marks what we now understand as the social death that marks all Black bodies as not only Slaves to their legal Masters but every single White person. In *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms,* Frank B. Wilderson III, by way of Orlando Patterson, defines social death as a paradigmatic *position*[12] (not simply an identity or 'anthropological accoutrements') of those who are 'generally dishonored, perpetually open to gratuitous violence, and void of kinship structure, that is, having no relations that need be recognized, a being outside of relationality…' (2010: 11). According to Marriott, '[B]lack social death is taken to be a rule of life that prescribes to [B]lacks that they live under the command of death' (2016: 34). Discussing what he calls Afropessimism's most 'comprehensive and iconoclastic claim', Wilderson argues that 'Blackness is coterminous with Slaveness: Blackness *is* social death' (2020: 102), an inseparability that marks a profound shift in how we may think about not only 'conceptions of suffering' (Wilderson in Mngxitama et. al, 2008: 97) when the ~~subjects~~ are Black bodies, but as an extension of this; how we are *seen,* how we *see* the socially dead.

In *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (2011), visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff argues that 'visuality's first domains were the slave plantation, monitored by the surveillance of the overseer, operating as the surrogate of the sovereign' (2011: 2). 'Visuality,' writes Mirzoeff, 'supplemented the violence of authority and its separations' (2011: 3) and, we should add, it was an extension of terror of and in the Plantation. The techniques of *overseeing,* embodied by the Overseer, constitute what Mirzoeff calls 'oversight' (2011: 10), a total violence and 'world-generating optic' (2011: 8) that we may think of as a force that makes the World-Modernity possible and structurally positions the Slave as a thing anyone can do anything to, including the capacity to *look* at.

I am interested in theorising the Plantation Optic as a framework to situate the terror of the plantation in and as the act of *looking*: to consider the violence of

the Human subject as constituent to the ways in which Black ~~subjects~~ are *looked* at and *enjoyed* 'as abject representatives of death' (Marriott, 2000: 15). How are the images of the (socially) dead *digested*? What is the nature of the *hunger* for Black images and can it be approached and/or theorised independently from the *appetite* for Black flesh? What is the function of this deadly fetish for Black flesh that (re)produces it as '*health tonic* for everyone who is not Black; an ensemble of sadistic rituals and captivity' (Wilderson, 2020: 40; emphasis mine).

Furthermore, Mirzoeff's 'Overseeing' connotes more than just a functionary of power operating at the level of the extra-judicial but points us to an excessive form of *seeing*, an unbounded *looking* embodied by Human bodies abundantly bestowed with ontological capacity that owes its integrity to the theft of bodies. This 'strange, and ruthless, world of wanting to look at black [people]' (Marriott, 2000: 34) is the function of Over-seeing that kills, a 'sadistic form of looking' (2000: 32) at the 'killable and warehousable objecthood of Black flesh' (Aarons, 2016: 5), the socially (and corporeally) dead-dying and only fatally alive. Overseeing *is* the Plantation Optic.

Notes

1. Beyond being a provocative statement, it must be noted that what I am gesturing towards is a theorisation of these categories (Black, White, as well as Slave, Human) as structural positions as opposed to identities. I argue, contentiously, that the people who embody them can only be free of them once we step into a new epistemological order, following the *end of the world as we know it,* a conceptual terrain where bodies will be imbued with different sets of meanings and capacities.

2. Probing what he calls Kobena Mercer's 'divided identifications', David Marriot (2000), in the essay titled 'Murderous Appetites: Photography and Fantasy', develops a sophisticated reading of Mercer's readings of Robert Mapplethorpe's images and asks us to consider the complex nature of a Black person looking at an image of another Black person/subject. Another example is provided by Marriott in Footnote 4 of the opening essay of *On Black Men* where he considers *identification* between a young Muhammad Ali and images of Emmett Till, as well as the black community looking at mass distributed images of Till's body, 'black communities who…are looking at an image of themselves – what they can become – in white culture' (2000: 22).

3. I am indebted to the literature of Afropessimists in my attempts to think the relation between visuality and the Black body.

4. Marriott is inviting us to reconsider the moment Fanon is *seen* by the violent gaze of a white child who, in a moment of horror (for him and Fanon), exclaims, '*Look*, a Negro…Mama, *see* the Negro!' (emphasis mine), and immediately followed by 'I'm frightened'. Fanon adds: 'Now they were beginning to be afraid of me' (2008: 84). What we witness, with and through Fanon, is an arrival that is too late to challenge the predominance of a Black imago.

5. To push this further, we might think this concept as an *anti-time* relation, an ontological dereliction that we can call an anti-narrative 'flat line' with no beginning and no end, a *disequilibrium-faux equilibrium-disequilibrium*, to borrow from the Afropessimist parlance.

6. I am not in any way suggesting that to liberate Black people from this Human hyper- capacity to *look* would amount to the so-called liberation of Black people, or the 'end of the world as we know it', to borrow from Aimé Césaire.

7. In his fine essay 'The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism' (2011), Jared Sexton argues that: 'Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in', and asks us to distinguish the 'World' from 'Earth'.

8. I borrow this phrase from David Marriot, *On Black Men* (2000: 32).

9. It is beyond the scope of this essay to argue how Black images that don't feature figures in pain, whether perceived/imagined or real, aren't immune to racial imagoes about Black people. This remains an interesting subject to explore in the context of an obsession and pervasive

consumption of Black portraiture in contemporary art. It is in this context that I mention Samson and Yiadom-Boakye, whose Black figures enjoy a relative distance to Black death (even though Samson's solo, *Iyabanda Intsimbi/The metal is cold,* at FLAG Art Foundation (2021), flirts with it, at least conceptually).

10. My interest here is tracing the history (which is to say, the past, present and future incarnations) of the desire and murderous appetite to look at Black bodies and how this phenomenon of a *looking that devours* can be located in the violent matrix inherit to the Plantation paradigm.

11. I am thinking about this total violence with the ideas developed in Calvin L. Warren's *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (2018).

12. Wilderson's intervention is crucial; there is a general tendency to conflate Blackness as a structural position and Blackness as an identity. Or to put it differently, how we may think the difference between how Black people are structurally or paradigmatically positioned in the World, as opposed to Black people's decision to identify as Black. The implications of this conflation are huge; this essay then concerns itself with the former as something that can be theorised separately from the latter.

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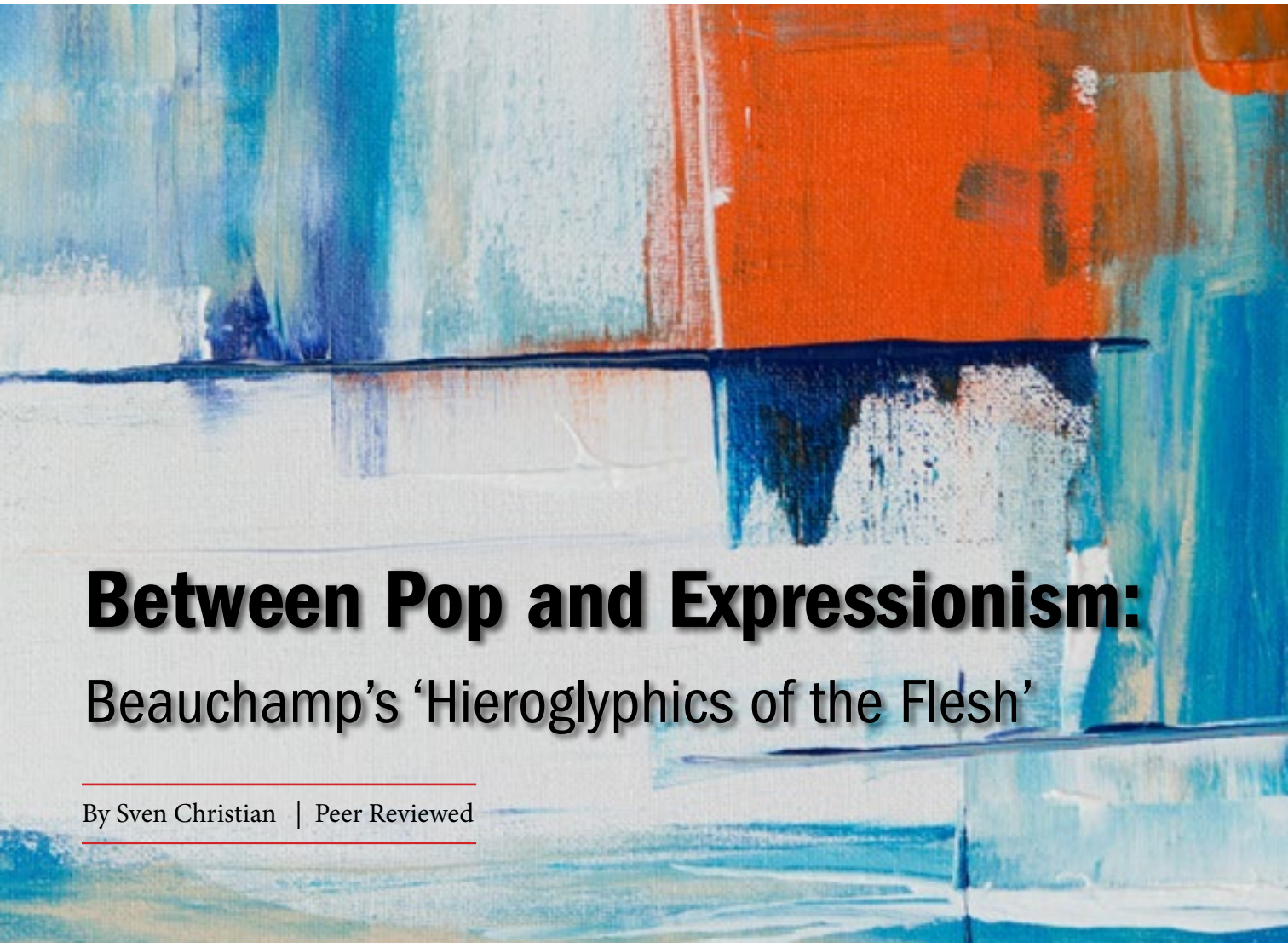

Between Pop and Expressionism:

Beauchamp's 'Hieroglyphics of the Flesh'

By Sven Christian | Peer Reviewed

Abstract

Satire is meant to problematise the way we see things. If it doesn't, it risks re-enforcing what it set out to critique. In 2019, Athi Mongezeleli Joja raised this concern, arguing that despite Vusi Beauchamp's desire to 'take away the power' that racial stereotypes have 'over black Africans,' his use of such iconography ultimately 'ends up misnaming, if not underestimating the power of the thing he thinks he's undermining.' While doubtful that Beauchamp underestimates the power of such tropes, I want to foreground the possibility that he is not being heard in the way he wants to be, drawing on the understanding that his art came about as 'sort of regurgitating something that [he] always knew but never had words for.' It is within this corporeal vein—this space of no words—that I'd like to discuss Beauchamp's work, for while much attention has been paid to his iconography, it is the specificity of his experience and his treatment thereof that is often overlooked, if only by virtue of the sheer toxicity of his subject matter. Here Elizabeth Alexander's paper "Can you be BLACK and look at this?" is particularly instructive, suggesting that experience 'can be taken into the body via witnessing and recorded in muscle memory as knowledge,' or what Hortense Spillers calls 'a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh.'

> 'People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.'
> — James Baldwin, 'Stranger in the Village,' 1955.

Satire is meant to problematise the way we see things. If it doesn't, it risks re-enforcing what it set out to critique. Richard Pryor – the comedian said to have popularised the n-word's use in contemporary culture (Henry and Henry, 2014: 150) – realised this quite late in his career following a trip to Kenya. 'I've been there three weeks and I haven't even said it, I haven't even thought it, and it made me say, "Oh, my God, I've been wrong, I've been wrong. I got to regroup my shit."'

Pryor only began using the word in his sets following his political awakening in the 1970s while living in Berkeley, where he met Huey Newton and deep-dived into the writings of Malcolm X. He seized upon the word with much enthusiasm, adamant that in doing so he would empty it of all meaning. 'It gave him strength,' wrote biographers David and Joe Henry, 'It robbed the word of its wretchedness and made him feel free.' Yet, as observed by Richard Iton, Pryor later felt that 'his intentions in using the word had been misinterpreted' and that 'his efforts were in vain: "They didn't get what I was talking about. Neither did I."'

In 2019, Athi Mongezeleli Joja raised a similar concern about Vusi Beauchamp's art, arguing that despite the artist's self-expressed desire to 'take away the power' that racial stereotypes have 'over black Africans,' his use of such iconography ultimately 'ends up misnaming, if not underestimating the power of the thing he thinks he's undermining' (2019: 32). Drawing on a range of examples – from the works of Irma Stern, Zapiro, and Brett Murray, to H&M's controversial advert, the Penny Sparrow saga, and the #SaveSA march – Joja makes a compelling argument for racial signification as an 'itinerant, elastic, and common ersatz,' able to mediate 'between hard boundaries of every social strata' (2019: 20).

While many of the examples that appear in Joja's paper were met with outrage, he observes how public backlash has not managed to stamp racist attitudes out, but instead drives them underground, only to resurface in a different guise. For this reason, he writes that racism is '"beyond" the stereotypes it produces,' arguing that it cannot 'sufficiently hold sway without recurrently manipulating the gap these stereotypes offer' (2019: 22). The result, he writes, is that racism 'always reaches unto the social screen memory to reconstitute racial boundaries' (2019: 22). Consequently, he writes that despite Beauchamp's attempts at subversion, the artist's reliance on such tropes may serve to inadvertently regenerate 'myths about blacks' and assuage 'white culpability' (2019: 20).

Part of the problem might be that satire's efficacy is reliant on a 'stable set of values from which to judge behaviour' (Colletta, 2009: 859); a set of values which enable artists to hold human folly to ridicule. In a racist society, the use of racial stereotypes, intended as satire, may simply reinforce or affirm racial prejudice. Another might be that in our postmodern age of pastiche – defined by Frederic Jameson as 'a neutral practice of mimicry, without satirical impulse, without laughter' (Colletta, 2009: 857) – it has become that much harder to distinguish between what is real and what is not, to the point where 'unity' is replaced with 'multiplicity,' 'meaning' with the 'appearance of meaning,' 'depth' with 'surface' (Colletta, 2009: 856). In short, to the point where everything becomes noise, open to interpretation and misunderstanding.

This might explain Beauchamp's preoccupation with popular culture, in particular the media. It might also explain his preoccupation with surface, sign, and symbol; with stereotypes, brands, politicians, movie characters, celebrities, and the like. My intention here is not to debate the efficacy of Beauchamp's work as satire – or, for that matter, whether it *is* satire – but to try to better understand his motivation. If he is not being

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heard in the way he wants to be, how does he want to be heard? If he is aware of the risks involved when reproducing racial stereotypes, then why continue to produce the work he does? Is he simply exploiting the art market's appetite for such tropes – for spectacle, shock, and awe, as Joja suggests – or is there more to the work than meets the eye? If an artwork is always, to some extent, a self-portrait of the artist (and here I'm not only talking about the artist as an individual, but everything that they bring to the work from the world outside), then where is Beauchamp in his work?

Premised on the understanding that his art is caught up in – and reflective of – a pervasive racial imago, I want to think about the relationship between the artist and the source of his imagery – what he is seeing in the world, how these images are internalised, and how they pass through the body to arrive in their present form.

Muscle Memory

Thinking through these questions, I turn to a paper written by Elizabeth Alexander in 1994, titled 'Can you be BLACK and look at this?'[1] It centred around George Holiday's videotape of the beating of Rodney King at the hands of four white Los Angeles police officers, in particular the video's distortion during the trial, the attendant narratives which circulated it, and how the video was publicly staged and consumed. By no means an isolated incident, her paper sought to articulate 'the ways in which a practical memory exists and crucially informs African-Americans about the lived realities of how violence and its potential informs our understanding of our individual selves as a larger group' (1994: 79), highlighting that although the historical spectacle of racially-informed violence has been primarily staged and consumed by white men, 'in one way or another, black people have been looking, too, forging a traumatized collective historical memory' which is 'reinvoked…at contemporary sites of conflict' (1994: 79).[2]

Her essay draws on a number of witness accounts, from Frederick Douglass' and Harriet Jacobs' 19th-century recollections to those which followed the lynching of Emmett Till in 1955. Whether or not experienced first-hand, Alexander observes how the act of bearing witness is often physically inculcated, to the point where witness often becomes participant. Thus, when Douglass recounts the whipping of his aunt Hester, he describes the sight of her blood as 'warm' (1994: 82). Similarly, when watching the 'not guilty' verdict of King's trial on TV, one individual reported 'a pain that went from the top of [his] head to the tip of [his] toes' (1994: 85). Alexander describes this as a 'synesthetic response' (1994: 82) to an experience that has been imbibed – recorded in what Hortense Spillers calls 'a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh' (Alexander, 1994: 86). For Alexander, such 'corporeal images of terror suggest that "experience" can be taken into the body via witnessing and recorded in muscle memory as knowledge'; a knowledge which she deems necessary to those who believe themselves to be next (1994: 83).

In this way, Alexander demonstrates how such incidents inform one's sense of self as part of a larger group, highlighting how this awareness is passed down from one generation to the next, 'so that everyone knows the parameters in which their bodies move' (1994: 85). Here, it is not only the actualisation of violence but its *potential* – the understanding that violence can arrive at your doorstep, unannounced and unprovoked – that leaves in its wake the uncomfortable (yet necessary) knowledge of one's own vulnerability. At the same time, she observes how the public spectacularisation of such violence and the narratives used to justify it – such as the repeated freeze-framing used to manipulate evidence in the King video and the defence's description of King as a 'bear-like,' 'probable ex-con' (1994: 80) – stand at odds with those histories recorded in muscle-memory and passed down from one generation to the next. Consequently, she writes that 'if any one aphorism can characterize the experience of black people in [the United States], it might be that the white-authored national narrative deliberately contradicts the histories our bodies know' (1994: 80), arguing that 'the American way with regard to the actual lived experience of African-Americans has been to write a counter-narrative' which erases 'bodily information,' substituting it with a self-justifying text that often becomes 'a version of national memory' (1994: 80).

Although Alexander's essay is rooted in the particular – yet varied – experiences of African-Americans, it is all too familiar here in South Africa. One need only recall the testimony of Hawa Timol (2012), who instinctively knew that the policeman in her living room was lying when he said that her son had jumped from

the tenth floor while in custody; or how the police responsible for Steve Biko's death initially claimed that he'd died in prison from a hunger strike. Later the story changed: there was a 'scuffle'; Biko had gone 'berserk'; Biko had fallen and 'bumped his head.' No doubt, Biko too felt the acute sense that he might be next, having joked to his wife Nontsikelo Biko that she would be 'a widow at the age of thirty' (South African Press Association, 1997), but for Biko, overcoming 'the personal fear of death' was a necessary step along the road to liberation.

In an interview, first printed in *The New Republic* a year after his death, he said that even 'your method of death can itself be a politicizing thing' (2005a: 152). To be sure, Biko didn't intend to be a martyr. He valued life. But it was precisely for this reason that he was prepared to die. Much like Alexander, who writes of 'a desire to find a language to talk about "my people"' – one which is 'claimed rather than merely received' (1994: 78) – Biko's Black Consciousness sought 'to talk to the black man in a language that is his own,' to 'make the black man come to himself; to pump back life into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity, to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the county of his birth' (2005a: 30).

Turning to Beauchamp's artist blurb for *People from the Sun* (2020), I come across a line by Publius Terence that seems apposite: 'I am human, and I think nothing human is alien to me.' It sounds like a straightforward declaration, but to 'think' is also to doubt. Where 'I am human' is a statement of fact, he cannot be completely sure that the way he inhabits the world is the same for others. The hesitation exists as an inconsolable gap; an unease about the placement of 'I' and its relation to the collective that in some sense echoes both Alexander and Biko's desire to find a language through which to identify; a language that is 'claimed rather than merely received' (Alexander, 1994: 80). It is here, I believe, that we may begin to understand Beauchamp's motivation, for while much attention has been paid to his iconography, in particular the repeated use of blackface and its potential efficacy as satire, it is the specificity of his experience and his treatment thereof that is often overlooked, if only by virtue of the sheer toxicity of his subject matter.

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In an interview with Mmutle Arthur Kgokong (2015), Beauchamp recounted his earliest memory. It is 1985. He is six years old, and has just arrived home in Mamelodi from primary school. He and his one-year-old brother are playing outside when they hear the sound of 'gun shots from everywhere…loud and very close' (Beauchamp and Kgokong, 2015). His mother comes running out of the house, dressed in her gown, picks up his brother and takes them both inside, placing a lappie over their faces to mask the tear gas. 'I never saw my mother in the state she was in. I remember looking out through the big windows wondering what is going on. Go iragalang? And at the same time there was this feeling, a scary feeling that I'd never felt before' (Beauchamp and Kgokong, 2015). A little later on, he talks about how his art came about, as 'sort of regurgitating something that I always knew but never had words for' (2015).

It is here, in this mute space – this space of no words – that I'd like to consider Beauchamp's work. What interests me is that although Joja is making a case for why Beauchamp's work fails in its intent to empty such stereotypes of their meaning, I cannot help but feel that Beauchamp would agree; that in some sense, the reasoning behind Joja's criticism is also the reason why Beauchamp continues to hold such tropes, in all their grotesquery, on the surface of his canvases – not to let them disappear from view, but to keep that undercurrent in plain sight. When, for example, Joja writes that 'the spatio-temporal afterlives of racial stereotypes always seem contingent on the perpetual non-events of freedom, aporias of

redress, and endless rebirths of Capital' (2019: 22), or that 'neoliberalism has accelerated privatization' and 'symbolically disaggregated "race"—as its definitive agent—from state politics, but without dissolving the conditions that give rise to racism and its practices,' instead making 'racial tropes appear denuded of their historical profanities, and reinvented as capacious forms floating innocently in the visual field' (2019: 22), I cannot help but think that he is also in some sense describing the compositional make-up of Beauchamp's work.

That the artist might fail in his intent simply underscores the extent of the bind he finds himself in – if he paints what he paints, he is trapped in its reductive logic; if he is forced to self-censor, equally so. While Beauchamp's use of racial stereotypes and their effect on audiences is important, the idea of entrapment — of being caught in a perpetual loop — deserves greater attention. In Joja's description of Beauchamp's *Congress* (2014), for example, we read:

> 'Through repeated recourse to plantation visuality, whether in its inflammatory or empathetic forms, Beauchamp repurposes these ventriloquizing postures with apolitical enthusiasm and a jingoistic acquiescence to their incendiary conclusions. In the painting entitled *Congress*, this gleeful recourse to the most proverbial of tropes, that is, "the heart of darkness." Through this seemingly impenetrable and esoteric forest, a figure resembling the young Nelson Mandela abstractedly appears in the background. Over him an emblem or ribbon hovers above like a halo, and the word "king" is inscribed across it. The punchline seems clear: Mandela is the "king of the jungle." Across the middle of the image, the word "cooning" is inscribed in cursive red Coca-Cola typographic style. Below, towards the edge of the painting, in black, is written CONGRESS. Suppose the prominent blackface figures, with their thick red lips, gaping mouths and big eyes, in shock or jubilation, are his "comrades." In archetypal neo-Tarzanist specular visuality, we encounter the traditional Hollywood image of the pop-eyed African in the jungle.' (2019: 30–31)

While in agreement that the painting, in its dark and muted tones, evokes Conrad's *Heart of Dark-ness*, something that appears to have been overlooked is that this 'seemingly impenetrable and esoteric forest' is made solely of Venus flytraps, which are recurring motifs in much of Beauchamp's work. The idea of entrapment — which also invokes Achille Mbembe's description of 'power in the postcolony' as 'carnivorous' (2001: 200) and bound up with capital exploitation — is evident, not only through Beauchamp's repeated use of the Venus flytrap or the shackle and chain, but his continued use of the title of his initial exhibition at the Pretoria Art Museum in 2015, *Paradyse of the Damned*. The repeated use of this title invokes a difficulty — the inability to *move beyond*, to get *past*.

Granted, this does not discount Joja's argument that racism is 'beyond the stereotypes it produces,' or the risk that his work might inadvertently reinforce what he sets out to critique. Nor can one discount the multitude of ways in which other artists have addressed this bind without mimicking and potentially perpetuating its stranglehold. Glenn Ligon's series *Runaways* (1993) is a case in point, as is *Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Black Features/Self-Portrait Exaggerating My White Features* (1998). Both implicate the viewer, whilst offering the artist a way out of the logic that would have his being reduced to a 'type'. Beauchamp's work offers no such reprieve. As alluded to by Joja, and articulated by Ashraf Jamal in a recent conversation, Beauchamp presents the 'Disneyfication of black life.' His optic is 'caught inside a fabric of pastiche that is macabre, a fabric that he is trying to puncture,' but which nevertheless continues to mutate and stitch itself back together again (Jamal, 2021, personal conversation, Observatory, Cape Town).

The fabric in question here is markedly Pop. Much like the artists of the '50s and '60s who worked within this idiom – Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, Mark Rauschenberg *et al* – Beauchamp's sources come readymade. The flatness of his early work carries the depersonalised hallmark of the production line. It is, perhaps, to this aspect of Beauchamp's work that I would attribute those elements described by Joja as 'apolitical' and 'gleeful,' yet for me the work is far from passive. I see no 'jingoistic acquiescence' on the part of the artist. No reluctant acceptance of the status quo. Unlike Warhol, my hunch is that Beauchamp does not *want* to be a machine.[3] On the contrary, the blend of Pop and Expressionism – a mode outlawed by Pop artists for being too self-absorbed, for bringing to the fore an 'existential anxiety' (Livingstone, 1990: 15) – suggests an artist trying to navigate that precarious strait between

the self and a world that has consistently attempted to exploit and commodify the black body. His approach is not unlike that of Jasper Johns, who employed and re-employed the image of the American flag in order to re-articulate its meaning (Livingstone, 1990: 16). That Beauchamp might fail in the attempt simply underscores the nightmare he finds himself in. Yet, as notes Johns, 'the painting of a flag is always about a flag, but it is no more about a flag than it is about a brush-stroke or about a color or about the physicality of the paint' (Livingstone, 1990: 16). The acknowledgement is particularly instructive. By straddling the worlds of Pop and Expressionism – flatness and depth – Beauchamp reveals a world of veracious consumption, as well as its toxic fallout.

In three of his most recent series – *Prisoners of Waar* (2020), *People from the Sun* (2020), and *Debunking: The Interpretation of a Dream* (2021) – it is the latter which appears to take centre stage. Once bright, clean-cut, and legible, his colours have gradually begun to bleed, his contours have become muddier, his words more opaque. This shift from the world of Pop to Expressionism – from what Jamal describes as 'statement art' to something more 'enigmatic' (Jamal, 2021, personal conversation, Observatory, Cape Town) – has also been accompanied by a clear mutation in sign, from over-determined brands, stereotypes, and icons to Venus flytraps, unknown figures, and sunflowers, all of which were present in his earlier work, but which now occupy a more prominent position. Where signs and symbols once floated alongside or were superimposed on top of one another, here they appear to have been imbibed – a sickly residue at the back of the throat. The question for me is what to make of this new sticky conglomerate, because although the chemistry has always been there – buried deep beneath a cool and powerful veneer – for me his more recent work registers closer to the person.

Does this shift indicate that he's found a way through, a way out, or is the artist simply responding to the criticisms levelled against his work? Is this shift a sign of health, akin to Richard Pryor's breakthrough realisation, or is the artist simply playing up the inner turmoil such iconography provokes? Bringing it back to Pryor, I am drawn to a particular instant in which the comedian was probed by a journalist to respond to those who initially criticised him for using the n-word 'on stage, in his albums, and got rich doing it,' to which he replied: 'I'd say to them, "Allow me to grow"' (Comedy Hype, 2020).

Notes

1. The title is a nod to Pat Ward Williams' mixed-media work *Accused/Blowtorch/Padlock* (1986), in which the artist, in her own handwriting, 'reinscribes an African-American narrative onto a photograph of a man being lynched' (Alexander, 1994: 93).

2. This understanding is also echoed in Joja's paper, where he reflects on the explosive reaction to the H&M advert, which 'left some H&M stores in a wreck, and the company's public image tainted' (2019: 19).

3. 'Machines have less problems. I'd like to be a machine, wouldn't you?'

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For Ambivalent Black Figures

By Thulile Gamedze | Peer Reviewed

Black figures have appeared for almost as long as Black 'figures' have been. The speculative proposition of this piece is that not all Black figures today are equal before the violence of the contemporary art marketplace. Numerous practices involving Black figuration go unrecognised commercially, remaining "in the dark," less comprehensible, although potentially offering possibility beyond the static of this new aesthetic status-quo. I propose that marketable Black figures are those that visually (whether or not rhetorically) adhere to sustained taxonomies of the neoliberal world; figures rooted in the mantra of representation 'mattering.' Engaging Garth Erasmus' State of Emergency series (1985 - 1989), and Randolph Hartzenberg's Map of the Neighbourhood series (1996 - 2004), the text studies less profitable practices of Black figuration, concerned with matter/s other than representation. Moved beyond the disturbing identity erotica of neoliberal post-apartheid South Africa, both practitioners, rejecting mainstreamed taxonomies, are continually invested in the body inasmuch as it operates as a vessel for forms of opened (and I argue Black Conscious) political, philosophical, spiritual, and social life. Their figures may be 'furtive' or on the move - they appear with ambivalence, opacity, and do not present themselves as knowable. If not free, they remain un-captured, unpredictable.

Prelude: A note on ambivalence

Ambivalence is 'the state of having mixed feelings or contradictory ideas about something,' a state into which flux and morphability are hardwired. Ambivalence could be said to be committed to occupying a number of realities at once, even when these realities throw each other off, and even when this throwing-off makes every reality equally untenable. In my best reading, ambivalence is a suspiciously open state – (and this next bit is crucial) – *where the necessity for openness in orientation is rooted in stable resistance to what we might call 'the current conditions'*.[1] To me or for us (if you want), ambivalence can be recognised for its resonance with queer politics: anarchic and unresolved, as well as disinterested in, or even *failing* neo-liberal aspirations and applications of success.[2] Because ambivalence is certain only of what it rejects, its main occupations are in listening for, to, and with other options.[3]

Given the recursively colonial conditions of ownership and 'taste' that shape the life of the contemporary 'art world', art's analysis and production demand, at the very least, ambivalence.[4]

(This text arises from, seeks, and produces, ambivalence.)

Context: fraudulent images

'Art,' as a result of its relation to excessive wealth and its history of patronage, has long been entangled and implicated within, parallel to, or as a benefactor of various forms of exploitative horror.[5] Today, the art world subtends monopoly capital, the 'washer' of blood spilt by nefarious neo-liberal operations – military, prison, pharmaceutical, and immigration industrial complexes, as well as forces of apartheid, settler colonialism, and gentrification. The central irony of this nasty enterprise is that it is often through funded art practices that nuanced forms of 'speaking back', 'self-representing', and 'counter-narrating' are given space and time. Such practices may routinely aesthetically undermine the politics of the resources and institutions that circulate and display them, whilst themselves being *structurally* undermined by the politics of the resources and institutions that they circulate in. In other words, representational 'counter-narratives' produced under these conditions are doomed to enacting varying levels of political fraudulence.

I want to be clear that this fraudulent status-quo is not unique to the aesthetic practices of the art marketplace, and is broadly descriptive of the central contradictions in representation under neo-liberalism. In art, we could think about the 2014 Sydney Biennale Boycott by artists, who refused to participate given that the funding from the 'Transfield Foundation' came at the hands of its running offshore detention sites for asylum seekers that were inhumane, dangerous, and in violation of International Civil and Political human rights.[6] We could think of disturbing phenomena like 'Rainbow Capitalism', the commercialisation of aesthetics of the LGBTQIA+ community, at fundamental odds with queer positions that have historically put lives on the line in rejecting 'business as usual's' reproduction of capitalism and its inherent patriarchy. We could think of 'greenwashing' and apartheid Israel's forests; advertised as a selflessly 'environmentally conscious' project but, in fact, a deeply unsettling one, whereby trees are planted onto stolen Palestinian land.[7] Locally, we could think of the countless Mandela statues littered around South Africa that somehow fail to be read as an indictment of the new dispensation's failure, and themselves instead function strangely – a seeming replacement for equitable material life? We exist, in other words, in an odd scenario in which we know and understand the fraudulence of these kinds of images, yet are somehow able to cognitively dissociate, accepting them as an appropriate replacement for our own realities.

In the context of democratic South Africa – which has largely been defined through its deepened identification with, and violent reproduction of, our inherited apartheid and colonial racial schema – the art marketplace is a particularly bizarre arena of exchange. Contemporary practices of Black portraiture or figuration are the hot product of this fraudulent zone, often representing Black autonomy or agency that is ultimately undermined by the conditions of its fetishized consumption and predominantly white-owned economy.

I might add that, in many cases, the work is not only

undermined by its 'world', but by its own dealings with Black bodies. Of particular interest herein are seeming parallels between Black portraiture trends, and the algorithmic manipulation of platforms like Instagram, which shape 'desire' through surveillance, and either the repression or promotion of content. These methods of policing consistently produce more and more identity categories that become defined by perfected and much-circulated archetypes: Black 'excellence' is visually signalled via middle class-ness, nuclear family-ness, and uncritical participation in capitalism; Black queerness is visually signalled via fixations on the flesh body, its fashioning and its hyper-visibilised transition states; Black joy is visually signalled through middle class 'leisuring' activity and the disappearance of the Black worker, who in fact pays for others' middle-class leisure using her largely joyless labour time. These processes of aesthetic flattening result in the collapse of everything, or *everyone*, into product and brand. Accompanied often by sweet nothings like 'representation matters', such images, more and more frequently mirrored in contemporary painting and photography, fail to acknowledge that their trendiness functions to quell, and thus to stall, actions informed by the reality of sadness, violence, and humiliation defining modern relations of race.[8]

These algorithmic traps tend to repress less legible expressions of Black and queer people interested in forms of presence, existence, relation, and internality, rather than in the aestheticized *performances* of existence. In this text, I occupy myself in work – and worlds – that sidestep singular visual investment in the body as body only, as flesh, and look to expressions of presence even as these attempts are doomed to obscurity and inevitable illegibility. I consider forgotten work, forgotten worlds, canonically neglected work – that is, committed work, layered work, ambivalent work, and ambivalent worlds. I engage *the ambivalent Black figure:* the obscured, abstracted, ambiguous, scary, running Black figure, who both arrives to and disappears from view, and whose relation to the world of the body is fundamentally unstable. For its simultaneous openness and secure rejection of the world as it is, I love ambivalence. It is not an antidote to the neo-liberal capture of the art world – instead, it is an elusive ethic, where 'slipperiness', of both aesthetic work and dealings with the 'art world' is a strategy enabling constant movement, thus the resisting of seductive new taxonomies of art discourse.

> "These algorithmic traps tend to repress less legible expressions of Black and queer people interested in forms of presence, existence, relation, and internality, rather than in the aestheticized *performances* of existence."

I arrived at Randolph Hartzenberg and Garth Erasmus through my part-time research work with Africa South Art Initiative (ASAI) – a small, highly generative world of necessary ambivalence (around the state of Southern African art discourses), intergenerational interactivity through writing, and intentional efforts to engage with artists whose work is neglected by mainstream history. These considerations of their practices and lives are attended by the exchange of a number of warm and detailed emails with both Randy and Garth.

Body: Hartzenberg's distillation

Hartzenberg's figures leave everything to the imagination. They are diagrammed outlines with tubes connecting heart to ear, heart to mouth. They are anonymous tumbling faces caught in a network of arrows, empty profiles in symbolic fields of dust and salt and exile. Hartzenberg's figures give almost nothing, so occupied they are in being present amongst staircases that lead nowhere, darkened squares of somethings painted over, empty cubes, empty houses, words scratched sharply into once-wet surfaces, chaos of excavation and buildings, and chaos of loss. Hartzenberg's figures float balefully in tragedy and trauma, spun upside-down and still spinning (they are objects, maybe), in a seemingly perpetually re-ordering practice, whose looping character delves into deeper readings with each new render.

He sends me a string of emails, patiently working through my multiple curiosities, which, in this moment,

are enquiries into the ways that bodies or their parts arrive amongst the seemingly obscure set of objects and materials that root his multimodal practice. (The images in his flat work are the objects of his sculptural work and are the props of his performance work.) Salt, dust, the *Oresteia* Greek tragedy, 'exile', suitcases and staircases, connective pipes, stones: 'An integration of a number of interconnected elements conceptually, materially and contextually...' (Hartzenberg, 2021, personal email correspondence). His emails layer on top of one another in a series of subject lines, 'Thoughts in the margins of time,' then 'continuations,' then 'recurring images,' and then 'more thoughts.' The lines read kind of like poetry. Each message opens for and to the next, reminding me of his characteristically re-re-re-re-painted canvases, whose seemingly resolved top surfaces still hold and implicate the heaviness of the aesthetic histories they cover (the *Ground Left Behind* series has, for instance, been ongoing since 2015, with each work a palimpsest, or a pile of past iterations.)

In the series, *No.8* is one of the only works depicting the 'figure' (if we would choose to define this through the literal representation of a body). A set of two small anonymous faces in profile, seemingly tumbling leftward, appear amongst the mild greyscale chaos in the lower right plane of the canvas. I imagine them now paused, stilled for this moment, but ready to keep it moving whenever we'd choose to exit the scene and allow them to re-commence. The tumbling faces are ambiguously elaborated through the addition of the words '*STONE'* and '*SALT,'* which hang above them in a kind of absurdist labelling system. Their bodies are intentionally negated, 'displaced within the context of South African social, historical, political terrain' (Hartzenberg, 2021, personal email correspondence). Elsewhere, we see arrows without clear direction, a floorplan, a black cube housed inside a transparent one, and the words '*NAILS,' 'BREAD,' 'DUST,'* and '*A-... Silent... Throughout,'* all rendered in the haphazard, diagrammatic style which moves through Randy's practice.

'I work towards a *distillation* of imagery...' (Hartzenberg, 2021, personal email correspondence)

Body: Erasmus and trauma

Erasmus's figures move or are moved. They are running stick people rendered quickly in spray paint, or pools of dried ink on pages warped by their former wetness. They are conglomerations of greasy smoke, vaguely rendered, loosely drawn improvisations with medium; 'ghosts,' he says (Erasmus, 2021, personal email correspondence). Garth describes the figures in his work as primarily his 'own personal ghosts,' who have arrived as a result of trauma. Garth understands that trauma is something that goes far beyond the body, affecting our 'deep emotional and spiritual condition.' Violence is inflicted through the invocation of body taxonomies, like gender or sexual orientation or race, but its deeply gratuitous and dissonant nature – the trauma it passes on and expands – cannot be comprehended through the same invocations. In other words, our bodies and their type-castes, read in imperial or colonial or apartheid or neo-liberal terms, do not indicate the trauma itself, but that trauma lives inside. Erasmus's figures or ghosts are in fear, in song, fleeing, or making sound. One special figure, appearing in the *Mantis Praise* series, is horizontal, at rest; this is another kind of presence, symbolic of the artist's late father, a figure of familial spiritual gatekeeping and guidance (Erasmus, 2021, personal email correspondence).

Erasmus is himself regularly in song, the maker and player of Khoisan instruments, whose sounds collapse time, beckoning ancestral histories into the present, and moving us away and away and away etc, from the identificatory options that constitute legible South African life (options which are always in hot pursuit.) Erasmus, full of music and of sound, is himself the Black figure of his practice too – the Black portrait, even as he resists an aesthetics which over-identifies with the body as surface.

In images of both Erasmus' and Hartzenberg's much varying works, we encounter figures in a hurry, figures *en route*, or figures otherwise occupied. While they appear, and although we may look at them, they avoid giving themselves over to us in the space of display, and are often more pressingly involved with and motivated by the sometimes absurd, sometimes colourful, sometimes chaotic fields in which they live. When they sleep, they dream of spaces we cannot see, when they tumble, we are unsure of exactly where they are going, when they yell, we do not quite know what they are saying – when they are there, we do not know how long they are staying. They do not stand still, are not strategically posed, and do not gaze

straight at us with perfect skin, performing their own presence. These figures are living!

Of *Map in the Neighbourhood*, Hartzenberg explains that 'the works reflect...an internal state. A map of the internal neighbourhood.' In the series of monoprints with collage, he repeats the anonymous figure in profile, who finds themselves floating above a familiar 'distillation' of elements – the dust and the salt, maths equations, body parts, and always *Oresteia*... an ancient narrative of terror, trauma and suffering under violent warfare and unthinkable collective grief, which, for Randy, had urgent parallels with the violence of South African apartheid, (and after) (Hartzenberg, 2021, personal email correspondence).

Garth's *Xnau* is another internal map. The blue facial imprint – blueprint? – of Erasmus's thirteenth *Xnau* figure is on its way out, or on its way in. Arms are raised high in a moment of seemingly bloodied intensity. Eyes are empty. The disembodied imprint, hanging above its more visceral twin, creates a presence x2. The central figure's occupation is intense – fleeing? bleeding? astral-projecting?

Du Boisian double consciousness offers a route in considering the pain of bloody splitting that *Xnau 13*'s figure is subject to. I ask Garth about the 'twinning' or the double presence, which I notice in a number of his works in the series. Appropriately, there is more than one answer. His first response is an articulation of the work's existence beyond his own 'intellectual control': that the images themselves constitute a kind of uninhibited material response to 'the peculiarities and characteristics of the medium' (Erasmus, 2021, personal email correspondence). In this case, the peculiarities of the medium are liquid, with figures and faces being subject to the motion and wetness of water, loosening from the page, even tearing in some cases, and then settling and drying differently, with puddled pigments, but, I think, a sustained sense of motion, instability. In this improvised mode of making, where medium and the hands or the body consent to one another's agency, the produced image itself enacts a further openness, an orientation to the world that notes its meaning as changeable, as changing, in accordance with the irregular conditions of the world around it. When images' claims are difficult to grasp neatly, are dealing in contradiction, in motion, and in the mushiness of what's unnameable about *being*, they are less easily appropriated by the spaces in which they act. They are slippery, and always already halfway out the door.

A Conclusion: For Ambivalent Black Figures

Blackness, if understood through South African Black Consciousness, would seem to necessitate the production of aesthetics which are disruptive to (or reject) the central taxonomic force that creates the exploitation frameworks of art institutions. Blackness finds its position in refusal of the fundamental violence of racial capital – its responsibility is in the recognition of this system's production of relations of violence and oppression, understanding that racism and class are produced by, and produce, patriarchy, ableist world views, messed up beauty standards, and so on. This political refusal – *systematic* in its nature – makes way for an opening, an insistence that Blackness as 'identity' not be articulated with any fixity, even as its base of solidarity stands (see Gamedze, 2021).

For Erasmus, the underlying motion of such an approach to identity unfolds: 'The body represents the soul as an outer/physical manifestation of an inner world. But in another ironic sense, the condition of the emotional/inner state is influenced by the outside and the environmental...' I find an echo with Biko, as he talks of the loss of the 'black man' under apartheid as the 'loss of his personality,' that the conditions of oppression erode the personality – the soul! – and that restoration is only possible through Black self-reliance, materially, psychologically, and spiritually (Biko, 1978).

"Du Boisian double consciousness offers a route in considering the pain of bloody splitting that *Xnau 13*'s figure is subject to. I ask Garth about the 'twinning' or the double presence, which I notice in a number of his works in the series. Appropriately, there is more than one answer."

In their visual articulation, we already know that Garth's figures are often ghostly or accompanied by ghosts, lost personalities perhaps? At times, they are bodied, but herein, are just separated body parts, dismembered, violated. Hartzenberg too reflects these states of body detachment. Both practitioners speak of histories of trauma. I think that through their strategic and poetic and varied withhold of fixed bodies, both offer us openings to the other, less knowable realms of being that resist our gaze.

Representation through systems of colonial identification (which continually recur in new language, with consistently refreshed liberal vigour) and through colonial 'worlds' of circulation and display, are not sufficient in relaying the textures of our experience. Fraudulent images expand the cognitive dissonance – the metaphysical dissonance – that defines marginalised experiences of this world. Motion, flux, and all that is unseeable in the body, is much in excess of, even if consistently pressed and shut down by colonial and new taxonomies of the algorithm.

Randolph Hartzenberg and Garth Erasmus's figures do not pretend to capture enveloping, or revised versions of 'the Black body'. Instead, they avoid representation, offering work consumed by trouble, conflict, and the unsolvable equations of be-ing in the horror of coloniality-modernity's accumulation and loss. Hartzenberg's figures are rolling in space, are incomplete, Erasmus's are buried, ghosted, disembodied — they are all opaque, and certainly not free, but continue, somehow, to be un-captured and unpredictable. They are ambivalent Black figures, and while they don't have the answers, they do keep things moving.

Notes

1. During the weekend of the 'Black Self' colloquium at Nirox, my friend Phokeng mentioned Patricia Hayes' book *Ambivalent* (2019) in response to my presentation. Whilst the notion of 'ambivalence' for me seemed to possess an organic relation with the style of my enquiry, I was interested in this particular mobilisation of it due to the shared proximity of our concerns and locations. The framing of this collection draws from photographer Santu Mofokeng's claim that his work is informed by ambivalence, that 'he is gesturing toward these planes of the conscious/unconscious and, indeed, the polyvalent work that photography does.' In this way, an ambivalent orientation is restitutive, 'returning' ambiguity and instability to the reading of images, and in their case, understanding photography as only one *part of* broader social, administrative and narrative operations, which do not always seem to make complete, neat sense.

2. Halberstam thinks of queer failure as a disruption to heteronormative notions of success, which have been imagined through a white supremacist and patriarchal world view, and strengthened through the increased fascism and wealth gaps created in the period of neo-liberalism. A 'failed' queerness in this way, is a position moving away from desire for respectability, assimilation, adherence – a politics beyond sexual orientation: 'While liberal histories build triumphant political narratives with progressive stories of improvement and success, radical histories must contend with a less tidy past, one that passes on legacies of failure and loneliness as the consequences of homophobia and racism and xenophobia' (2011: 98).

3. In the introduction to *Globalization and the Decolonial Option* (2010), Walter Mignolo says: 'Master paradigms are just but options dressed with universal clothes.' His observation here is rooted in the idea that *decolonial options* need to be sure to locate their approaches in understandings of coloniality that delegitimize the 'normalisation' of imperial desire in the shaping of the modern world.

4. (If not their destructive overhaul.)

5. Art here is not used as a generalised term enveloping broader understandings of cultural and aesthetic practices taking place everywhere. Rather, I invoke the (less interesting) 'art': a discipline and product of the western world, whose exhibition, patronage, epistemic, and taste conventions have largely been accepted and assimilated into the (art) world at large.

6. See Butt and O'Reilly (2017) for reflections on this boycott, and considerations of boycott as a

crucial claim of autonomy under the precarious conditions of art practice in neo-liberalism.

7. There is a myriad of resources on this horrific practice. See, for instance: Holm, 2012.

8. A trend in Black portraiture herein seems to be in the novelty of paint's application to scenic depictions of contemporary middle-class social life; renderings of young conventionally attractive Black people having a good time. Nkgopoleng Moloi's review (2021) of the exhibition *Everything was beautiful and nothing hurt,* curated by Anelisa Mangcu and Jana Terblanche, shown at Johannesburg's 'art mall' – Keyes – critiques the group show, a large collection of contemporary works of Black portraiture from emerging artists, as impeded by a level of curatorial irresponsibility, as a result of its 'limitations in adequately challenging or stretching what is often the problematic portrayal of Black imagery that is not aware of itself or aware of its consumption.' I fully agree and would suggest that, in parallel, Black artists take some responsibility too, in considering the ways that representation for its own sake may end up consenting to a rigged epistemological framework that is structured through hierarchies of bodies, and mediated – and in these spaces, *owned* – by the white gaze. This comment arrives in response to both production of images and the conditions of these images' exhibition – artists should take seriously the cognitive dissonance created by the limits of the art world and find ways to explore and expand their practices through insisting on also showing in contexts of care and reciprocal intellectual work.

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Colour, Abstraction and Fantastic Sunsets

By Nkgopoleng Moloi | Peer Reviewed

This essay provides a study of colour as a dematerialised object through which to consider Blackness and art making. I ask how colour has been employed by Black artists as a critical component of their practices, proposing that a critical study of colour can help us understand how Black artists navigate the art landscape and create spaces of imagination, possibility, and life for themselves. Foregrounded by Darby English's book, 1971: A Year in the Life of Color (2016), I consider Alma Thomas' A fantastic sunset (1970), David Koloane's Mgodoyi III (1993), and various exhibitions by Serge Alain Nitegeka. Although rooted in Black studies, I also consider British artist Marlow Moss' painting Composition in yellow, black and white (1949). Here I'm interested in how colour can be used to expand notions of intersectional identities through a queering approach. Colour is read as an effective tool of creation, resistance, and refusal. Through this text I consider Fred Moten's riff on Fannie Lou Hamer, 'Refuse what has been refused to you,' as a potential approach and method, while considering colour as a method of refusal. That is to say, what does it mean when Black artists gravitate towards or away from a certain colour? How are these choices influenced by what they have been refused and what they choose to refuse?

> *'I have made many discoveries in my painting career but I do not think I have made a more exciting discovery than that of colour.'*
>
> — George Pemba, Diary Entry, 1987 (Hudleston, 1996: 81).

Fully emerging in the 1950s, abstract art brought with it the abandonment of the figure – the figure had been demoted...seemingly only to be resurrected today through an intense multiplication of images of Black bodies, particularly in photography and in painting. As a result of the current proliferation of the figure one has to wonder: why are there so many images of Black life being drawn, painted and photographed at this moment? Are these depictions pointing to a reckoning with the demands of Black people globally, or is the figure simply being co-opted by the market? A perverse consumption that does nothing but perpetuate harmful structures of power that have rendered Black life fungible? Within this context, abstraction and colour seem once again like interesting modes of creation through which opacity, fugitivity, nuance and refusal can be articulated.

As I meditate on enduring systems of control and the ways in which we might be able to dismantle them, or at least subvert them, I return to a phrase that was offered to me a few months ago: *refuse what has been refused to you* – a term popularised by poet and theorist Fred Moten. At the time, I did not fully comprehend what these words meant, at least cognitively, but I felt them to be true. Deep in my belly, I felt a resonance that drew me towards this new modality in the quest to live free of oppressive structures. My crudely oversimplified model of refusal is enumerated:

1) Refusal in time (refusing today what was denied to you yesterday).
2) Double/Overt refusal (refusing the refusal and claiming for yourself what the world has decided to deny you).

Each of these feels useful in different contexts, when considering how best to respond to systems of control, the art market, and capitalism more broadly. Through this text, I'm interested in the potential for colour and abstraction to function as modes of refusal in the age of intense consumption of the Black figure.

The colour blue

> *'We call on all plastic artists to use the color blue, for it has great potential in showing internal dimensions and depths – in other words, it has the ability to create a Crystalist vision. It is currently the clearest embodiment of Crystalism within the color spectrum. We must stress that the human ability to see internal dimensions in the color blue is not merely the result of a conditional reflex specific to the blueness of the sea and the sky.'*
>
> — The Crystalist Manifesto, 1976.

I begin with the Crystalist's appeal (through the 1976 Crystalist Manifesto) for artists to use the colour blue. Conceived in Sudan, the Crystalists 'understood appearance and perception of solid objects to be mere suggestions rather than [actual] denotations; and embraced an unorthodox materialism based upon mutual contradiction' (Lenssen, 2018). Committed to inventions and new directions in art, the Crystalists believed the colour blue to possess 'the greatest potential in showing internal dimensions and depth.' Colour, of course, is visual perception deriving from the stimulation of photoreceptor cells through electromagnetic radiation. Colour is wavelengths of light or the absorption of light. And light is time – *travelling at the speed of light*, *faster-than-light travel*, *light-speed travel*, *299,792,458 meters per second*! Just as there are multiple times, there are multiple experiences of the 'same' colour and so even as we speak of blue, or red, or orange... we are speaking of a multiplicity of blues, of reds, and of oranges depending on the number of viewers. This understanding of colour and the impossibility of its reduction to a singular experience points to humanity's innate ability to experience things differently and still be able to find common ground. This reading of colour is indeed optimistic, hopeful, and instructive.

This text seeks to deconstruct and analyse how colour has been employed by Black artists as a critical component of their artistic practice, drawing attention to a deep investment in colour as both object and method. I propose that a critical study of colour is useful in understanding the ways in which Black artists have been able to navigate the art landscape

“The study of colour as object is part of a larger investigation into various methods of creation employed by Black contemporary artists, against a backdrop of an art market and art world that was not made for them. Colour is read as an effective tool of creation but also of artistic resistance and refusal.”

and create spaces of imagination, possibility, and life for themselves.

The study of colour as object is part of a larger investigation into various methods of creation employed by Black contemporary artists, against a backdrop of an art market and art world that was not made for them. Colour is read as an effective tool of creation but also of artistic resistance and refusal. Through this text, I am considering the quote ‘refuse what has been refused to you’[1] as a potential approach to making. That is to say: what does it mean when Black artists gravitate towards or away from a certain colour? How are these choices influenced by what they have been refused and what they choose to refuse? This examination of colour, travels alongside the use of abstraction not merely as an aesthetic choice but as a strategy to render things opaque and complex.

In her seminal text, ‘The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner’, writer and scholar Saidiya Hartman introduces us to Esther Brown, a wayward coloured girl with no social constraints (see Okeowo, 2020). Esther Brown – ungovernable, riotous, an embodiment of anarchy – refused what she was given and got ready to be free. Hartman writes:

‘Esther Brown never pulled a soapbox onto the corner of 135th Street and Lenox Avenue to make a speech about autonomy, the global reach of the color line, involuntary servitude, free motherhood, or the promise of a future world, but she well understood that the desire to move as she wanted was nothing short of treason. She knew firsthand that the offense most punished by the state was trying to live free.’ (Hartman, 2018)

Even as she understood the dangers of reaching towards freedom, Esther continued to live on her own terms. She refused what she was given and lived only on what she needed. Taking instruction from Esther and thinking with her on varying notions of what it means to be free, one could read refusal in the works of Black artists who choose not to participate in representational exchanges of Black life or who choose to do so in interesting ways. Like Esther Brown did, what would it mean for Black artists to refuse the assignment of representing themselves? What other modes of creation and making become possible? In refusing to hold on to their own image (own nothing) and refusing what the canon is giving (its old white masters and its violent erasures), could Black artists begin to move towards ‘a kind of freedom’?

Refusing man’s inhumanity towards man through fantastic sunsets

> ‘Color painting was a loosely arranged formalism that accommodated many painters’ fervent exploration of hue, depth, density, texture, shape, and color relations’ capacity to mutually inform pictorial structures.’
>
> — Darby English, 2016

Born in 1891, Alma Thomas was an American painter and teacher. Considered a brilliant colourist by her contemporaries, her practice is characterised by abstract forms articulated through the bold use of colour. The first graduate of Howard University’s Art department, she was one of the earliest Black modernist painters of the 20th century. Created in 1970, eight years before her death at 87, A Fantastic Sunset is a 121 x 121 cm acrylic painting. Colours are painted next to each other, creating circles that morph into a smaller circle resembling a very bright, very hot sun. The work is a study in colour theory and is demonstrative of the artist’s philosophies on colour. In her autobiographical writings, she is cited as saying: ‘Color is life, and light is the mother of color.’ She goes on to elaborate: ‘The use of color in my paintings is of paramount importance to

me. Through color I have sought to concentrate on beauty and happiness in my painting rather than on man's inhumanity to man.' Here, we see Thomas locating her practice outside of what she refers to as 'man's inhumanity to man', which can be read as the oppressive structures of racism, classism, and sexism. Although her paintings seem apolitical when considered purely from an aesthetic view, Thomas' writings stretch their meaning to speak of resistance and refusal of man's inhumanity towards her.

For Tina Campt – a Black feminist theorist and a member of the Practicing Refusal Collective –refusal is not just a simple act of opposition or resistance, but a fundamental renunciation of terms of impossibility defining certain subjects. For the Sudanese Crystalists, refusal came in the form of pleasure (see Lenssen, 2018). Pleasure was considered the sole measurement of man's essence, functioning as both a means and an end, as time as well as space and direction – containing the multiplicity and duality of truth. If the goal was 'trying to live free', then pleasure was the manner through which to achieve it. I think of pleasure as joy. It is this joy that I am reading in Alma Thomas' fantastic sunsets – because refusal can also be gentle and warm.

But of course, refusal is also an insurgency. It is also an insurrection. Recalcitrance. Disorder. Withdrawal. An errant path. Oftentimes, acts of refusal are small, unseizable and repeated over time. In an essay entitled 'At Daggers Drawn with the Existent, its Defenders and its False Critics', an anonymous anarchist notes:

> 'If we refuse centralisation we must go beyond the quantitative idea of rallying the exploited for a frontal clash with power. It is necessary to think of another concept of strength—burn the census lists and change reality, what we're trying to do here is to not act en masse. Carry out actions in three or four at the most. There should be as many small groups as possible and each of them must learn to attack and disappear quickly.'
>
> — from The Anarchist Library, n.d.

The collective NTU, composed of members Nolan Oswald Dennis, Tabita Rezaire and Bogosi Sekhukhuni, is perhaps an example of working in small groups, doing the work and disappearing quickly.

Described as a 'South African based family and creative agency concerned with the spiritual futures of technology', the collective was founded in 2015 to disseminate and raise awareness of African sciences and technologies. Through a multi-disciplinary approach, the collective produced a series of works that were often abstract and relied on materiality. UBULAWU (2017), for instance, is a mixed media installation that includes mounds of earth. The work sought to encourage an experience and significance of dreams and practices of divination. A lot of the works by the collective tends to take this form of splicing, splintering, and collaging through a language that is material and often abstract.

These insurrectionary principles of carrying out small unseizable actions over time are visible in the methods of many artists and artist collectives across the world. Through his most recent body of work, Nolan Oswald Dennis gestures towards possible ways of refusal through the act of care (see Goodman Gallery, 2021). The globe is abstracted and the colour black is invoked. Dennis begins with the model of a globe – used to map and organise the world. Refusing the systems that come with the singular mythology of the globe as an organising unit, Dennis draws on Black geographies and Black cosmography to investigate world endings. Through his body of work from his exhibition, conditions (2021), Dennis engages both colour (albeit indirectly) and geometry to reach new possibilities of creation.

Through the instruction of old and new, far and near ancestors, practices of refusal run in our blood. I return to American abolitionist and women's rights activist, Sojourner Truth, and her powerful speech delivered at the Women's Convention in Ohio, in 1851. Being refused humanity and womanhood, Sojourner Truth responds with a question that isn't really a question: '*Ain't I A Woman*?' She notes:

> 'If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again!'
>
> — Sojourner Truth, 1851

This was one of many instances when Sojourner had practised refusal in order to liberate herself. Hers was a double refusal (refusing the refusal) as she also manipulated the extractive postcard industry (which at the time was used to further the colonial empire) to her advantage, selling images of herself taken in a photographer's studio in order to fund her activism and support her abolitionist agenda. When we think of Sojourner Truth, we can think of refusal as a route of escape from hegemony. It is the stubborn refusal to conform – the embrace of odd constructions and the oddly constructed. One might have expected Sojourner to protest the use of her image through postcards, but instead she used the industry through what she described as 'selling the shadow to support the substance.' This type of refusal is not obvious. It runs toward crossroads, pathways, and intersections, where things contradict and surprise – it is the beginning of queerness...perhaps? Before it was co-opted by Harry Styles, Billie Eilish, and Gucci. This is when being 'outside the norm' was a fugitive strategy of survival used by those who were cast to the margins and who understood the power of the space between resistance and capitulation, between subservience and subversiveness.

It's not enough to say that black is beautiful

Artists such Serge Alain Nitegeka have found ways to employ opacity and ambiguity through the literal use of the colour black. Through the language of abstraction, Nitegeka employs the colour black, often evoked through the titles of his exhibitions, Innate Black (2018), Ode to Black (2017) and Black Passage (2015). For Nitegeka, black becomes a pathway to inquiries into philosophical and political concepts. For him, it is not enough to say that Black is Beautiful, rather: 'Black is a colour reserved unto itself. It is comfortable in its own nature, unruffled and confident. It tries very hard to stay anonymous but inquiring eyes are drawn to it; spectators cannot resist it. It is not popular. It reveals little because it is neither warm nor cold. It is an enigmatic pigment' (Nitegeka, 2017).

Colour is obscured

Born in 1938 in Alexandra, Johannesburg, Koloane spent his career preoccupied with what we might refer to as the human condition. Through his writing, teaching, curatorial and artmaking practices, Koloane demonstrated modernist aspirations rooted in the questions and concerns relevant to the African artist (particularly the Black African artist). His artmaking, which coalesces painting, drawing, assemblage and printmaking, displays a keen interest in colour – how colour can be manipulated to achieve different things. Through blended colour and complex imagery, Koloane produces works that are textured, meandrous and full. Mgodoyi (iii) is a lithograph made in 1993. The work is part of the famous Mgodoyi series, made on the eve of South Africa's transition from apartheid to a democratic nation. The title refers to a person or people who behave like mongrels, an insulting term offering a critique of corruption. Through a striking use of colour – blue, brown, orange, and yellow – Koloane is able to articulate stark contrasts and shadows that foreground the two fighting dogs into prominence. Combined with his ferocious marks, the colour blue loses its tranquil and orderly qualities while the yellow, brown and orange elicit feelings of frustration and anxious excitement.

Can colour queer?

> 'I find geometry and colour more reliable categories than like a man or a woman. So in some ways, I can see myself more in a square of yellow than I can in a drawing of a woman or a man.'
>
> — Sasha Velour

In an attempt to consider colour's queering potential, I consider British artist Marlow Moss. My reading of Moss's work relates to ideations of self as they relate to queerness. Moss' Composition in Yellow, Black and White (1949) is an oil painting of abstract and minimal composition. The focal point is a square of yellow at the bottom right of the painting. Through the use of colour and proportion, the painting reveals nothing about itself beyond the basic elements of art – line, value, space. It creates a sense of freedom and liberates the artist from being easily pigeonholed. Writing about her work, Moss notes: 'I only see space, movement and light' (Tate, 2019). Speaking about this work in a video recording for TateShots, LGBTQ+ activist Sasha Velour reads Moss's painting as an entry point towards a more expansive way of thinking through gender and sexuality, referring to geometry

and colour as more reliable categories of identity, even more so than the traditionally accepted binaries of man and woman. Through this work, we see the liberatory potential of colour and geometry.

Through this text, I have considered the ways in which colour is employed within various artistic practices and furthermore how it is metabolized by both the maker and the viewer. My analysis has led me to an interesting intersection of colour and abstraction as a generative combination in thinking through intersectional ways of being. A key conclusion is that colour is critical, but it will not perform all the work. I propose that colour, combined with abstraction, can in fact function as a methodology for artists and that through this combination artists continue to make work that is political and challenging – not abandoning the social, cultural, and material meanings that colour evokes. Colour and abstraction can in effect function as legitimate modes of refusal. And of course, practices of refusal are not only useful conceptual frames but are also catalysts towards constructing new conditions of Black life. They exist as grand refusals recorded and documented throughout history but also, to evoke Hartman again, as quieter moments that reflect on everyday choreographies of the possible. What continues to make refusing useful is not that it is radical or novel, but that it continues to inspire actions (and non-actions) that yield real results in our quests for freedom. Refusal against the unending ruthless crisis of anti-Blackness. Refusal against heteronormativity. Refusing Black consumption. Refusing gender and class oppression. Refusing now. Refusing together.

Notes

1. Credited to Fred Moten through a recorded conversation (see Carter and Cervenak, 2017).

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Darkness Pass
A Nocturn

By Stacy Hardy | Peer Reviewed

'night opens
I enter
night shuts
I don't leave'

— Alejandra Pizarnik, The Galloping Hour: French Poems

In the title for his most recent book, Out of the Dark Night (2021), Achille Mbembe echoes Aimé Césaire, who describes the postcolony as an enervated landscape, seen and felt 'at the end of the small hours.' From this liminal time-space—betwixt what Césaire calls 'the strand of dreams and the senseless awakening'—Mbembe rejects both nihilistic suspicion (toward language, identity, meaning), and the false oases of scientific-epistemological certainty. Threading their twilight perspectives through the nocturnal lens of Édouard Glissant's opacity, Andrew Culp's 'Dark Deleuze,' Jason Mohaghegh's philosophy of the after-dark, Fred Moten's fugitivity, and more, I explore night as a third route beyond the tabulations of masochistic skepticism and sadistic truth. Working between fact and fiction, autobiography and critical theory, I delve into the fascinating paradoxes of nocturnal experiences through the tactics of some of its most dynamic practitioners, those post-apartheid artists, writers, and musicians who reject both the glaring fallacies of rainbowism and the self-defeating nihilism of afro-pessimism; those who keep strange hours and navigate the hidden potentialities of the after-dark: the thief, the runaway, the dreamer, the drunkard, the insomniac, the revolutionary, the prophet, the madwoman, the sorcerer, and the trickster.

night opens
I enter
night shuts
I don't leave

— Alejandra Pizarnik, 2018

Dark night babe
toss and turn
the clouds above
you make the sober go drunk

— Isabella Motadinyane, 2016

In the title for his most recent book in translation, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (2021), Achille Mbembe echoes Aimé Césaire, who, in *Notebook of A Return to The Native Land*, describes the postcolony as enervated landscape seen and felt 'at the end of the small hours'[1] (Césaire, Arnold and Eshleman, 2013). From this liminal time-space betwixt and between night and day, 'the beach of dreams and the insane awakening' (Césaire, Arnold and Eshleman, 2013: 3), Mbembe rejects both nihilistic suspicion (toward language, identity, meaning) and the false oases of scientific-epistemological certainty.

Césaire's gloaming recalls the hour of the guillotine as well as the concluding line of Apollinaire's 'Zone' (Apollinaire and Padgett, 2015), 'Soleil cou coupé', which he borrowed for the title of one of his own collections (translated by Eshleman as 'Solar Throat Slashed' [Césaire, Arnold and Eshleman, 2011]). As Césaire's epic poem progresses, the emphatic repetition of the line acquires an unsettling urgency. The promised dawn, the relief of morning, never arrives. Instead, we remain suspended in eternal night.

For Césaire, and Mbembe after him, this prolonged nocturn opens up a time-space of shifting, slipping, dislocations and hidden emissions – a time of violence and upheaval, yes, but also one of revolutionary possibility. Through the force of language and image, darkness begins to suggest a subversive impulse; an insurgent negativity that I propose we need to summon and seize against a contemporary world characterised by compulsory happiness, decentralised control, and overexposure. At a time when Black Studies has been institutionalised, 'black lives matter' is a t-shirt and decolonisation is official university policy, and against the urgent interest and over-exposure of black art – 'black lives, black bodies, black portraiture' (Jamal, 2021) – I propose that we must, to paraphrase Fred Moten, 'refuse what has been refused to us'[2] (Moten, 2013: 242) and return to the night.

'The long, dark night of the end of history has to be grasped as an enormous opportunity,' writes Mark Fisher (2009: 80). He goes on to suggest that the very oppressive pervasiveness of capitalism means that even a 'glimmer' of alternative possibilities can have a disproportionately great effect.

In order to perceive this glimmer, however, we require darkness. As Pier Paolo Pasolini teaches us in his 1975 essay, 'Where have all the Fireflies Gone?', written against fascist foreclosure and its attack on the imagination, it's very easy to make fireflies disappear: just turn on a strong-enough light. The converse is also true: to make fireflies and their embodiment of hope reappear, all we have to do is render to the night its powers of potential, of latency. All we have to do is accept the night, in order to access its darkness. Simultaneously, the reappearing fireflies make the night itself appear, as the visual space through which precious signals come to us.

This paper is precisely such an attempt, an experiment in turning out the lights and inviting the darkness. Silently, then, the fireflies might send us their pulsations, their luminous emissions. Are they secret messages? Distress signals? Love letters?

Make no mistake, choosing the night, its shades and shadows, is perilous. As Ashraf Jamal's insomniac narrator in the title story from his 2002 collection *The Shades* reminds us, night is bloodthirsty, it is a hawk, 'silently swooping, plucking day from the sky with its talons':

> 'He looks through the window. The red earth of the driveway is turning black. No stars, only glittering talons, plucking, stitching, forming its patchwork of black... There are maleficents abroad. Beasts of prey. They come like fate, without reason, without pretext. This is South Africa where the night is red. Ribbons of blood like a kite's frayed tail cutting through the black. Ink in the brain. Blood too.' (Jamal, 2002: 2)

Rereading this passage, I'm immediately struck by the uncanny[3] semblance between Jamal's hawk and Nicholas Hlobo's now infamous sculpture, 'iimpundulu zonke ziyandilandela'[4]. Constructed from black rubber inner tubing and an animal skull, and trailing frayed tail of multicoloured ribbons that cut through the black, Hlobo's 'lightning bird' is a seducer, a deceiver, a messenger. Prophetic and blasphemous, intertextual, and hybrid in form, it presents a revisioning of history through the motif of divine descent.

Like Pasolini's fireflies, and the glistening talons of Jamal's hawk, 'iimpundulu zonke ziyandilandela' is both a harbinger of dark forces and unspoken celestial mysteries. It reminds us that to return to the night is always a 'fatal wager'[5]. One must stare into what one already realises intuitively as a paradoxical object: night is where horror thrives, but also passion and infatuation; night conceals things, but things are also said to 'come out at night'; we are caught off-guard by a sudden rustle of wings, a flash of talons, while also welcoming the safety of its dark feathered cloak. As Jamal's insomniac characters know only too well, even night's love child, sleep, provides no respite, bringing dreams and nightmares to the vulnerable slumberer.

Fortunately, we have excellent guides on this journey to the end of the night[6], a handful of its most fascinating practitioners: namely, those artists and writers who have chosen to forsake the well-lit glare of the white cube and the frigid sterility of white monopoly capital, in favour of the darkest passages and most dangerous alleyways[7]. Figures who keep strange hours and navigate the different potentialities of nocturnal experience – both of terror and enchantment, destruction and magic: the criminal (fugitive, thief, dealer, prowler); the wanderer (nomad, sojourner, sleepwalker); the revolutionary (rebel, insurgent); the lunatic (madman/woman, maniac); the outsider (exile, stranger, misanthrope); the dreamer (utopian, visionary, romantic)[8].

The Revolutionary

'My Blackness cuts up the Light / The light cuts up my blackness.' It's 2 a.m. and Lesego Rampolokeng's unmistaken voice floats over the speakers, staining the darkness of these times with a fierce guided by the light. Simultaneously razor sharp and gutter-sunk, mesmeric and exilic, Rampolokeng's prose and poetry have consistently, over the past half century, decentred and defied subjectivity and an identity politics that's tied to the dominant order of national, ideological, and stereotypical blackness.

'The light descends and strikes / To the heart of the night / Dusk around my head / The night,' Rampolokeng continues on 'Blackness and Light', a recording from his album *Bantu Rejex (a half century album)* created with Warrick Sony (Rampolokeng and Sony, 2017). It's a voice that is solely entwined with a nocturnal tongue, the ultimate language of destabilization, amplified by Warrick Sony's dark, illbient dub beats.

Refusing to sing the bright hymns of the age, or to compromise his vision for commercial acceptance, Rampolokeng's dark tones exhilarate, infect, inflame. Like a postcolonial Aimé Césaire or deep South Tchicaya U Tam'si, he is a poet who exudes radiance even as night falls in his poems.

An insurgent poet, a rebel, and revolutionary, he rages against oppression and the damage wrought on the black body in our contemporary world. Night, as Iranian theorist Jason Bahbak Mohaghegh tells in his 'philosophy of the after-dark', promises a revolution against the archetypal. It overthrows the 'dominant hierarchies and universal myths' in favour of the 'beautiful disarray of the masquerade or bonfire' (Mohaghegh, 2019). And Rampolokeng is its most seditious son. In his mouth, language is both a revolutionary tool and a device to conjure a new world that transcends the one we know. Polyvocal, intertextual, and hybrid in form, his many books – spanning jazz-infused, linguistically experimental, free verse, aphoristic fragments, and lyrical prose narratives – are a call to arms, a reminder to stay vigilant and wakeful throughout; to keep watch while others close their eyes.

Significantly, Rampolokeng's revolutionary stance extends beyond the page. Unlike the rest of us, content to rail against white-washed visions of blackness, while happily supping at the well-lit altar of capitalism, he has continually chosen the dark path of true rebellion, courting the night as one of the revolutionaries' most powerful allies. Like Frantz Fanon and Steve Biko before him, he knows that genuine revolution is

necessarily fugitive and violently negative. His skin is scarred with war wounds from previous battles. From another time, under different light, at a different angle of looking. His whole face is sculpted. His eyes are deep set. He shakes his head. Laughs then stops too suddenly, says, look at his fingers, the police smashed my hands. Everything crooked. A piece of paper, ripped in three. Edges curling, the writing is red. I can't read it. The lines are claw marks, they tear up the page. He has an unlit cigarette hanging off his lips. He can't find the lighter. It is buried somewhere in the wreckage of the house: loose papers hand-scrawled; books with covers torn and missing – all of them, pages sunk in yellow and words eroded from being fingered and fingered again.

Later, he collects up a pile – *The Antipeople* by Sony Labou Tansi, Marechera's *Black Sunlight*, a monograph on Dumile Feni, *The Madman and the Medusa* by Tchicaya Tam'si, Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night*, a worn copy of Staffrider Magazine open to a page of artwork by Fikile Magadlela – and forges an impromptu syllabus for his regular night school. Having been thrown out of Rhodes University for being too outspoken, too black, Rampolokeng has taken his teaching underground. Like Senegalese writer and film director Sembène Ousmane, who saw cinema as *cours du soir* or 'evening classes,' (Nyampeta, 2019) informed by the traditions of orality, sensuality and conviviality, Rampolokeng is forging a new pedagogy of the oppressed: a carrion call for a future generation of dark outsiders to master night's formulas and learn its conceptual-experiential relations to time, space, fear, nothingness, desire, death, forgetting, enigma, solitude, secrecy, monstrosity, and the body.

The Outsider

If any South African artist is worthy of the mantle outsider, it's Dolla Sapeta. A prolific painter and a poet, working in diverse media, and across forms, Sapeta's work seldom makes it to the podiums of conferences such as this. Nor is it exhibited in the galleries that feature contemporary South African art. It's simply too township, too black for the elite art scene; yet also too dissonant and ugly for the commercial 'township' market.

As Sapeta writes in his debut poetry collection *skeptical erections*:

> every day i wear judgment on my way to work
> at the home affairs department
> where i am found dancing inside a gumboot
> flooded by the blankness of my conscience
> and remain armed with nothingness
> i stink that too (Sapeta, 2019: 9)

The stink Sapeta is referring to permeates his work. His electric poems burn and reek, 'snitch and guzzle' (Sapeta, 2019: 11), seduce and jeer. They bend language and lore and strain against dominant discourse to painstakingly document the township as nocturnal space permeated by the 'cadmium stink of meat' and populated by 'men without tongues', 'frustrated prostitutes', starving dogs, and 'voluptuously throbbing bodies' (Sapeta, 2019: 15–19).

Similarly, his painting has ceaselessly documented the township as an outside in, an inside out. It is where one fathoms otherwise, the time-space of the visionary, the imaginary, the unreal, the unknown, the elsewhere, the outside, and the emergent. Beauty here is the experience of the limit, an autonomy beyond that of life itself; beauty that can be discerned in the ugly and the scarred, the dysfunctional and the erotic, the derelict and the obsessive.

His new body of painted works, collectively titled the *Meat Eaters*, exudes a similar thick stench. Foregrounding the irreducible concomitance of flesh, thinking, and personhood, it is both a critique of capitalism and consumption, and a joyous celebration of black bodily desires and pleasures.

"If any South African artist is worthy of the mantle outsider, it's Dolla Sapeta. A prolific painter and a poet, working in diverse media, and across forms, Sapeta's work seldom makes it to the podiums of conferences such as this. Nor is it exhibited in the galleries that feature contemporary South African art. It's simply too township, too black for the elite art scene; yet also too dissonant and ugly for the commercial 'township' market."

Here the body itself, the sacred human body, its cock and tongue and fingers, heartbeat and lungs, is no more than flesh, a machine constructed by a dead god to murder and shit. Flesh grown from other flesh, blood and come, bloodshed and consumption, carcasses slick with filth and skin, wild matted hair, the frozen grin of a smiley. It continues, even in the still night, even in a universe silent and asleep, the creatures, perhaps their souls, spirits, spasming, eating, shitting and baying. The shriek of awareness, and howl of death[9], the glimmer of a blade against a throat. It is true, what they say, 'at night all blood is black'.[10]

From this bleeding, this blending and bending, an art of resistance emerges, ever at odds with imperialism, neo-colonialism, racism, and xenophobia, while challenging and rethinking prevailing notions of otherness.

The Wanderer

Few figures of the night are as enigmatic as the night-traveller, those who master patterns of nocturnal movement and intricately choreograph their 'infiltrations or escapes' (Mohaghegh, 2019) around the hours of oblivion. While the revolutionary seeks to overthrow the dominant hierarchies and universal myths in favour of the beautiful disarray, and while the outsider fathoms otherwise, seeking out the shadows, the unreal, the unknown, the elsewhere, the night traveller deliberately defies a motive or destination. Against tradition, structure, reason, and systemic orders of the mind, the nocturnal *flâneur* is inescapably tied to discourses of chaos, chance, obscurity, and fragmentation.

David Koloane is our guide here. While many of his paintings portray the city during the day, his vision is always nocturnal in that it is simply not invested in time; it stilt-stalks over it, or makes its own time. Travelling in what jazz musician Herbie Tsoaeli called 'Cycle in circles' or 'in the meantime' (Tsoaeli, 2020), Koloane's city is always viewed from the perspective of the afterdark. All his works engage the mysteries of encounter, wanderlust, rootedness, the slippery lines between object and subject, and our uncertain place in a startling world. Tracing trajectories more insinuating and twisted than the straight line into the heart of darkness that is the unrequited death wish of an undead urbane West, he challenges easy division between night and day.

Significantly, it's only in Koloane's many paintings overtly set at night (his street and township dogs series, as well as his 'Mgodoyi' series) that time seems to stop. Or maybe we move outside of time completely, out into another realm? As Fred Moten tells it, 'we wanted to be outside…the sacrality of aeration… of unbounded…of outness itself…our intention…is that the undecidable local of light/sky/shadow/air is precisely what is at stake/issue…outness…outside ness…if not outsider ness…it is the outdoors…that which resists enclosure' (Moten and Hartman, 2016).

The Lunatic

Tracy Rose has long been dubbed the 'madwoman' of South African art. But if she is indeed this, she does not suffer from any of the fashionable contemporary disorders brought to us by Dr Freud and the psychoanalytic vicious circle – depression, anxiety, self-destructive behaviour, disorders of identity, etc. Rather, she is the maniac – the one disorder radically side-lined by psychoanalysis. In a fascinating reading, Mohaghegh makes the claim that psychoanalysis turned away from mania or rather turned the maniac away because he/she decentres the subject (Mohaghegh, 2021). Unlike depression, anxiety, etc. – which focus inwards, which foreground 'me, me me' – the maniac looks outward into the world, fixating and obsessing. Wracked by 'accelerated speed' (racing thoughts); 'elevation of mood' (expansiveness, insatiability, playfulness, energetic gesturing, agitation); 'hyper-sensitivity' (arousal, provocation, immanent triggers); 'hyper-expressiveness' (overflowing language); 'sleeplessness' (ultra-vigilance, concentration, temporal imbalance); 'risk taking' (impulsiveness, recklessness, destructive pleasure-seeking), the maniac is a destabilizing force (Mohaghegh, 2019).

Through her multiple performances, Rose enacts an obsessive mania, deliberately courting entrancement, excess, and delirium to rewrite femininity and reckon with colonialism, all while guiding us toward the mythic possibilities of creation: how constellations are formed from the pits of our stomachs and the darkness of our mouths. And how involuntary, how compulsive, and

how merciless the relationship between artist and subject can be.

Her performative practice and multiple personas have seen her art interpreted as exploring identity, but if Rose does engage identity, it is to shatter rather than affirm it. And if Rose's work is personal and confessional, what she is confessing is not a set of personal problems: it is a fatal disappointment with the world at large. Her work is less a self-exposure than a self-evisceration. These are not brooding laments but bricks hurled at empires, at the art world, at any pre-packaged lie that parades itself as the only available truth. Rose's feminism is profound and complicated. Ecstatic and erotic, its truth is both the deep wound against the black female body and the 'fuck it' that follows.

The Thief

In a world where thievery has been commercialised and institutionalised via both colonialism and capitalism, the thief is a fraught figure. But unlike those who perpetually practice daylight robbery – the gallerists, curators, funders, etc. – the nocturnal thief embraces larceny, not as an act or action, but as a practice and a way of life, born of techniques of cunning, camouflage, dissimulation, decryption, secretion, and dark allegiance.

The nocturnal thief – the trickster, the highwayman, the pirate, the vigilante – robs his audience of reassuring truths. It's Fela Kuti's 'Authority Stealing': 'You be thief [I no be thief]' (1980). It's Johannes Phokela stealing from thieves and then reselling the spoils back to those same thieves. It's Nolan Oswald Dennis lifting methodologies and language from other fields (astrology, physics, cosmography, and jazz) and turning them to his own use[11]. It's also Robin Rhode, not just for drawing a car then stealing it, but also for how in performing this, he steals reality out from under our feet.

It's the last night I spent together with Robin in Cape Town before he flew back to Europe. A shitty bar in Salt River. How he draws a picture of my heart on a serviette, then pockets it and walks out the door. Carless and heartbroken, I take a taxi home. Over the speaker Tupac sings, 'Sweet lady, Dear mama…Don't cha know we love ya?' as we pass the place where someone did the Tupac graffiti. It is gone now. The wall where Tupac's face once rose defiant is stripped clean, painted white. The area is part of the city redevelopment initiative. All that remains is a hastily scrawled tag: 'One Settler one bullet. Viva Tupac.' But on the streets, it's not me who is dying.

The taxi lurches, turns right to take a short cut. We cross under the overpass. I close my eyes, suddenly exhausted. The road goes on and on. The path keeps forking, splitting like an endless atom, splitting like a lip against a fist, like the sky, the sun breaking through the clouds. The day cleaving into night.

The Dreamer

In an era of extinctions, including the extinction of hope, dreamers are perhaps night's most precarious figures. They are our fireflies, those artists whose tiny lights both incarnate the night and its limitless possibilities, and offer a glimmer of the dawn to come. Those artists who dare to dream and whose dreams are too often extinguished by a brutal system. They are the many many friends and comrades I've lost over the past two decades. Writer K. Sello Duiker who understood both the quiet violence of dreams[12] and their necessity; artist Unathi Sigenu whose drawing traces the fragile moment when joy bleeds into suffering[13] and vice versa; photographer Thabiso Sekgala who captured the beauty and horror of lived experience.

It is to them that this paper is dedicated.

It is Saturday night. The city is pulsing and somewhere a piano is playing, a jazzy knell tolling a structure of sadness into the tonality of joy and laughter. Again, I'm back there, the night Moses Molelekwa died; strangled his girlfriend then himself. Since then I have had a thousand conversations on why he did it. A friend says, maybe we can read his suicide as an act of defiance, a refusal not an abdication? I don't know how Moses has come up in the conversation. We are sitting in some hipster club in Cape Town. The music is trip hop. I nod my head slowly but really it is a default gesture, more about keeping time with the beats than agreeing. The truth is, no one knows what happened the night that Moses died. Nothing can explain it except what transpires in the moment, that split second when everything shudders and life passes into darkness[14].

Notes

1. Arnold and Eshleman's translation of 'au bout du petit matin,' an Antillean Creole expression for the low-lit time between night and morning.

2. Or, as Pasolini says it: 'Refusal has always been an essential gesture. Think only of the saints, the hermits, but also of the intellectuals. The few who have made history were the ones who said no, not the courtiers or the servants of the cardinals.' (Colombo, 2006)

3. Sigmund Freud allegedly conceived of his concept of the uncanny while walking the dark streets of Vienna at night (see Freud, 2003 [1919]).

4. Often incorrectly dubbed a 'dragon', Hlobo's giant flying lightning bird is part of collector Jochen Zeitz's personal collection and is on permanent display at Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa.

5. See 'Night as Fatal Wager' in Mohaghegh, 2019.

6. A reference to Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night* (Céline and Manheim, 2006).

7. The Congolese poet and artist Sinzo Aanza perfectly captures this spirit in a recent Facebook post he tagged me in about defying the pandemic curfew in the Congo:

   A police officer: you are 30 minutes late for the curfew!

   Me: I am the city poet!

   The policeman: give a coffee and go home!

   Me: I am the poet of this city!

   The policeman: daddy do you want to sleep at the police station?

   Another policeman: besides the jeeps rarely pass here to take the people we have arrested, you will spend the night with us, you will sleep in the dust of the sidewalk... I advise you to give even a thousand francs and we leave you go...

   Me: I patrol the pulsations of the city in the silence of the night, I am the poet of it all, you yourselves the city police are subjects of my poetic addictions.
   The first policeman: leave him, it must be a student who has lost his mind, how do you want us to keep our heads in the schools of this city where nothing is happening because everyone is running behind the money?

8. This formulation owes a huge debt to the catalogue of various 'figures' of the night in Mohaghegh, 2019.

9. Or is it the night that howls, as poet Isabella Motadinyane suggests in her poem 'My bruised soul': 'my night shrieks/shock the neighbours' (2016: 19).

10. From the title of David Diop's novel, *At Night All Blood Is Black* (Diop and Moschovakis, 2021).

11. This strategy, Felix Guattari suggests in 'The Idea-Thief', forges linkages and assemblages, i.e. between singularities within a particular field and into a range of components and fields in other conceptual territories, transversally (Guattari, Lotringer, Wiener, and Wittman, 2009).

12. Drawn from his second novel, *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* (Duiker, 2001).

13. See Jean-Christophe Lanquetin's obituary 'All I Can Say for Now' (Lanquetin, 2017).

14. Listen to *Darkness Pass – Solo Piano* (Molelekwa, 2004).

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Settled

By David Mann | Short Story

Settled is a work of short fiction concerned with the notions of value and extraction in the arts, and the unequal relationships of power this imposes. It was written as part of a collection of short stories that seeks, through the lens of fiction, to provide an alternative record and critique of the South African art world. The collection was produced over the course of a Creative Writing Masters programme at the University of Witwatersrand, under the supervision of Ivan Vladislavic. The idea of the 'borrow pit' in the story is made in reference to South African theatre-maker Jemma Kahn's 2018 play The Borrow Pit.

It is still dark when they leave Bloemfontein, the roads blanketed with fog. Theirs is the only car on the road. Nicholas was meant to take the morning shift, but he is tired and groggy and so Ayanda finds himself behind the wheel. They make a brief stop at an Engen garage on the outskirts of the town to top up on petrol, snacks, and bad coffee before taking the onramp onto the N1 and continuing their journey into the Eastern Cape, towards Kenton-on-Sea.

'What are we listening to?' asks Ayanda.

Nicholas shrugs. He is gripping his coffee cup with both hands, slumped against the passenger side window and staring out into the passing darkness.

'Wake up, please. If you're making me drive, then you at least have to talk to me. I'm as tired as you are.'

'Anything. Just put on anything. I don't care.'

'Anything?'

'Anything good. Not that awful stuff you had on yesterday.'

'It's a pop-culture podcast, Nicholas. It's not meant to be anything hugely sophisticated.'

'It's mindless.'

'Well, I like it. It's helping me build my list of movies to watch once we get there.'

'No, no. I'm not watching any of that. I've got reading to catch up on.'

'I don't think I've seen you read a book in the last ten years.'

'Exactly. Now I'll have the time. Look, just put something on, it's too early for chatter.'

Ayanda opts for silence. He drives on, hunched forward in the seat to better see the unlit road ahead. It will be a while before Nicholas is out of his mood, he thinks. Might as well let it pass.

The drive from Johannesburg yesterday was in higher spirits. They were both excited to be on the road, out of the city, finally making the trip down to their new home. It's a move they've been planning for a while. Ayanda has wanted out of Joburg for years. Nicholas has always been less keen on the idea. There is always some new project, a new exhibition to work towards, another installation to tend to. Such is life when you're in a relationship with one of the country's art darlings, thinks Ayanda. Someone always wants a piece of Nicholas and he is always happy to oblige.

It took Ayanda declaring that he was leaving on his own, flying down to set things up in the new house by himself, to force Nicholas into action.

'I suppose now's as good a time as any,' he'd said.

In reality, Nicholas could afford to pack up and go anytime he wanted. Probably, he didn't trust Ayanda to handle the move on his own.

Outside, only the soft, red lights of long-haul trucks are visible through the mist ahead of them. Ayanda yawns, stretches, readjusts his grip on the wheel. He embraces the silence, presses on, drives as fast as the road allows.

Nicholas sets down his coffee, still too hot to drink.

'Wake me up before we get to Gariep,' he says, pulling his jacket up to his chin and turning away from Ayanda.

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The gravel road rattles Nicholas awake as the car makes the climb up the track overlooking the Gariep Dam. It's still early, but the sun is out and they can see the vast, shimmering body of water below. Ayanda is tired. He drove through the dark in silence, letting Nicholas sleep. They take the tarred road that leads down to the bridge arching across the dam. Nicholas sits up.

'Pull over at the parking lot, there,' he says, gesturing to an unpaved patch of land with a cluster of worn cement picnic tables.

'Can't we just pull over at the viewing point on the bridge? No one's around, anyway,' says Ayanda, slowing nonetheless.

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‘I want to walk,’ says Nicholas.

‘It’s cold.’

‘It’s not that cold. Isn’t this the whole reason we’re driving down anyway? To see the country? Take it slow, make stops when we want? Just up here’s good, pull over here.’

Ayanda brings the car to a stop and they climb out into the icy morning. They make their way to the viewing point, jackets zipped up and hands stuffed into their pockets. They walk in silence until they get there. From where they’re standing, they get a view of the whole bridge, the hills beyond it, and the sky holding its pale pink hue. Below, uniform concrete pillars plunge downwards, supporting the length of road that stretches across the dam.

‘It’s off,’ says Ayanda, chin still tucked into his jacket.

‘Huh?’

‘The water’s not running.’

‘Hmm. Well, if it was, I doubt we’d be able to have a conversation. You should hear it when it’s in full swing. Like thunder.’

Nicholas walks over to another small lookout point that provides a view into the dry ravine below. Ayanda follows. The two of them take in the surroundings. Ayanda takes out his phone and points it at Nicholas.

‘Look here.’

‘No, no.’

‘Come on, just one. I can see you’re all sentimental being here. It’s sweet. Come on, just stand there.’

‘No. I’m still waking up, I look awful.’

Ayanda pockets the phone. Moves closer to Nicholas. ‘Is it good to be back?’

‘Mm. Different.’

‘Want to walk over the bridge?’

‘No. Better get going.’

They walk back to the car. Nicholas gets into the driver’s side and adjusts the seat, giving himself more legroom. They pull off and make their way over the bridge, looking out at the water and the hills as they go.

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Twenty minutes outside of Steynsburg, they begin to talk. The day is growing hot and the sun has lifted their spirits. They talk as two people who’ve shared a life together for more than two decades do – speaking alongside one another, independently of each other’s conversations, each pursuing their own line of thought without responding to the other’s.

For a while, they talk about the accommodation from the night before, the small towns and farmstalls they passed on the way there. Ayanda jokes about the presence of satanic cults in the area. Nicholas talks about the drives he used to take through the area for research. Anecdotes about getting lost, running out of petrol, spending the night sleeping in the car in the middle of nowhere. Ayanda has heard them all before. Some time passes. They fall into a familiar silence.

‘I took my first photograph there.’

‘Hmm?’

'At the dam. I took my first ever photograph there.'

'Oh.'

'They were still finishing some of the lower foundations. We went there...'

'...on a family trip. You used your uncle's camera. It was the last photo on the spool.'

'Have I told you this before?'

'No. You've told other people, though. I remember reading about it in an interview.'

'Before we met?'

'No.'

'Oh. Well, sorry to bore you with my stories.'

They stop talking. Nicholas capitalises on their stubborn silence and changes the music. Ayanda looks out the window, watches the gradation of the passing landscape – brittle greens and yellows, empty blue sky. He is upset, but he does not make a show of it. That sort of thing never works with Nicholas, only hardens his resolve. Nicholas can go hours without talking, just to prove a point. More often than not, the point being that he hasn't done or said anything wrong. Time will pass, Ayanda will apologise. They'll move on.

The two met in Cape Town, at a bar in Observatory. Ayanda was 20, then, an art school dropout – a lack of funds more than a lack of ambition. Nicholas was in his mid-30s although only just starting to enjoy his new-found fame, out celebrating the opening of a solo in town. Ayanda had gone out with friends because he had nothing better to do.

They met through an acquaintance, began to talk. Ayanda already knew who Nicholas was by then. Nicholas had no idea who Ayanda was, but he enjoyed the attention. Ayanda spent the night sitting across from Nicholas in a corner booth of the bar that stank of piss and beer, listening to him talk about himself, about making art in post-apartheid South Africa, about the international markets opening up again. The opportunities were pouring in, he said, he was busier than ever. He was even looking for a new assistant to join him in his Johannesburg studio.

Certainly, Nicholas had no idea that Ayanda would show up at his studio a month later, ready to work. Ayanda worked in his studio, picked up some of the admin, screen-printed, reproduced endless amounts of landscapes and railway lines and electricity pylons in ink and charcoal – drawings to be cut up and reworked into whatever Nicholas wanted them to be. They maintained a non-committal fling for a few months while Nicholas saw other people. Ayanda was useful, eager to work and to learn, and so Nicholas kept him around. They became exclusive around the time Ayanda started managing the studio, handling Nicholas's admin, travel, his exhibitions, forthcoming publications.

He moved in. The years passed. They travelled, bought and sold homes, discussed the idea of marriage without ever taking it further. A gesture towards long-term commitment came in the form of Ayanda's eventual title of Director of the Nicholas Trist Foundation.

'Who else could I trust to manage it all?' Nicholas had said. Ayanda was happy, he reasoned. What else would he have done with his life? And life with Nicholas had been good, if a little lonely.

'I'm taking us through Cradock. I'd like to stop at the old Schreiner house if we have time,' says Nicholas.

'What about Alice? Didn't we say we'd stop over and see Athi?'

'What?' Nicholas turns the volume down. 'What's in Alice?'

'Athi's there. I told you. He moved back there a few months ago. I wanted to go and visit.'

'Oh god. I didn't think you were serious about that.'

'Why would I not have been serious about it?'

'You know what I mean. We didn't plan for it, is what I'm saying. You should have let me know earlier.'

'We can still go,' Ayanda insists, 'the turn off isn't until

another hour at least.'

'We can't just stop off there unannounced. Where does he even stay? How will we know where to go?'
'I have his address. He's told us to come and visit. He's dying to see us. He's been busy setting up that Pan-African Library.'

'Oh, that little project. I do remember that. Look, he can come and visit us once we're settled, I've already planned to see the Schreiner house.'

'What for?'

'Just to see it. I'm thinking of doing something around it. Might want to photograph it as part of a series.'

'Please! Do you even have a camera on you? You haven't done any of your own work in years.'

Nicholas's mood shifts. He speaks with a sharp, clipped tone. 'Not this crap again, Ayanda. This is why I was reluctant to take this drive with you. These little tantrums you throw. And for what? Because you're bored? Because you want to cause some scene to pass the time? I'm not doing this.'

Ayanda falls back, does not respond. Up ahead, roadworks slow them down. The heat and the trucks give them something to attach their anger to. They pass a large hole in the earth, deep and vast. They move past it slowly, both taking it in. For all the depth and scale of the hole, the amount of earth that has been removed in order to create it, there should surely be a mountain beside it, a pile of sand and stone, but there is nothing.

The roadworks come to an end and they leave the hole behind them, dedicatedly overtaking long-haul trucks and bakkies with trailers carrying livestock. When they eventually reach the turn off to Alice, Nicholas drives on towards Cradock. Ayanda does not protest.

***

The stop in Cradock proves to be a salve for their moods. They agree to take the tour through Schreiner House together. Ayanda has little interest in Schreiner, but he lingers and reads the many yellowing, laminated posters detailing her early life, the influence the site had on her writing, the influence her work has had on others. He reads a copy of a letter she wrote to a friend, describing the joy she took in climbing to the top of a koppie one morning and stripping naked, feeling the elements on her skin. He takes a photograph of the passage and texts it to a friend with the caption: 'Listen, Olive was wild'.

Outside, Nicholas chats idly with the curator who explains that he lives in a room at the back of the house, that they hardly get visitors these days, no support from the government. They buy a few books – local authors and anthologies of poetry about the Eastern Cape. Nicholas leaves a small donation. They discuss the idea of making the trip up the koppie to visit Schreiner's grave, but decide against it. It is something they'll do once they're more settled. There will be time to do that sort of thing then, they agree. For now, they are happy to press on.

Back on the road, they are in better spirits, talking, listening to podcasts about architecture and literature and stopping at various points to admire the landscape, taking postcard-style photographs on their phones as they do. They pass Bedford, Glen Ambrose, and stop for a late lunch at a pub in Makhanda, where they're served by a listless student waiter who is animated only once Nicholas introduces himself in full.

After lunch they amble around, remark on how quiet the place is in the absence of artists and performers and the endless production posters that colour the small student town for a week or so during the National Arts Festival. They consider a visit to the Camera Obscura, where Nicholas says he spent a formative afternoon on a school trip many years ago, but decide against this, too. It's already late afternoon, they reason. They do not want to arrive after dark.

Past Salem, they see quarries and rocky hills, remnants of sustained blasts for shale and limestone. Ayanda drives and Nicholas thumbs through his phone. Potholes and slow-moving trucks keep them from anything faster than 80 kilometres.

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It is the last stretch. They are both eager to be off the

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road, although Ayanda is not ready for the trip to be over. What then, he thinks? He agonises over the approaching finality. What to do or speak about once they finally arrive? They will unpack, sure. Spend the week orientating themselves, settling in. And after that? After the unboxing and the pleasant drudgery of sorting out their new home – what Nicholas says will be their forever home – will they take those trips they've been planning on the way over? Doubtful. How long before Nicholas grows bored, restless, finds a new project or production to busy himself with?

Around them, the landscape grows greener, the air feels cooler. Ayanda anticipates the ocean, the sand, the rocky shores of places like Kasouga, Port Alfred, and other seaside towns dotted along the Sunshine Coast. The road opens up, he drives on, leaves the trucks behind, races to beat the fading daylight.

'It's called a borrow pit,' says Nicholas, not looking up from his phone.

'What?' Ayanda turns the music down.

'That big hole we saw earlier. It's called a borrow pit. Well, that's what the Americans call it, anyway. I'm on some website about roadworks in the States and they say it's called a borrow pit.'

'What's it for?'

'It's just the extraction of sand. They'll be busy with a new section of road or building a bridge or something like that and they'll use some of the earth from nearby. It leaves one of those big holes behind.'

'And what happens to it?'

'What do you mean?'

'The pit. Does it get filled back in?'

Nicholas considers the question, scrolls through the text on his screen. 'I don't know. Doesn't say.'

'So, they leave a giant pit behind? They never fill it up?'

'Well, I imagine they'd need more sand to fill it up. Which would mean they'd need to dig another hole. Either that or a series of small holes, taking sand from each of them, but I mean who's got the time to do that? It probably just fills back in over time.'

'Probably.'

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It's dark by the time they arrive in Kenton. Ayanda yawns, grips the wheel with both hands as the car moves down the empty, suburban streets.

'It's there, just up there,' says Nicholas, sitting up in his seat. It is the most animated Ayanda has seen him since they started the trip.

They reach a boom gate and stop. A guard emerges from a security booth off to the left and exchanges words with Nicholas. The boom rises and they enter. They travel along the same road for a while longer, passing other people's homes in the dark. Empty, thinks Ayanda. A neighbourhood full of holiday homes. They turn right onto a gravel road lined with trees. They drive slowly, trying to take in their new surroundings through the lights of the car.

They arrive at the house and get out. Nicholas takes the keys from his pocket and walks towards the front door. Ayanda stays at the car, watching Nicholas fumble with the keys for the security gate, the front door. He watches the lights go on in the entrance hall, hears Nicholas calling out for him to come and take a look. Cold, white light spills out from the house and onto the driveway. Nicholas goes upstairs,

his footsteps noisy on the wooden floors, the lights come on in one room and then another. He calls out again. Ayanda gets his bag from the boot. Tomorrow, he thinks, the vans will arrive with all of their things. Maybe then it will start to feel a little more permanent, a little more like home.

Forward Trajectory of a Positive Black Self

By Nolan Stevens | Photo Essay

> *'Fairer skin has been in favour for what, the last couple of hundred years? But now the pendulum has swung back. Black is in fashion!' – Get Out: the motion picture.*

It is said that the future of black art is bright. The truth is the future of blackness in any context can only ever be promising. The past fails to provide a representative depository of positive black excellence. It is with this in mind that the present and more specifically the future are the only spaces were blackness can hope to aspire for more. Simply put, positivity connected to blackness can only ever truly exist as a futuristic endeavour. The Asisebenze Art Atelier (AAA) artist studio and dealership is an apt case study f or this argument.

The newly formed AAA space in downtown Johannesburg houses a collection of artists who each personify the realities of the black art experience present within the Johannesburg and South African landscape. If the artists currently occupying the Asisebenze building are indeed an illustration of the effects of South Africa's dark political past, then it stands to reason that they are but a small sample size of the contrasting divide that exists between black artists and those of their white counterparts. As most of the resident artists in the building are either self-taught artists, technically sound but inexperienced in theoretical understandings of art, and are first-generation artists within the context of their families or communities, they have not had the luxury to draw from the same pool of resources their peers have. Many of whom are only recently being exposed to the reservoir of conceptual and intellectual frameworks which supports the technical skills they now explore. All of which subliminally suggests that they have had to learn the nuances of the industry whilst simultaneously grappling with their practices.

At present, this crop of artists each engages with ideals of futurist blackness in very specific ways which manifest in one of two means: the first method taking on an aspirational approach, which is mostly conveyed through the subject matter of their work; the second method of incorporating an outlook of futuristic selfhood as illustrated in the artist's process itself. To unpack this idea, I will use a variety of both the Asisebenze residents and those artists affiliated to the space as examples, in the hopes of depicting how a sense of positivity aligned to a futuristic view of the black self is cultivated.

In the case of Samson Mnisi, the most senior artist at Asisebenze, it is not the past violent experiences during his youth as part of the African National Congress' military wing that are focal points, nor does he tap into his foray into crime thereafter which, as he puts it, was a natural progression due to his familiarity with firearms. Instead, his artistic practice is one which does not seek to engage with what once was. Rather, he uses his abstracted work and process of transforming life to its most fundamental point as his true vehicle of expression. A portrait study is fine-tuned into a collection of lines. His abstractions exist not as minimalist renderings of a past lived experience but rather thrive as visual meditations of the present which aid him in better understanding that which is yet to come.

Print-maker, painter and drawer, Treatwell Mnisi, is in some ways the ying to Samson Mnisi's yang. This is glaringly evident in the works each artist creates. Treatwell's gestural figurative works and the over two-generation age gap are the most obvious differences between these two. It is in Treatwell's ballet dancers where we are most directly confronted with imagery which feeds off ideas of futuristic aspirations of blackness. His dancers did not fall into his canon of subject matter because he had at some point witnessed a ballet performance. It's surprising to learn that this young artist has never been to the ballet, and chose to depict ballerinas because a childhood crush of his danced. It isn't difficult, however, to imagine how these statuesque dancers could become personifications of attainable black excellence which may not exist in the present, but akin to the dancer who hones her craft in the pursuit of future greatness, works towards a better version of herself. Treatwell's dancers appear to be signifiers not of the humble beginnings he has surpassed but of the possibility of greatness yet to come.

Themba Shabala's pyrography on woodworks see him deconstruct, burn and texturize the wooden surfaces he works on in an attempt to wrestle with the effects of physical trauma. But rather than thrust to the forefront the trauma of the injury that cost him his right eye, he fashions and moulds it, fusing it into the core of his process, while allowing his subject

matter to take centre stage. These subjects which speak of future hopes and not past failures become a staple element of Shabalala's work. As is the case in his *Layers of Self* triptych, a depiction of his partner and their son. The work which revolves around the promise of things to come, muses on the life he and his partner created and alludes to a continuation of his own lineage from this to the next generation. Even though the three panels are depictions of his son, his partner and of her carrying their child, he is an invisible ever-present presence breathing amidst the crevices of the wood. These are depictions that suggest that Shabalala himself will live on in some way through the man his son will become.

Samantha Maseko's prints and paintings are visual soliloquies which speak of black femininity in its most natural state. Her fixation on black hair, more specifically with the aesthetic of the afro as a proud and authentically black aesthetic, is central to her work. Maseko's practice is one which pushes back against a long history that sort to sell a synthetic version of beauty to black women and girls, teaching them through years of indoctrination that the beauty associated with blackness was not good enough. Maseko's vibrantly painted portraits and detailed prints aim to destabilise these notions, by presenting the black self in all the crowning beauty associated with black hair. The undeniably alluring process she employs is purposeful in her desire to one day make the natural state of blackness an ever-present element in popular visual iconography.

Vivien Kohler, an artist affiliated to AAA, presents a darker view of the African condition in his *Pieta*, a work which draws inspiration from the iconic Michelangelo sculpture of Mary cradling the dead Christ. In the same way in which Michelangelo's *Pieta* serves as a reminder of the connection between a mother and her child, reminding us of the loss a mother feels at the moment she loses her child, Kohler's *Pieta* attaches those same emotions to a work which speaks to the scourge of xenophobia. The painting asks us to remember that which connects us as sons and daughters of Mother Africa. This painting simultaneously draws from an expansive gallery of imagery central to the South African political arena, as connections to the iconic June 16 image of Hector Peterson can be made. Whilst this piece asks pivotal questions of the prevailing powers that be, as indicated through the use of ANC election posters, it poses sterner questions to us as Africans as well – daring us to take responsibility for the future we wish to collectively create. The cautionary tale presented by Kohler is rooted in the past as well as in the present, but if its message is heeded, the future created can only be positive.

> "Themba Shabala's pyrography on woodworks see him deconstruct, burn and texturize the wooden surfaces he works on in an attempt to wrestle with the effects of physical trauma. But rather than thrust to the forefront the trauma of the injury that cost him his right eye, he fashions and moulds it, fusing it into the core of his process, while allowing his subject matter to take centre stage."

Mashir Kresenshun's mixed media pieces exploring Indian culture offer a much softer presentation of multicultural unity. His works serve as subtle reminders of the complexities at play within these narratives by not holding true to a binary black and white viewpoint. The charcoal and ink works which make up his *Indian Trade Series* function not only as a means of speaking about a heritage of the commodification tied to cultural exchange, but also seek to broaden the understandings of non-whiteness, which often finds itself automatically being equated to blackness. Kresenshun addresses this in his use of colour. Here the use of black charcoal, white ink and the brown of his cardboard, each representing black, white and brown peoples, aim to represent a broadness to the African understanding. His work acts as engagements which wrestle with the assumed understandings of identity, as they pose hidden questions such as 'If I'm not white does that automatically make me black?', or 'Is my contribution valued less because I'm not your kind of black?' Mashir Kresenshun's works do not fit easily into the scope of this essay but therein is the reason for his inclusion. He offers an alternative to the black self-conversation; an alternative which hopefully encourages a furthering of understandings

to the narratives surrounding blackness within the cosmopolitan environment that is Johannesburg and South Africa.

The selection of artists aligned with the Asisebenze Art Atelier studio and dealership present a diverse, complex and varying perspective on the positive trajectory of the black self-conversation. It is undeniable, however, that the AAA finds itself in a unique position as studio space and dealership – to not only guide the swinging of that pendulum as it swings forcefully into *in vogue* blackness, but simultaneously to ensure that it does so in a manner which impacts history and the art world in a positive light.

Samantha Maseko
"Rebellion"
Oil on canvas
100 x 60cm
2021

Samson Mnisi
The golden under the pink sky
Acrylic on canvas
1800 x 700cm
2022

Treatwell Mnisi
“Unforgettable”
Charcoal on incissioni
70cm x 100cm
2021

Themba Shabalala
”Layers of self”
Pyrography on wood
240,4 x 120,3cm
2022

Vivien Kohler
"Pieta"
Campaign posters,
acrylic and oil on board
182 x 193cm
2019

Mashir Kresenshun
"There is always knowledge learnt
at the end of the day"
Archival Cardboard, turmeric,
masala, charcoal and Ink on canvas
135 cm x 120cm