

CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICAN VISUAL ART  
AND THE POSTCOLONIAL IMAGINATION,  
1992-PRESENT

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This study examines themes of history, humanness, cultural appropriation and identity politics, as engaged by selected contemporary South African artists and scholars in the 1990s and 2000s. During this period visual artists produced artworks and scholars posited arguments characteristic of postcolonial imagination whose contemporary qualities demonstrated a shift away from the culture of resistance to that of innovative expressions and expanded subject matter. There also emerged contentions that evidenced the complexity of the transition from apartheid to democracy.

Working with local discourses (by Njabulo Ndebele and Albie Sachs) preoccupied with a liberated imagination from the stranglehold of apartheid as well as global postcolonial theories (of C.L.R. James, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha) on the aforementioned themes, this study presents six chapters.

The introductory chapter maps out a theoretical framework and contextual background of the study and articulates the meaning of postcolonial imaginary. Chapter 1 reads Johannes Phokela's oil paintings as a postcolonial critique of (art)

history's Eurocentrism and his visual rewriting of such history by inserting black subjects into colonial master narratives from which they were omitted, obliterated and misrepresented. Chapter 2 examines Zwelethu Mthethwa's color photographs through which he proclaims to restore the dignity of black subjects surviving in the margins of postcolonial modernity. Chapter 3 is a critique of Peet Pienaar's performance artwork which appropriates a Xhosa male initiation ritual and subjects a black female medical doctor to circumcise him in an art gallery. Chapter 4 reflects on Liese van der Watt's call for post-identity, post-race and post-black. The concluding chapter reads the work of Phokela, Mthethwa, Pienaar and van der Watt in light of postcolonial desires: yearning and searching for something different from that which colonial apartheid has constructed and imposed on the South African imagination.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Thembinkosi Goniwe is an artist and art historian, who studied Fine Art at the University of Cape Town and History of Art at Cornell University. He has taught Fine Art and Art History at the University of Cape Town, University of the Witwatersrand, University of Fort Hare and Vaal University of Technology. His artworks have been exhibited in South Africa, the United Kingdom, the United States and Wales. He has contributed essays to various publications, edited numerous exhibition catalogues, and curated exhibitions in South Africa, Italy and Scotland.

For my mother, Ntombentsha Gladys Goniwe

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INTRODUCTION  
CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICAN VISUAL ART  
AND THE POSTCOLONIAL IMAGINATION

In the nineties, from the moment the country shifted irrevocably from apartheid to a representative democracy, the field of South African art has been in a state of constant invention. Contemporary artists of different generations were not only able to shift from modes of artistic production that were largely informed by the resistance culture under apartheid, but artists were also quick to adapt to the emerging global changes that made South African artists some of the most sought-after in exhibitions during the nineties.

Okwui Enwezor (2008)<sup>1</sup>

South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy in the 1990s affirmed the contingency of artistic developments on the country's socio-political context, at the same time attesting to the reasoning that art is inextricably connected to everyday socio-cultural and human concerns. As South Africa embarked on becoming a *new* polity<sup>2</sup> there also emerged *new* artistic expressions and diverse representations. Visual arts demonstrated a different character from dominant narratives and stable forms that were circumscribed by proclivities and determinisms of *colonial apartheid*.<sup>3</sup> Artworks that mushroomed evinced a variety of content, creative procedures, innovative mediums and experimentation with materials indicative of *novel* aesthetics that wrestled with the continuing and discontinuous historical problems and established artistic forms. Observable in some, if not most of these artworks, was a radical move

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<sup>1</sup> Okwui Enwezor, "“Better Lives,” Marginal Selves: Framing the Current Reception of Contemporary South African Art” in *South African Art Now*, Sue Williamson (2008), 16.

<sup>2</sup> South Africa is a belated post-colonial state compared to other African countries whose independence from colonial rule began since the mid twentieth-century.

<sup>3</sup> This combination connotes an extension of colonialism to apartheid and how the latter becomes an intensification and epitome of the former in the process of modernization in South Africa. This combination also underscores an understanding that “Colonialism was not a single moment or process. Rather, it was series of multiple, overlapping processes of attempted domination that were simultaneously mutually reinforcing and disintegrative.” Nicolas M. Creary (ed.), “Introduction” in *African Intellectuals and Decolonization* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2012), 6.

away from the restrictive *culture of resistance*<sup>4</sup> to a *culture of liberated expressions*.<sup>5</sup>

Andries Oliphant acknowledges this “aesthetic shift [which] became visible during the transition,”<sup>6</sup> a similar point Sue Williamson noted regarding the “change on the level of aesthetic freedom”.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Aesthetics and Political Changes***

An attention, in post-1994, to aesthetics became the province not only of artists but curators, critics, scholars and art brokers who, during apartheid, were restrained to engage with its potential force (for social, political and cultural change as well as intimacy, splendor and pleasure). The reason for this restraint owes to “the politicization of art” when artists were encouraged to serve “the political struggle” against colonial apartheid; the result of which was a subjection of creative arts to being ideologically instrumentalized for political propaganda at the expense of aesthetic consideration and “formal mastery,” as Oliphant opines.<sup>8</sup> The emergence of aesthetic freedom during the 1990s was a part of the political transition facilitated by the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA). Through a negotiated political settlement between the apartheid regime and liberation organizations,

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<sup>4</sup> It was “the content and means by which both white and black artists were fighting that repressive regime.” Sue Williamson, *Resistance Art in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philips, 1989), 8.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion and examples of heterogeneous and hybrid art forms produced during this transition see, Sue Williamson and Ashraf Jamal, *Art in South Africa: Future Present* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1996); Sophie Perryer (ed.), *10 Years 100 Artists: Art in a Democratic South Africa* (Cape Town: Bell-Roberts, 2004); Sue Williamson, *South African Art Now* (New York: Collins Design, 2009); Thembinkosi Goniwe, Mario Pissarra and Mandisa Majavu (eds.), *Visual Century: South African Art in Context, Volume Four 1990-2007* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Andries Oliphant, “Imagined Futures: Some New Trends in South African Art” in *Visual Century: South African Art in Context, Volume Four 1990-2007*, eds. Thembinkosi Goniwe, Mario Pissarra and Mandisi Majavu (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2011), 181.

<sup>7</sup> Sue Williamson, “Introduction” in *Art in South Africa: Future Present*, Sue Williamson and Ashraf Jamal (Cape Town: David Philip, 1996), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Andries Oliphant, (2011), *Ibid.*, 181.

CODESA delivered the first democratic elections, which in 1994 brought to political power the African National Congress led by Nelson Mandela. Two of the key political initiatives that immediately followed were the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) inaugurated in 1995 and a new Constitution and Bill of Rights endorsed in 1996.

Important to note here is that the TRC facilitated reconciliation and forgiveness between perpetrators and victims of apartheid. It enacted a tolerable process whose purpose was to come to terms with the past and prevent future violence and violation of human rights in the meaningful appeal of Nelson Mandela: “Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another and suffer the indignity of being the skunk of the world.”<sup>9</sup> Underpinning this motive was to establish a shared humanity and a *new* future for all yet diverse South Africans. The new Constitution became essential in ensuring the (proper) workings of law and order, guiding and procuring the implementation of democratic ideals. It enshrined equal rights, rights to dignity, respect and value for all South Africans, including clauses such as sections 16: the *freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of association* and *freedom of assembly*. These clauses give ground to unrestricted possibilities of enunciation at the same time protecting artists against intimidation and censorship. They have been important to artists and writers who have struggled against official censorship and who by extension had to exercise restraint not only to publicly criticize oppressive regimes and the circumstances they create and impose, but to also explore unbounded subjects of personal choice and subjective will.

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<sup>9</sup> Nelson Mandela speaking at his inauguration as President of South Africa, Union Buildings, Pretoria, South Africa, 10th May 1994 in [http://www.mandela.gov.za/mandela\\_speeches/1994/940510\\_inauguration.htm](http://www.mandela.gov.za/mandela_speeches/1994/940510_inauguration.htm)

A number of established artists capitalized on the opportunities resulting from democracy by producing art that rhymed with local developments and international trends. Importantly, the readmission of South Africa into the global arena enabled artists a direct access to artistic advancements taking place in other parts of the world. Contemporary South African artists thus mined assorted artistic forms that afforded them the possibility to advance and expand their aesthetic enquiries and creative approaches. Their perspectives and art practices therefore further shifted from those produced under apartheid to innovatively reflective forms. These developments became notable in the work of artists such as Kay Hassan (b. 1956), Santu Mofokeng (b. 1956), Penny Siopis (b. 1953), Jane Alexander (b. 1959), Sandile Zulu (b. 1960) William Kentridge (b. 1955), Zwelethu Mthethwa (b. 1960), Johannes Phokela (b.1966), Berni Searle (b. 1964), Kendell Geers (b. 1968), Candice Breitz (b. 1972), and Tracey Rose (b. 1974). Some of these artists' work continued to tackle socio-political issues that evinced consequences of colonial apartheid in democratic South Africa, whilst others explored new subjects and contemporary preoccupations.<sup>10</sup>

Artworks that emerged in post-1994 South Africa explored themes of self-definition, self-affirmation, self-determination and self-reflectivity. These artworks varied in forms and innovations, as artists tackled contentious and polemical topics pertaining to the politics of identity, biography and autobiography, with others conveying introspective, intimate, beautiful, playful and pleasurable representations. Artists investigated personal experiences, family narratives, individual memories,

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<sup>10</sup> For an array of writings on and images of these contemporary South African artists see publications such as *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art* founded in 1994, *Artthrob* established in 1997 ([www.artthrob.co.za](http://www.artthrob.co.za)) and *Art South Africa* established in 2002).

dreams, desires and projections. They did so through the use of their own bodies and mining of archives, experimenting with various mediums, materials, technologies and performative strategies.<sup>11</sup> Retrieving and refashioning of cultural traditions, rituals and artifacts were pursued by some artists among whom I note Churchill Madikida (b. 1973), Nandipha Mntambo (b. 1982), Thando Mama (b. 1977) and Mary Sibande (b. 1982). Themes of memory, history, trauma, healing, masculinity, femininity, heterosexuality, homosexuality or queer identities became more apparent in the work of Steven Cohen (b. 1962), Zanele Muholi (b. 1972), Nicolas Hlobo (b. 1975) and Lawrence Lemaana (b. 1982).

### ***Enduring Transition***

The aforementioned artists produced an art whose preoccupation with the time and space they occupied was also in dialogue with the broader art world globally.<sup>12</sup> By time and space, I refer to their contemporary context, an important juncture in the history of South Africa, noting the crucial transition from apartheid to democracy aptly described by Carli Coetzee as “the process of the long ending and new beginning.”<sup>13</sup> Coetzee’s description is similar to Amilcar Cabral’s observation about the politics of African independence from colonialism to have been “the end of the beginning.”<sup>14</sup> It is an enduring, if not a permanent transition, one that has become what

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<sup>11</sup> For examples, see footnote number 5.

<sup>12</sup> It is a global arena from which they were excluded during the apartheid regime, whose racism was declared by the United Nations a crime against humanity and thus South Africa was banned from participating in (cultural) activities internationally.

<sup>13</sup> Carli Coetzee, *Accented Futures: Language and the Ending of Apartheid* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2013), ix.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Nicholas M. Creary (ed.), “Introduction” in *African Intellectuals and Decolonization* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2012), 6.

Achille Mbembe perceives as “a historical interval” wherein the democratic elite “is still caught up...between an intractable present and an irrecoverable past, between things that are no longer and things that are not yet.”<sup>15</sup> Referred to here is a transitional predicament during which the past and present are in a dialectical contestation, whose outcome is a suspended, an unpredictable future. But one thing is for sure: since the advent of democracy the socioeconomic conditions of the black majority have not improved much given the visible evidence of intact racial inequities between the black majority and white minority.<sup>16</sup>

Although devastating to the poor and working classes,<sup>17</sup> this enduring transition has been important for creative arts and cultural expressions, taking cognizance of the enabling democratic conditions for the rise of a culture of free and wide-ranging expressions. The 1990s witnessed a variety of artistic and intellectual practices that are complex, nuanced and refreshing in comparison to those that were dominantly produced during apartheid. Artists have produced artworks that often assume characteristics indicative of inventive impulses in the persuasive arguments Kathryn Smith made about an *experimental turn in the visual arts*<sup>18</sup> of South Africa. Gavin Jantjies has also acknowledged these developments in “the production of works that signaled changes in the attitudes of artists to their role in culture. These works

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<sup>15</sup> Achille Mbembe, “Foreword” in *Domains of Freedom: Justice, Citizenship and Social Change in South Africa*, eds. Thembela Kepe, Melissa Levin and Bettina von Lieres (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2016), ix-x.

<sup>16</sup> I make this point aware of the *petit bourgeois*, black political elite and affluent class that also enjoy *some* privileges, but a class that, when read with reference to Frantz Fanon, remains ineffective in making a radical socioeconomic transformation owing to the fact that it “draws its strength after independence chiefly from agreements reached with the former colonial [apartheid] power.” Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 176.

<sup>17</sup> “However, given the negotiated nature of the transition, the economic, social and cultural infrastructure bequeathed by the past was left intact. Consequently, the focus fell on transforming existing institutions to serve the new democratic agenda,” concedes Andries Oliphant, (2011), *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>18</sup> See Kathryn Smith, “Experimental Turn in Visual Arts” in Thembinkosi Goniwe, Mario Pissarra and Mandisi Majavu (eds.), (2011), *Ibid.*, 118-151.

indicated that artists had strategies and methods to address complex issues of cultural and sexual identities, the revision of history and the evolution of culture” in the last decade of the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup> The timing of such an experimental turn and changes in attitudes would seem a necessary response to the criticisms and propositions articulated in Njabulo Ndebele’s *rediscovery of the ordinary*<sup>20</sup> and Albie Sachs’ *preparing ourselves for freedom*.<sup>21</sup> Articulated in the 1980s, these criticisms and propositions pertaining to the significance of artistic imagination have been much more relevant in the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Towards Practices of Free Imagination***

Critical offerings by Ndebele and Sachs are important<sup>23</sup> given that they have been key in the transformative debates and resilient struggle pertaining to the question of liberated cultural expressions and diverse subject matters in the history of South African creative arts, especially at the juncture marking the enduring process of ending colonial-apartheid and the emerging of post-apartheid. Their ideas, especially Ndebele’s, were and are part of the discourses and practices of postcoloniality; they are not after the fact, but theoretical tenants central in the constitution of what became the *culture of liberated expressions* in the field of creative and intellectual arts, not to

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<sup>19</sup> Gavin Jantjies, “Great Expectations: A View from Europe” in Thembinkosi Goniwe, Mario Pissarra and Mandisi Majavu (eds.), (2011), *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>20</sup> Njabulo Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* (Scottsville, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> Albie Sachs, “Preparing Ourselves for Freedom” in Ingrid de Kok and Karen Press (eds.), (1990), *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> See Ashraf Jamal, *Predicaments of Culture in South Africa* (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 2004).

<sup>23</sup> Of importance here is not the historical resonance and particularity but theoretical dimensions and path-openings of Ndebele’s and Sachs’s criticisms and propositions in shifting and shaping up both creative practices and intellectual discourses that emerged in the *enduring transition* in South Africa. Their theoretical offerings are useful for this study as reflective propositions and more so conceptual frames of reference for discoursing both the thematic notion *postcolonial imagination* and historical period from 1992 to the present.

mention them being conversant with postcolonial discourses within Africa and globally. It is these liberated expressions that include innovative strategies and expansive subjects to which I refer as *postcolonial imagination*—a conceptual frame defined in various sections of this chapter—to articulate phenomenal practices theorized in the decades preceding and implemented in the 1990s.<sup>24</sup>

In their different though overlapping articulations, Ndebele and Sachs posit compelling criticisms on the circumscription and burdening of creative arts especially by serving political ideologies and hence their entrapment within social pathologies. To address these stifling glitches, Ndebele and Sachs called for the freedom and responsibility of creative arts in a society fraught with socioeconomic disparities, rife with brutal oppression and violation of human rights. Their diagnostic emphasis was, in the main, on the necessity to *free imagination* or what Ashraf Jamal calls “the decolonization of imagination”<sup>25</sup> from the stranglehold of colonial apartheid. This was a challenging necessity to the creative arts whose liberating character was important in the sense of *preparing* South Africans for the enduring transition and the predicaments of a new democracy.

In 1989, Sachs posed the challenge in this way: “The problem is whether we have sufficient cultural imagination to grasp the rich texture of the free and united South Africa we have done so much to bring about.”<sup>26</sup> Sachs made this argument with

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<sup>24</sup> I have intently focused on relevant and useful ideas of Ndebele and Sachs. For insightful critiques of their ideas, for instance, see Tony Morphet, “Cultural Imagination and Cultural Settlement: Albie Sachs and Njabulo Ndebele” in Ingrid de Kok and Karen Press (eds.), (1990), *Ibid.*, 131-144; Pitika Ntuli, “Fragments from Under a Telescope: A Response to Albie Sachs”, *Third Text: Africa Special Issue*, No. 23 (1993), 69-77; Kelwyn Sole, “Reading the Nations” in *Southern African Review of Books*, 39 & 40, (1995), 39-40; and Ashraf Jamal, (2005), *Ibid.*, 1-16 and 83-105.

<sup>25</sup> Ashraf Jamal, (2005), *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>26</sup> Albie Sachs, (1990), *Ibid.*, 19.

reference to the circumscribing determinisms produced by apartheid for artistic and cultural productions especially the extent to which the 1980s slogan that *culture is a weapon of the struggle* posed “the dangers of a too narrowly defined political expectation of and prescriptiveness about arts.”<sup>27</sup> This slogan, which framed and inculcated the active role, responsibility and contribution of creative arts to the struggle against oppression and inhumanity imposed by the apartheid regime, was understandable. As Matsemela Manaka argued:

Art of the eighties reflects the struggling and resisting masses...workers in protests against management, people resisting against forced removals, people protesting against any form of injustice, and above all, art has become a tool for liberation.<sup>28</sup>

Nadine Gordimer, too, argued:

[a] great responsibility devolves on artists and cultural workers to align themselves consciously with the forces of democracy and national liberation in the life and death struggle to free our country from racist bondage.<sup>29</sup>

Elsewhere, Gordimer argued for a “Society’s right to make demands on the writer as equal to that of the writer’s commitment to his artistic vision.”<sup>30</sup> These arguments asserted the significance of *protest art*, *commitment art* and *resistance art*<sup>31</sup> in the history of visual arts, literature and cultural production during apartheid. What, however, became an issue was that the culture of resistance was so overwhelming to the extent that the artists’ commitment to their artistic vision was compromised. Furthermore, according to Colin Richards, the culture of resistance pursued a struggle mostly committed “to create conditions for creativity” necessary to confront apartheid,

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<sup>27</sup> Ingrid de Kok, “Introduction” in Ingrid de Kok and Karen Press (eds.), (1990), *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Matsemela Manaka, *Echoes of African Art* (Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1987), 17.

<sup>29</sup> Nadine Gordimer, “The Value of a Conference” in *Culture in Another South Africa*, eds. W. Campscreur and J. Divendal (London: Zed Books 1989), 10-12.

<sup>30</sup> Nadine Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Place* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1988), 209.

<sup>31</sup> See Sue Williamson, *Resistance Art in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philips, 1989).

but “seldom created those conditions itself”<sup>32</sup> and by extension for its own innovative advancement. Consequently, creative arts became constricted, especially for being an ideological instrument for political ends. This *politicization* of art was important, albeit resulted not only in crippling the potential plenitude of creative arts but disabling cultural imagination of artists and creative producers, too. Creative arts, notwithstanding, became a limited and limiting practice as it failed to envision a different, democratic world other than and beyond that which is structurally circumscribed by the colonized imagination of apartheid.<sup>33</sup> Besides this crippled or disempowered art, the expectation from artists was and will always be innovative ways of breaking free from what Sachs calls the spell of “multiple ghettos of the apartheid imagination”<sup>34</sup> and creatively articulate “the new consciousness”<sup>35</sup> relevant to a desired different future society. Five years earlier, Ndebele had articulated a similar, though complex, critique in writing:

The challenge is to free the entire social imagination of the oppressed from laws of perception that have characterized apartheid. For writers, this means freeing the creative process itself from those laws. It means extending the writer’s perception of what can be written, and the means and methods of writing.<sup>36</sup>

Although Ndebele’s critique concerns literature it applies to visual arts. It is scholarly complex and systematically detailed, stretching further back into the turn of the

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<sup>32</sup> Colin Richards, “About Face: Aspects of Art History and Identity in South African Visual Culture” in *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*, eds. Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor (London: InVA, 1999), 348.

<sup>33</sup> The so-called *township art* exemplifies this circumscription: an art epitomizing the limitation of oppressed subjects whose subject matter was the obvious black oppression, despair and musical scene; not to mention its impaired artistic form or visualizing language fitting the description of a native’s emasculated, if not subdued, *tongue* only able to express imperceptible representations within the colonial apartheid predicament. Its visual speak was bankrupt of reflective imagination as it was an art indicative of constricted visions of the ghetto sentimentalism.

<sup>34</sup> Albie Sachs, (1990), *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>36</sup> Njabulo Ndebele, (2006), *Ibid.*, 63.

twentieth century. Ndebele articulates the limits of *protest art* in particular its inadequacy to engage with both the varying oppressive conditions in the 1960s and 1970s. Ndebele criticizes its artistic medium and creative procedures, dismissing it to be a “mind-bogglingly spectacular” and “obscene social exhibitionism”<sup>37</sup> that has “lost its objective basis” as it “reproduces itself uncritically”<sup>38</sup> and thus became “a pathology”.<sup>39</sup> In this dismissal, Ndebele articulates a prolonged historical urge (for an artistic imagination) that traces its pedigrees to Lewis Nkosi,<sup>40</sup> who in the 1960s criticized the protest and commitment art as “a mere rendering of ‘the surface meaning of the scene’”<sup>41</sup> and thus lacks “both vigor of the imagination and sufficient technical resources, to the problem posed by conditions in South Africa”<sup>42</sup> and not to mention it being nothing but a “journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature.”<sup>43</sup>

Visual artists were not spared from such criticism noting Thamsanqa Mnyele’s comments: “Our work hasn’t yet developed above the mere stage of protest: we’re still moaning and pleading. And even that we do with inferior craftsmanship and insincerity. We must partake actively in the struggle to paint sincerely.”<sup>44</sup> Mnyele’s comments are indicative of a critical consciousness that considers the importance of both the struggle against oppression and the imagination necessary not to submit

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 31-33.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>40</sup> For an instructive discourse on Lewis Nkosi’s wide-ranging work see, Lindy Stiebel and Liz Gunner (eds.), *Still Beating the Drum: Critical Perspectives on Lewis Nkosi* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2006).

<sup>41</sup> Lewis Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles of African Literature* (Essex, UK: Longman Group Limited, 1981), 76.

<sup>42</sup> Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile* (London: Longman, 1965), 131.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>44</sup> Thamsanqa ‘Thami’ Mnyele, “A New Day” in *Thami Mnyele + MEDU Art Ensemble Retrospective*, eds. Clive Kellner and Sergio-Albio González (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2009), 20.

creative arts to the limits implicated in the discourse of protest. Whilst the role of art in the struggle was imperative, so was its active responsibility to advance its means of engagement, by being innovative in its creative form or artistic approach, for the character of art cannot be reducible to restrictive political ideologies.<sup>45</sup>

It is within this historical art criticism that Ndebele dismisses ‘protest art’ and proposes a “search for ways of thinking, ways of perception, that will help to break down the closed epistemological structures of South African oppression.”<sup>46</sup> Sachs also opined a similar point regarding the need for artists to “shake off the gravity of their anguish and break free from the solemn formulas of commitment,”<sup>47</sup> what Okwui Enwezor would later rephrase as *South Africa’s often-told story of anguish* predicated on “a fertile ground of high human drama,” which has “accumulated an iconic aura centered on accounts of the impoverished life”.<sup>48</sup>

At the core of these foregoing criticisms is a dirge pertaining to the bankruptcy and negation of imagination. Such a problem also rests on the deficit that, according to Richards, owes to “the culture of resistance [which] has often only been able to glance at a more imaginative future out of the corner of its eye.”<sup>49</sup> Implied in Richards’ argument is not a complete absence or negation of imagination, but a restrained, thin filter through which imagination was channeled prior the 1990s. Thin and restrained due to the overwhelming conditions imposed by colonial apartheid. Thus, at the

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<sup>45</sup> James Baldwin had already posited this criticism about Black American literature of the 1950s, lamenting the dearth of “complexity”, “ambiguity”, “paradox” and artistic “language”, “style or characterization”; he perceived this deficit to “make it impossible that our lives shall be other than superficial.” “compulsive, bloodless dimensions”. James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 13-23.

<sup>46</sup> Njabulo Ndebele, (2006), *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>47</sup> Albie Sachs, (1990), *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>48</sup> Okwui Enwezor, “Photography After the End of Documentary Realism: Zwelethu Mthethwa’s Color Photographs” in *Zwelethu Mthethwa*, ed. Isolde Brielmaier (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2010), 101.

<sup>49</sup> Colin Richards, (1999), *Ibid.*, 348.

precise moment of the official ending of apartheid and advent of democracy, after Ndebele and Sachs, for Richards, “The challenge now is how to begin to realize what has only been glimpsed through fissures in the finally declining white nationalist hegemony.”<sup>50</sup> As a resolve to this challenge, Ndebele and Sachs have proposed redemptive formulations.

### ***Redemptive Formulations***

For Sachs, a redemptive formulation is when creative arts “bypasses, overwhelms, ignores apartheid,” or any tyrannical regime; in so doing “establishes its own space.”<sup>51</sup> Different interpretations of Sachs’ formulation have been offered, for instance, with Brenda Cooper perceiving him to call for a “new space [that] needs a new language, which does not really exist yet.”<sup>52</sup> For Gavin Younge, Sachs prompted an important debate on the “autonomy” of artists so that they have the “freedom” not only over their subject matter but “to act socially” and disrupt their tradition at the same time recognizing that tradition is “the one most quality necessary to an understanding of art’s affirmative social role.”<sup>53</sup> Kendell Geers construes Sachs to propose an “alternative” space necessary for an “avant-garde” art which is critical not only of oppressive regimes such as “apartheid, but of both itself as well as its own history.”<sup>54</sup>

The invocation of avant-garde art is important here, especially considering

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 348.

<sup>51</sup> Albie Sachs, (1990), Ibid., 21.

<sup>52</sup> Brenda Cooper, “Underneath the Fists are Open and Vulnerable Eyes” in Ingrid de Kok and Karen Press (eds.), (1990), Ibid., 53.

<sup>53</sup> Gavin Younge, “Running in the Sackrace” in Ingrid de Kok and Karen Press (eds.), (1990), Ibid., 83-84.

<sup>54</sup> Kendell Geers, “Competition with History: Resistance and the Avant Garde” in Ingrid de Kok and Karen Press (eds.), (1990), Ibid., 44.

Jamal's reading of Sachs to intimate "a cultural agency that surpasses boundaries" in order to "invoke a third space which, in Southern African cultural economy has not quite been expressed, let alone sustained."<sup>55</sup> Similar to Cooper's reading of a *new space* and Geers' *alternative space*, for Jamal, after Tony Morphet<sup>56</sup> and with reference to Homi Bhabha,<sup>57</sup> such a *third space*, is also "an as yet unthinkable other space"<sup>58</sup> in a propelling sense of the question posed to South African cultural producers by Tony Meintjies: "how do we make the jump that is required to move forward decisively in the unfolding phase?"<sup>59</sup> Artists are key in addressing Meintjies' question, but primarily (if not only) when they have a grasp and effective application of the creative attributes of imagination.

In short, these interpretations of Sachs' proposition articulate an artistic quest akin to avant-gardism insofar as to bring to attention the necessary practice of imagination. Such is the postcolonial imagination through whose reflective and penetrating undertaking is, on one level, capable of creating works of art that tackle the complexity of the contemporary wrestling with persisting histories and ways of being free from circumscriptions which remain haunting specters of the present and future. On another level, it is a venture into unknown avenues, examining unfamiliar subjects and expanding its contents whilst in the process renewing its own creative forms and artistic strategies. In so doing, such postcolonial imagination becomes a creative and intellectual practice whose force innovatively revises and revitalizes

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<sup>55</sup> Ashraf Jamal, (2005), *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>56</sup> Tony Morphet, (1990), *Ibid.*, 131-44.

<sup>57</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 36-9.

<sup>58</sup> Ashraf Jamal, (2005), *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>59</sup> Tony Meintjies, "New Thinking – The Broader Political Context" in Ingrid de Kok and Karen Press (eds.), (1990), *Ibid.*, 119.

artistic methods that should be effective and adapt to changing socio-political circumstances. Ndebele eruditely articulates this undertaking in his proposed redemptive formulation, particularly his arguments on subject *content* and aesthetic *form* to which I turn now.

Developed in a series of essays, a redemptive approach for Njabulo Ndebele is predicated on the rediscovery of the ordinary. It involves a methodical use of imaginative aptitude, ethical propensity and reflective consciousness in tackling subjects not limited to social, political and economic matters, but take into account personal introspections and psycho-emotions. Ndebele's pressing concern is the need for creative arts to simultaneously oppose and subvert *surface representations* and *superfluous spectacle*.<sup>60</sup> Writers and artists are tasked to explore imaginative forms with which to understand the existential human experiences and social conditions and moreover the ordinary tactics people utilize for resistance and subversion, survival and sustenance in their everyday lives. Ndebele insists that: "The very resources of living should constitute the material essence of the search for personal and social meaning."<sup>61</sup> Thus it becomes imperative for artists to understand and make these ordinary phenomena the substantial themes of their "imaginative explorations."<sup>62</sup> The quintessence of creative arts, it should be noted, is not reductive to the subject matter but is equally invested "in the inventiveness of treatment, in the sharpening of insight, and in the deepening of consciousness."<sup>63</sup> A conscious and purposeful creation of artworks through this mode, as Ndebele articulates, should give rise to a "deeply

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<sup>60</sup> Njabulo Ndebele, (2006), *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

philosophical contemplation” and consequently the “discovery of complexity in a seemingly ordinary and faceless” person or subject, revealing the fact that “life is complex.”<sup>64</sup>

Ndebele’s proposition, whose objective to activate transformation through imaginative art, is two-fold. It is apparently concerned with content and form, subject matter and aesthetic procedure. The proposition on content is preoccupied with an investigation of various subjects and situations in particular those not always already *public* and dominantly *spectacular* but subtle and nuanced. These are not obvious but silent and neglected subjects that tend to occupy the realm of insignificance, the peripheral yet contentious edge in a society where the drama of everyday practices among ordinary people is played out. That is where also a variety of human experiences, perceptions and emotions (such as love, joy, intimacy, torment and anxiety) take place. It is the neglect of these human qualities by creative arts that Ndebele and Sachs bemoan, with the latter posing a poignant question: “What are we fighting for, if not the right to express our humanity in all its forms, including our sense of fun and capacity for love, tenderness and our appreciation of the beauty of the world?”<sup>65</sup>

Regarding form, Ndebele proposes an analytic approach “in order to reveal new possibilities of understanding and action,” an approach with which once invented and their application resolved would demonstrate that artists and writers have rediscovered the ordinary.<sup>66</sup> This involves the “change of discourse from the rhetoric

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>65</sup> Albie Sachs, (1990), Ibid., 21.

<sup>66</sup> Njabulo Ndebele, (2006), Ibid., 46.

of oppression to that of process and exploration” through “an open-endedness in the use of language, a search for originality of expression and a sensitivity to dialogue.”<sup>67</sup> Echoing this preoccupation with form, Manaka advises: “for an artist the process of making is more than the final product.”<sup>68</sup> Advanced here is what Ndebele considers “the creative act”<sup>69</sup> which is predicated on “a search for appropriate form and technique, which would enable [artists] to grasp the complexity and render it understandable.”<sup>70</sup> In other words, artists are compelled to be inventive in their use of their creative language, so as to either circumvent or transgress its limits and incapacitations for effective communication and persuasive expressions that are imperative in opening up avenues wherein possibilities to think and act differently, imagine new futures, social identities and human relations are activated and thrive.

To accomplish this task, artists have to acquire an artistic technique<sup>71</sup> capable of gaging and affecting the intersections of language and everyday rituals of the particular context in which they live and wish to change. Another dimension to this task is an aesthetic form, particularly as a technical matter of profound consequence in artistic production. It is a technical form whose realization is contingent upon possessing a certain command of a creative language through which there is a constant innovation of technical (r)evolution.<sup>72</sup> In short, Ndebele’s concern was the extent to

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>68</sup> Matsemela Manaka, (1987), Ibid., 18

<sup>69</sup> Njabulo Ndebele, (2006), Ibid., 70.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>71</sup> By “technique” Ndebele “does not mean a rarefied, formal, and disembodied attempt at innovation for its own sake” but “the attempt to find the best possible ways of extending social perception through appropriateness of form. Technique, then, is inseparable from the exploration of human perception.” Njabulo Ndebele, (2006), Ibid., 71.

<sup>72</sup> This particular concern with form and technique recalls Walter Benjamin’s argument: “that the important elementary progressions in art are not a matter of new contents... Nor are these progressions classified as new forms... Revolutions in *Technik*, Benjamin insists, precede both content and form. In these revolutions in *Technik*,

which artistic technique was not refined and utilized according to its dynamic capacity that is able to “probe beyond the observable facts, to reveal new worlds... This way, the social imagination of the oppressed can be extended considerably and made ready in concrete terms to deal with the demands of a complex future.”<sup>73</sup> For Ndebele, the attainability of such a language would demonstrate the rediscovery of the ordinary, not only “as the opposite to the spectacular” but “sobering rationality” which is essential in “forcing attention on necessary detail. Paying attention to the ordinary and its methods will result in a significant growth of consciousness.”<sup>74</sup>

Ndebele’s call for an attention on necessary detail and nameless subjects is akin to Michel de Certeau’s theory on practices of everyday life, particularly the latter’s arguments about the anonymous, a dedication to an ordinary man, the common hero.<sup>75</sup> More interesting are de Certeau’s thoughts on the sort of measures, procedures and actions that the marginal subjects employ on a micro level in their perceptive ways to undermine and subvert chastising tyrannies. Take for instance his articulation of “the tactic” as that which “insinuates itself into the other’s place...it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized “on the wing” and “...must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into opportunities.”<sup>76</sup> These nameless and anonymous subjects, equipped with the tactic of maneuvering and improvisation, are not dissimilar to the thesis of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*,<sup>77</sup> in

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which outcrop in a fracturing of artistic development, the political tendencies that inhabit every artwork are disclosed, since artworks are ‘historical construction of consciousness’.” Cited in Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 46.

<sup>73</sup> Njabulo Ndebele, (2006), *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>75</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (California: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, xix.

<sup>77</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1965).

that they operate in the fringe though within the socioeconomic realm dominated by oppressive regimes and grand narratives. Also, they are either excluded or obliterated, if not “othered” in both material and symbolic representations. Most of these subjects occupy the bottom echelon of society. These are black (and non-western) peoples who wrestle with both the meaning of life, estrangement, visibility, recognition, livelihood and survival. Lewis Gordon, after Frantz Fanon, reads these black subjects as non-being in an anti-black world.<sup>78</sup> Certainly, these are neglected subjects, notwithstanding their invisible but present and active operation despite repressive and exploitative regimes. Courageously, they have made the fringe a site for productive maneuverings in the sense argued by bell hooks about black women in feminism,<sup>79</sup> Gerald Gaylard’s reading of postcolonial fiction,<sup>80</sup> and Gayatri Spivak’s assertion that, “‘postcoloniality,’ far from being marginal, can show the irreducible margin in the center.”<sup>81</sup> There is also Olu Oguibe’s argument of the marginal other not merely as a “silent present” but a “significant silence,”<sup>82</sup> adding to his view that “our discourse should begin to move in the direction of dismissing, at least in discursive terms, the concept of a center, not by moving it, as Ngugi wa Thiong’o has suggested,<sup>83</sup> but superseding it.”<sup>84</sup> Corroborating the importance of the margins is also James Phillips

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<sup>78</sup> Lewis Gordon, *What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2014), 19.

<sup>79</sup> “It is essential for continued feminist struggle that black women recognize the special vantage point our marginality gives us and make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter-hegemony.” bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 15.

<sup>80</sup> “Because fiction does not have an immediate social goal or result... it is all too easily dismissed as peripheral, particularly in its more abstruse forms, yet that very peripherality is its strength for it allows fiction to exhume the forgotten, the unseen, the unsaid and the marginalized in culture.” Gerald Gaylard, *After Colonialism: African Postmodernism and Magical Realism* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2005), 11.

<sup>81</sup> Gayatri Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (London: Routledge, 1993), 63.

<sup>82</sup> Olu Oguibe, *The Culture Game* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 11.

<sup>83</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Moving the Center: The Struggle for Cultural Freedom* (London: Heinemann, 1993).

<sup>84</sup> Olu Oguibe, (2004), *Ibid.*, 4.

and James Morley who opine how “it is in the margin that we will find an active interest in imagination” because of its “power to not only react to the world but to recreate it.”<sup>85</sup>

As an act of imagination, Ndebele’s “rediscovery of ordinary” is a methodical redirecting of focus and attention away from dominant subjects and grand narratives towards the unceremonious or unrecognized and particularly their ways of operating or doing things.<sup>86</sup> This reasoning is indicative of postcolonial precepts especially discursive strategies applicable to challenge the hierarchical binary relations between center and margin, grand and minor, superordinate and subordinate. This is to say Ndebele’s rediscovery of the ordinary could be perceived and configured in terms of creative practices necessary to shifting attention away from the colonizer to the colonized, dominant subject to marginal subject. It is a tactical approach whose primary undertaking, on one level, is to reverse or undermine the focus on and centering of grand narratives over, above and at the expense of peripheral narratives. On another level, it is to collapse or balance the hierarchical relations between these disparate subjects. Put differently, Ndebele’s proposition is predicated on repositioning the marginal narratives in the march for liberation, justice, equality and fairness in contemporary South Africa. Underpinning his proposition is a postcolonial imagination that advocates (radical) shifts in contemporary attitudes of the marginal or subaltern subjects. These are attitudes that would be impossible to alter without exposing, attacking and redressing the actual conditions that produce marginality,

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<sup>85</sup> James Phillips and James Morley (eds.), “Introduction” in *Imagination and its Pathologies* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003), 7.

<sup>86</sup> Michel de Certeau, (1984), *Ibid.*, xiv.

symbolically and literally. The sites of representation,<sup>87</sup> particularly in the field of visual arts and cultural productions are where mental shifts are negotiated and contested. These are sites to which Ndebele's theoretical interventions attend, more so partaking in postcolonial discourses advanced by Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, among others.

### ***Postcolonial Theories***

Although articulated in different contexts, Ndebele's rediscovery of the faceless subjects and De Certeau's device of tactic speak curiously to Edward Said's postcolonial strategy of *contrapuntal*. This is the case particularly considering Said's theory on the creative act of both resisting and inserting back into the dominant narrative those (historically colonized) subjects that have been forcefully omitted or erased from master's texts through imperialism, colonialism and apartheid.<sup>88</sup> What underpins Said's contrapuntal is the reopening up and rewriting of (modern) history whose treacherous formation is notable for its exclusive and repressive epistemological programs of Eurocentrism, Orientalism and Universalism. Said's undertaking is similar to that of Stuart Hall, who, according to Chris Rojek, "attacks 'the West' for self-idealization; for omitting to recognize or respect difference; propounding the Western idiom of perception and representation as universal".<sup>89</sup> Said's contrapuntal strategy is one form of postcolonial interventions or analyses of imperial, single, linear history and its cultural archive. Through its imaginative

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<sup>87</sup> See Stuart Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: SAGE Publications, 1997).

<sup>88</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 66-67. Also see Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

<sup>89</sup> Cited in Chris Rojek, *Stuart Hall* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 34.

enactment alternative perspectives and new narratives are inevitably bound to emerge and the consequently suppressed, hidden, eclipsed and disavowed subjects are excavated. In this way, these marginalized subjects are given visibility and recognition but also new meaning and value, if not “newly engaged interest.”<sup>90</sup> Such postcolonial thoughts are concerned with alternative conceptions of the way in which history is no longer reduced to a Eurocentric singularity, nor dictated by colonial apartheid narration, but is understood in a plural, expansive coexistence and intersectional multiplicities. The foregoing postcolonial thoughts are applied across the different chapters of this study.

Johannes Phokela’s oil paintings, discussed in **chapter 1**, aptly exemplify Said’s contrapuntal as a critical intervention concerned with the exclusion of black subjects from and their re-insertion into European master paintings produced at the juncture of colonialism. Phokela’s paintings undertake what David Attwell theorizes as rewriting modernity, “that modernity [which] is the currently governing concept of what it means to be a subject of history.”<sup>91</sup> His paintings, particularly considered as creative forms of the subaltern “writing back”<sup>92</sup> to empire, also speak to “postcolonial modernity” in the sense explained by Homi Bhabha: “we must not merely change the narratives of our histories, but transform our sense of what it means to live, in other times and different spaces, both human and historical.”<sup>93</sup> Bhabha’s driving concern here is that the effectiveness of “postcolonial, critical discourse that contests

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<sup>90</sup> Edward Said, (1994), *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>91</sup> David Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>92</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Empire Writes Back The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>93</sup> Homi Bhabha, (1994), *Ibid.*, 256.

modernity through the establishment of other historical sites, other forms of enunciation”<sup>94</sup> should not be a reductive erection of binary or parallel accounts, which become a rehearsal of colonial apartheid. Instead, and at stake for the discursive projects, is to disrupt colonial, western modernity and its exclusivity by ways of interrogative displacements at whose core program is to re-inscribe subaltern narratives or cultural histories of others into modernity through an epistemic procedure able to produce a *hybrid* postcolonial modernity. Bhabha’s theoretical argument resonates with Dipesh Chakrabarty’s advocacy of postcolonial history which acknowledges that, “...rather than returning to atavistic, nativist histories, or rejecting modernism itself, [subaltern subjects] should invest a narrative that ‘deliberately makes visible, within the very structure of its narrative forms, its own repressive strategies and practices’.”<sup>95</sup>

Another useful postcolonial strategy to re-imagine and re-insert colonized subjects into (modern) history from which they have been removed, obliterated and dehumanized is catachresis. It is a method of appropriating and re-claiming concepts from narratives written somewhere else, as articulated by Spivak: “what is being effectively reclaimed, is a series of regulative political concepts, the supposedly authoritative narrative of the production of which was written elsewhere, in the formation of Western Europe. They are thus being reclaimed, indeed claimed, as concept-metaphors for which no historically adequate referent may be advanced from

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid. 254.

<sup>95</sup> Ashcroft, Bill Griffiths, Gareth and Tiffin, Helen (eds.). *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 1999), 357.

postcolonial space.”<sup>96</sup> Spivak’s theory of catachresis corroborates Dipesh Chakrabarty’s argument that, the theoretical concepts utilized in the writing of postcolonial history are of Europe, so much that the entire variable range of subaltern written histories in the adjectival form of ‘Indian’, ‘Chinese’ and ‘Kenyan’ are nothing but differential versions modeled on the master narratives whose designation becomes impossible than the questionable, including both desired and despised, history of Europe.<sup>97</sup>

It is in light of Chakrabarty’s dictum I wish to understand Spivak’s catachresis, particularly with reference to her phrase that “I would rather use what history has written for me,”<sup>98</sup> a phrase that recalls Benjamin Buchloh’s deliberate “search for a usable past.”<sup>99</sup> I read this phrase as a discourse useful in performing a synchronized itinerary of appropriating both from history and the west so as to profit from the construction of postcolonial subjectivities relevant for the contemporary global context. The postcolonial subject undertakes such a project in the manner, also, of “pursuing the question of a global imaginary: local identities might borrow patterns and processes of self-definition from elsewhere, but they equally reflect local concerns and problems.”<sup>100</sup> Phokela’s paintings perform exactly this discourse, which challenges the hegemonic and problematic representation of colonized and Third World subjects in Eurocentric models and dominant narratives.

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<sup>96</sup> Gayatri C. Spivak, (1993), *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>97</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 27.

<sup>98</sup> Sarah Harasym (ed.), *The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 69.

<sup>99</sup> Cited in David Evans (ed.), “Introduction” in *Appropriation: Documents of Contemporary Art* (London & Cambridge, Massachusetts: Whitechapel & The MIT Press, 2009), 16.

<sup>100</sup> Cited in Michael Chapman, “Introduction” in *SA LIT: Beyond 2000*, eds. Michael Chapman and Margaret Lenta (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2011), 11.

I want to further note that characteristic of Spivak's catachresis is also (cultural) appropriation, the act of borrowing.<sup>101</sup> This arises when the colonized subjects take, re-articulate and re-inscribe useful aspects of the colonizing culture for their own advantage, such as to resist and subvert imperial domination whilst establishing their own subjectivity and advancing their own agency. I make this argument mindful of problematic appropriation, particularly its implications of disquieting to the oppressed subjects, cultures and practices when exercised unreflectively and offensively (by the dominant subjects). Said exposed this predatory appropriation, noting how "in every cultural appropriation there are those who act and those who are acted upon, and for those whose memories and cultural identities are manipulated by aesthetic, academic, economic, or political appropriation, the consequences can be disquieting or painful..."<sup>102</sup> This problematic appropriation is the subject of **chapter 3**, where I discuss white artist Peet Pienaar who appropriated black subjects, specifically Xhosa male circumcision and employed a black woman medical doctor to perform his (questionable) circumcision in a visual arts space. My criticism also takes into account the colonial history of predatory appropriation of subordinated subjects, who feature in colonial representations as de-substantiated and debased subjects. This criticism follows on the work of Oguibe<sup>103</sup> and Enwezor<sup>104</sup> who made compelling readings of how black subjects have been framed and obliterated in post-

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<sup>101</sup> A similar observation by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds.), (1999), *Ibid.*, 19-20.

<sup>102</sup> Cited in Robert S. Nelson, "Appropriation" in *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago, 1996), 127.

<sup>103</sup> Olu Oguibe, "Beyond Visual Pleasure: A Brief Reflection on the Works of Contemporary African Women Artists" in *Gendered Visions: The Art of Contemporary Africana Women Artists*, ed. Salah Hassan (New Brunswick: Africa World Press, 1996).

<sup>104</sup> Okwui Enwezor, "Reframing the Black Subject: Ideology and Fantasy in Contemporary South African Representation" in Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor (eds.), (1999), *Ibid.*, 376-399.

apartheid representations of white South African artists.

In **chapter 4** I pursue another critique of a white subject on black subjects, in this specific instance taking on art historian Liese van der Watt's problematic reading of black South African artists' artworks as *post-black* and *post-race*. At the heart of van der Watt's reading is an advocacy of a "post-identitarian" discourse in a fraught context wherein identity and race matter especially to people whose being and becoming in the modern world continue to suffer from consequences of colonial apartheid and white monopoly capitalism. Of concern in this chapter are the implications inherent in the prefix "post", implications seriously engaged in postcolonial discourses that van de Watt seemed either to have overlooked or bypassed in her haste towards a South Africa "free" of race and racial identities. The problem with the prefix 'post' in the context of democratic South Africa is premised on the refusal to recognize and thus engage with "neo-apartheid" challenges. For democratic South Africa should not be exempted from the political trajectory of neo-colonialism notable with many African countries soon after gaining colonial independence. This political trajectory is in line with Fanon's critical reading of neo-colonialism and the weakness of the petit black bourgeoisie in the post-colony: "The national bourgeoisie steps into the shoes of the former European settlement" knowing "its mission has nothing to do with transforming the nation; it consists, prosaically, of being the transmission line between the nation and a capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the mask of neo-colonialism".<sup>105</sup>

To bypass this neo-phase in the rush for post-apartheid is also to neglect or

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<sup>105</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 152.

negate the mixture of persisting colonial apartheid and emerging contemporary problems (in this way, also preventing comparative reading of South Africa and other African countries). With this understanding, the prefix ‘post’ is therefore used here cautiously, to reference postcolonial critiques that address the implications of the ‘post’ in post-colonial, post-apartheid, post-identity, post-race and post-black. These postcolonial critiques are concerned with the implied *complete end* of colonial apartheid in the post-colony. They argue about the continuities and discontinuities of oppressive and exploitative practices, adding to comprehending the post-colony as a context wherein the past and present coexist and is evident of sociopolitical processes that are charged with tensions, contradictions, contestations, intersections, overlaps and connections.

Mindful of colonial apartheid leftovers, the notion “post” is therefore considered to designate a different moment: a beginning of the end in the continuous process of decolonization that challenges not only the unrelenting hegemony, patterns and programs of former colonized subjects but also revised and novel forms of hegemony, oppression and exploitation in the democratic polity. It is a different moment where conditions and consequences of colonial apartheid wrestle with democratic ideals. This wrestling is between the old and new, oppression and freedom, injustice and justice, dystopia and utopia, contemporary and future. Put differently, post-colonial-apartheid is not merely a period or moment of victory but another phase of colonial apartheid in the manner in which (historically) oppressed and marginalized subjects continue their struggle for a different future polity free of subjugation and exploitation of whatever kind. It is with respect to this different moment the notion

postcolonial imagination is used, to frame and articulate a reflective awareness of both challenges and shifts that artists are dealing with in their work.

Despite the changes taking place in the post-colony, the conditions of black subjects remain oppressive and exploitative in the manner that colonial apartheid apparatus continue what Aimé Césaire called *thingification*, the instrumental dehumanization of both the oppressed and oppressor.<sup>106</sup> Fanon perceived this dehumanization as *thinginess*, whose *nervous conditions* and colonial psyche are specific instruments utilized in the production of the inferiority complex, self-abasement and disorientated neurosis of the colonized subjects.<sup>107</sup> These are problems that continue to dog democratic South Africa. Black artists and scholars in particular are critically interrogating these problems, including redressing cultural meanings, identities, sensibilities and humanity of historically disenfranchised subjects. There are also themes of restoring dignity, pride and value, which Zwelethu Mthethwa tackles through life-size color photographs. Examined in **chapter 2**, these photographs focus on black subjects residing in the margins of South African urban areas. Mthethwa has proclaimed that his “photographs preserve and show a humanness” of black people “in their private spaces.”<sup>108</sup> He considers “photography as a curative device or redemptive instrument” and thus “the end product of the camera” which “is the photograph, offers a different kind of healing.”<sup>109</sup> These proclamations invite a reading of his

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<sup>106</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham and intro. Robin D.G. Kelly (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 42-43.

<sup>107</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grover Press, 1967) and *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

<sup>108</sup> Cited in Bongi Dhlomo, “Zwelethu Mthethwa Talks About His Photographs” in *Liberated Voices: Contemporary Art from South Africa*, eds. Frank Herreman and Mark D’Amato (New York: The Museum for African Modern Art and Prestel, 1999), 65-79.

<sup>109</sup> Bongi Dhlomo, (1999), *Ibid.*, 65-79.

photographic project in light of (black African) humanism, as theorized by C.L.R. James, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said and Steve Biko among other postcolonial thinkers.

The work of these scholars, thinkers and activists including artists Mthethwa and Phokela is indicative of the working of the postcolonial imagination in two forms. One is a critique encompassing resistance and subversion of imperial, colonial and apartheid regimes. Another is a reordering and rewriting of the logic that subtends these regimes through intellectual critiques and creative reflections. It is an act of re-imagining and re-configuring identities, cultures and modernities of black subjects in the contemporary juncture marked by an *enduring transition*, a moment of uncertainty and indeterminacy, *endings and new beginnings*.<sup>110</sup> They do so in visionary ways that evidence subjectivities, agency and significance of black subjects. Such is postcolonial imagination in the manner that renders black subjects active makers of and contributors to the unfolding of modern history, and post-colonial apartheid. Moreover, it is informed by precepts of decolonization, a process involving an ongoing critical work of undoing colonial apartheid whilst advocating for a just world whose social, economic and political practices are beyond neo-colonial apartheid. Decolonization is intent not merely to interrupt but dismantle and undo the unrelenting colonial history and colonial modernity, “thus bringing into being new histories and from those new histories, new presents and new futures.”<sup>111</sup> In other words, decolonization here is considered as a simultaneous dismantling of colonial apartheid

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<sup>110</sup> See Elleke Boehmer, “Endings and New Beginnings: South African Fiction in Transition” in *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970-1995*, eds. Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 43-56.

<sup>111</sup> Gurminder K. Bhambra, “Postcolonial and Decolonial Dialogues” in *Postcolonial Studies*, Volume 17, Number 2, 2014, 116-7.

world-view and creating a new-democratic order that are imperative for a new present and a future that must be dictated by justice, fairness and equality.

### ***Decolonization's Creation of New African Subjects***

I use decolonization with reference to Fanon's fervent vision of the "new humanity"<sup>112</sup> for Africa and the world at large. Biko, after Fanon, proposed "the quest for a true humanity"<sup>113</sup> for South Africa. In their intellectualism and activism, Fanon and Biko advocated the *postcolonial imagination* (and *desire*) of the colonized blacks, whose brief modern histories trace back to the political articulation and cultural expressions of the negritude movement driven by Aimé Césaire, Birago Diop, and Léopold Sédar Senghor, who among other preoccupations were concerned with "a specifically 'African personality'."<sup>114</sup> It is an African personality predicated on a decolonized conception of colonialism's circumscriptive African identity, a decolonial conception of an African consciousness also espoused by Kwame Nkrumah through *consciencism*.<sup>115</sup> This is a decolonized discursive practice whose ethos and purpose involve Nkrumah's guiding principles for pan-Africanism,<sup>116</sup> one already articulated by African intellectuals in colonial South Africa. In the context of South Africa, Tiyo

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<sup>112</sup> Frantz Fanon, (1963), *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>113</sup> Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2004), 96-108.

<sup>114</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, (2000), *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>115</sup> Kwame Nkrumah defines *consciencism* as "the map in intellectual term of the disposition of forces which will enable African society to digest the Western and the Islamic and the Euro-Christian element[s] of Africa, and develop them in such a way that they fit the African personality. The African personality itself is defined by the cluster of humanist principles which underlie the traditional African society." Kwame Nkrumah, *Consciencism* (London: Heinemann, 1964), 79.

<sup>116</sup> "As I have always declared—even before Ghana attained here present sovereign status—the independence of Ghana will be meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of Africa." Kwame Nkrumah's Speech in *Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (New York: Prestel, 2001), 365-67.

Soga<sup>117</sup> articulated an earlier version of this African identity, followed by R.V. Selope Thema and later by H.I.E. Dhlomo, as the “new African”: it is a modern subjecthood elaborated by Ntongela Masilela in what he calls the *new African movement in South Africa*.<sup>118</sup> As for Fanon, at the turn of the twentieth-century, it was the *new man* whose coming into being is through decolonization, particularly in Africa’s march towards self-emancipation, self-remaking, self-actualization. The creation of this *new African subject* requires, according to Fanon, a kind of decolonization whose occurrence must be visibly noticed for the influences and modification it exerts on individuals, who have to be transformed from being “spectators” to “privileged actors” in the manner they have to own and control their lives and destiny.<sup>119</sup>

The creation of the new African subject also rests on what Ngugi Wa Thiong’o has dubbed *decolonizing the mind*,<sup>120</sup> following after Fanon’s insistence “that the mental liberation and the radical change in consciousness that accompany revolution begin with the “revolution in our minds,” questioning everything that has been hitherto taken for granted.”<sup>121</sup> Biko’s theory of *Black Consciousness* owes to these foregoing decolonial precepts, including work on race and racism, self-affirmation and self-emancipation, and more so the articulation of blackness espoused by African

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<sup>117</sup> Cited in Tim Couzens, *The New African: A Study of Life and Work of H.I.E. Dhlomo* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), 33-4.

<sup>118</sup> Ntongela Masilela, *An Outline of the New African Movement in South Africa* (Trenton: African World Press, 2013), xvii.

<sup>119</sup> In Fanon’s words, decolonization “brings a natural rhythm into existence, introduced by the new men, and with it a new language and a new humanity. Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men. But this creation owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the “thing” which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself.” Frantz Fanon, (1963), *Ibid.* 36-7.

<sup>120</sup> Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1994).

<sup>121</sup> Cited by Nigel Gibson who also asserts: “What has been normal for so long is fundamentally shaken.” Nigel Gibson (ed.), “Introduction: Living Fanon?” in *Living Fanon: Global Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 3.

American scholars, intellectuals and activists.<sup>122</sup> At the core of Biko's "Black Consciousness," "thinking is the realization by blacks that the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed."<sup>123</sup> Thus an epistemological procedure is necessary to decolonize the colonized black mind, by addressing the mind/psychology of the oppressed through an activation of the will for self-realization. Such are means towards imagining a different self, one that is predicated on a new self-awareness in comprehending the possible ways to question, interrupt and change one's identity, culture, language and society from that which is constructed and imposed by colonial apartheid or any oppressive regime. As a belief in self-realization, *Black Consciousness* is redemptive with respect "to rise and attain the envisioned self"<sup>124</sup> by way of restoring the capacity to belief in oneself, as such activating personal agency that is imperative for driving an individual self to liberate him/herself and others from the containment of colonial apartheid. Driving *Black Consciousness* was the importance mental attitude and articulate expression, both concerned with the subjectivity and agency of the individual black self which is an inextricable part of a collective or community.<sup>125</sup> Put differently, *Black Consciousness* is predicated on "a theory of the self" whose operative objectives are to bring into awareness and existence black selfhood, by enacting its autonomy and agency.<sup>126</sup> The importance of

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<sup>122</sup> They are W.E. Du Bois, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Stokely Carmichael and James Baldwin. "The writings of African Americans not only helped black South Africans to suggest an alternative way of constituting the national community that placed black bodies in symbiosis, rather than conflict, with the large whole, thus pointing to an alternative cultural identity of the nation-state. They also provided a framework for the political praxis of black leadership," writes Zine Magubane, *Bringing the Empire Home: Race, Class and Gender in Britain and Colonial South Africa* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 176.

<sup>123</sup> Steve Biko, (2004), *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>125</sup> For insights on visual culture and *Black Consciousness*, see Shannen Hill, *Biko's Ghost: The Iconography of Black Consciousness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 5.

<sup>126</sup> See David Attwell, (2005), *Ibid.*, 180.

selfhood is, on one level, to counter oppressive regimes so intent in *thingifying* black subjects, whilst on the other, to liberate black subjects from such oppressive regimes. It is also instrumental in proclaiming independent practices, self-representation and the self-defining of black desires and (psychological) will.

Ndebele's theoretical offerings of rediscovering the ordinary are inflected, even though not (directly) referenced, with Biko's "Black Consciousness" ideas.<sup>127</sup> His theorization is an extension of the afore-discussed decolonial discourses, particular in light of the need to free imagination in the process of cultivating the "significant growth of consciousness and its connection to the data of daily life in black community,"<sup>128</sup> what also Sachs perceives as "the new consciousness we are developing"<sup>129</sup> in and for (a postcolonial, if not democratic) South Africa. Inflections of such decolonial discourses are also discernable not only in his injunction that the artist's "immediate aim is a radically contemplative state of mind in which the objects of contemplation are the range of social conditions which are the major ingredients of social consciousness."<sup>130</sup> As well, they are evident in what appears as a reference to Nkrumah's "new African personality" and Fanon's desired "new man", in particular when Ndebele's rediscovery of the ordinary implies the need "to extend the range of personal and social experience as far as possible in order to contribute to bringing about a highly conscious, sensitive new person in a new society. This is the function of

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<sup>127</sup> This point is noted by David Attwell, (2005), *Ibid.*, 180, and T. Spreelin MacDonald, "The Emergent Self in South African Black Consciousness Literary and Discourse" in *African Intellectuals and Decolonization*, ed. Nicholas Creary (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2012), 72.

<sup>128</sup> David Attwell, (2005), *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>129</sup> Albie Sachs, (1990), *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>130</sup> Njabulo Ndebele, (2006), *Ibid.*, 67-8.

art in, and its contribution to, the ongoing revolution in South Africa.”<sup>131</sup> It is through an art (including cultural production and literature) whose imaginative attributes are critically reflective, having submitted to requirements of decolonization, being aware of postcolonial discourses and vested with post-apartheid critique, that Ndebele’s proposed new subjects would arise and attend to Sachs’ query about South Africans that are in need “to grasp the full dimension of the new country and new people that [are] struggling to give birth to itself”.<sup>132</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Underscoring these propositions is a construction of postcolonial subjectivities that possess an agency necessary to re-imagine a different but democratic South Africa, which is not anti-black. This particular undertaking that is capable of bringing to being novel postcolonial subjectivities operating under an enduring transition and historical interval is what I have termed the *postcolonial imagination* in contemporary South African visual arts. Gaylard captures its meaning in writing, “to think of the truly postcolonial is an imaginative activity,”<sup>133</sup> one which the artworks of the artists that are examined in the following chapters of this study demonstrate.

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>132</sup> Albie Sachs, (1990), Ibid., 19.

<sup>133</sup> Gerald Gaylard, (2005), Ibid., 1.

## CHAPTER 1

### A POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE OF (ART) HISTORY: JOHANNES PHOKELA'S PAINTINGS

For the emergence of history in European thought is coterminous with the rise of modern colonialism, which in its radical othering and violent annexation of the non-European world, found in history a prominent, if not *the* prominent, instrument of the control of subjects peoples.

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (1999)<sup>134</sup>

By all measures, Johannes Phokela's oil paintings are significant postcolonial intervention in interrogating (art) history as an imperative construct of modern Europe. It is a history whose advent is an inextricable practice of European colonialism, as the epigraph shows. Colonialism was not only responsible for violently othering non-Europeans; it also ferociously obliterated non-Europeans including their presence in and contribution to the making of modern Europe. Phokela's paintings examine and rewrite this problematic history of modern Europe, particularly rupturing its racial purity whilst providing visual occasions to reflect on the silenced atrocities of colonialism on black subjects both in Europe and in European colonies such as South Africa. In discussing Phokela's paintings, this chapter progresses in five parts. Starting with a brief biographical sketch of Phokela, and a summary of his oeuvre, which are deemed necessary as a prelude to understanding his intervention not only as an artist but also as a black subject operating within a postcolonial and post-apartheid context. The chapter also unpacks the construction of modern Europe by tracing its formation to the Renaissance, which is arguably a hybrid formation constituted of

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<sup>134</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds.), "History: Introduction" in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 355.

various cultures that include Asian, African and European, all making up the cultural fusion known as the Mediterranean. Moreover, the chapter investigates the invention of modern Europe through visual texts. As it progresses, the chapter advances the theoretical framework through and with which Phokela's paintings should be read and interpreted in this chapter, offering in the process a critique of Phokela's paintings, that reveals not only Phokela's contributions to South African art historical discourses, but also shortcomings.

### ***Johannes Phokela: Biography and the Black Artist's Subject Formation***

Phokela was born in 1966, in Soweto, Johannesburg, and currently lives and works between Johannesburg and London. Phokela's interest in art began while in primary school, as he attended part-time weekend art classes at the Open School, a non-government organization, whose key objectives were to introduce and encourage basic art and related creative activities to young people, especially black people whom apartheid denied formal art education. In these classes, Phokela learned basic skills of drawing, poster painting and printmaking, using vegetables such as potatoes and carrots. After completing high school, Phokela attended the Federated Union of Black Arts (1983-1986) at which he received intense training in printmaking, sculpture and painting. The late artist Durant Sihlali (1935-2005) mentored Phokela and thereafter, he received a scholarship which enabled him to study in London where he completed a foundation course at St Martins (1987-1988), following with a Bachelor of Arts in Fine Arts (BAFA) at Camberwell College of Art (1988-1991) and thereafter a Masters

of Arts at the Royal College of Art (1991-1993).

It was during his BAFA studies that Phokela found passion and majored in painting, a passion influenced and encouraged by one of his lecturers Alain Miller during his senior year. Since then, Phokela used the medium of painting as a cultural instrument useful to examine the contemporary art world through engaging with European art history. It is an examination that seems to have been made possible owing to Phokela's experience living and studying in London as well as travelling, exhibiting and taking up residencies in various European countries. This international experience granted Phokela access to the rich history of European culture and creative arts, both of which he studied in relation to European imperialism, particularly with regard not only to the politics of representation so central in the construction and writing of history through visual arts. Phokela also understood the political, social, cultural and economic predicament of black subjects who experienced dehumanization through slavery, prejudice and racism in England and Europe.

This encounter was neither novel nor unfamiliar to Phokela, given his experience growing up during apartheid, a violent and racist regime that extended European colonialism practiced by the Dutch and British in South Africa since 1651. Not only did apartheid oppress, exploit and massacre black people in its mission to institutionalize and sustain privileges of whites in South Africa whilst enriching the western world through expropriating and exporting local goods that were denied to the indigenous population. It equally segregated black from white people with intentions to produce or maintain racial purity of the white European settlers and arrested the modern advancement of black people at the very same time rendering them

subservient to white people. While black people were treated inhumanly and with contempt they were needed as exploitable (free and cheap) labor. The apartheid regime went so far as to exclude identities, experiences, histories, ideas and desires of black people from its (artificial or fictitious) construction of a white South African nation state. In this way, black subjects were written out of the racist (official) South African history. If black subjects were written into the history of South Africa, of course a history written by white people, they were misrepresented, distorted, denigrated and rendered insignificant.<sup>135</sup> Such is the racist discourse whose roots can be traced to Europe, specifically to Eurocentrism and European imperialism, both of which undertook to construct and produce white European identity, culture and history, on the one hand, as pure and free from non-Europeans whilst on the other hand at the expense of non-Europeans and colonized worlds.

Some examples of Phokela's works are *Candle Bathing* (1998), *As the Old Ones Sing, So the Young Ones Pipe* (1999), *Land of Cockaigne* (2000), *Roman Charity* (2002) and *Ecstasy of Medusa* (2002). In these paintings, Phokela has turned European painting against itself by appropriating, manipulating, re-interpreting and reflecting on iconic images of Old Masters such as Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), Pieter Bruegel (1525-1569), Anthony Van Dyck (1599-1641), Jacopo Bassano (1515-1592), William Horvath Hogarth (1697-1764) and Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669). His discourse became a critique of European art history and its implications for black

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<sup>135</sup> One reference that speaks to this dilemma of black subjects is Clifford James's argument that: "Something similar occurs whenever marginal peoples come into a historical or ethnographic space that has been defined by the Western imagination." "Entering the modern world," their distinct histories quickly vanish. Swept up in a destiny dominated by the capitalist West and by various technologically advanced socialisms, these suddenly "backward" people no longer invent local futures. What is different about them remains tied to traditional pasts, inherited structures that either resist or yield to the new but cannot produce it. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 5.

subjects and the colonized worlds. The paintings reflect, according to Bruce Haines, “his interest in the parallel histories of the Enlightenment and the African continent. Indeed, his paintings are as much about the violent and the twisted history of the Dutch in South Africa as they are about the history of painting.”<sup>136</sup> Through the paintings Phokela unpacks, deconstructs and reconstructs insignias of European (art) history. “Most of my work,” explains Phokela, “is a contemporary take on Old Dutch and Flemish Masters where I take on what is perceived to be Europe’s grandiose history of art as a medium to convey values and ideals represented within a global context of cultural elitism”.<sup>137</sup> Without compromising the quality of their paintings but exerting a technically complex and refined craft of painting, Phokela paints exactly as the Western masters do. The difference is that he alters and reorders the master paintings by editing out some details, inserting black subjects, adding symbolic elements and contemporary references in representational scenes that are European and exclusively populated by white subjects.

Phokela also paints white frames or grids over some of his final paintings. These grids function, on the one hand, to disturb the exquisitely rendered visually reworked iconic paintings of Old Masters whilst, on the other hand, separate segments of his paintings, as such establishing focus and emphasis on particular moments or areas within the work. In such a visual approach, the original meaning and form of the European Masters are not simply altered but most importantly manipulated and re-interpreted in contemporary ways that come forth as caustic and sometimes impressive

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<sup>136</sup> Bruce Haines, “Johannes Phokela, Changing The Title” in *Unpacking Europe: Towards a Critical Reading*, eds. Salah Hassan and Iftikhar Dadi (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen and NAI Publishers 2001), 380.

<sup>137</sup> Ndaba Dlamini, “Phokela exhibition celebrates mentro” in [http://joburgnews.ca.za/2006/july/jul28\\_phokela.stm](http://joburgnews.ca.za/2006/july/jul28_phokela.stm)

humorous critiques of European art history, Eurocentrism and imperialism, not to mention their unrelenting legacies. Phokela's painting ascribes fresh meanings to their original source materials, whilst rupturing their historical context and iconographic significations. His paintings are creatively imaginative in their conceptual strategy of confronting Northern European iconic narratives that are predicated on Euro-ethnicity or Eurocentrism. Such an approach is conceptual in the way in which Phokela revisits and reuses otherwise neglected art genre, by rendering it contemporary, postmodern and postcolonial. It is supposedly in this light that James Gaywood has described Phokela's work as "syncretist"<sup>138</sup> in the sense that his creative language combines different narratives whose inflectional variations or disparities are indicative of postmodern and postcolonial sensibilities notable with synthesis, hybridity and diffusion of differences and binaries as well as strategies of parody, mimicry and irony.

Underpinning Phokela's main concern is the question or dilemma of black subjects in modern European art history, in particular *a* history written or constructed through visual practices of painting. Regarding this dilemma, there are two apparent aspects, among others, that are detectable in the formation and representation of modern European history. One is the exclusion of non-European subjects in its (master) narratives and two, if they are included, they are written as subordinates and represented in obscure and denigrating portrayals and depictions. In the latter case, they enter history marked as 'moors', 'mulattos', 'negroes', 'negresses', 'orientals',

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<sup>138</sup> See Colin Richards, "Johannes Phokela" in *10 Year 100 Artists: Art in a Democratic South Africa*, ed. Sophie Perryer (Cape Town: Bell-Roberts, 2004), 290.

‘social bodies’, ‘subject race’, ‘others’, ‘kaffirs’, ‘Hottentot Venus’ or ‘Black Venus’. Although the main concern is with the former, Phokela’s undertaking is an engagement with such problematic visual representations, which were instrumental as cultural practices embedded in imperialism and colonialism.

The importance and “indispensable role [...] of European culture during the many decades of imperial expansion” cannot be underestimated, particularly carried out through what Edward Said called “an undeterred and unrelenting Eurocentrism”.<sup>139</sup> To examine European (art) history required critical engagement with Eurocentrism or Eurocentric culture. It is a critical engagement of culture, which postcolonial scholars, intellectuals, critics, activists, revolutionaries and artists,<sup>140</sup> and most specifically African and African diasporic have not merely debated but provided instructive perspectives and critiques in their theoretical and poetic accounts. Belonging to what came to be known recently as the “Black radical tradition”, these intellectuals and creatives have challenged, resisted and subverted imperialism/colonialism, doing so culturally in the sense of making culture central in their political, intellectual and creative work. As Said noted,

It has been the substantial achievement of all the intellectuals, and of course the movements they worked with, by their historical, interpretive, and analytic efforts to have identified the

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<sup>139</sup> “This accumulated experiences, territories, peoples, histories, it studied them, it classified them, it verified them; but above all, it subordinated them to the culture and indeed the very idea of white Christian Europe. This cultural process has to be seen if not as the origin and cause, then at least as the vital, informing, and invigorating counterpoint to the economic and political machinery that we all concur stands at the centre of imperialism. And it must be noted that this Eurocentric culture relentlessly codified and observed everything about the non-European or presumably peripheral world, in so thorough and detailed a manner as to leave no item untouched, no culture unstudied, no people and land unclaimed. All of the subjugated peoples had it in common that they were considered to be naturally subservient to a superior, advanced, developed, and morally mature Europe, whose role in the non-European world was to rule, instruct, legislate, develop, and at the proper times, to discipline, war against, and occasionally exterminate non-Europeans.” Edward W. Said, “Yeats and Decolonization” in *Remaking History*, eds. Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani (New York: Dia Art Foundation, The New Press, 1998), 5-6.

<sup>140</sup> Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral, C.L.R. James, Aimé Césaire, Walter Rodney, W.E.B. Du Bois, Léopold Senghor, Chinua Achebe, and Steve Biko, for example.

culture of resistance as cultural enterprise possessing a long tradition of integrity and power in its own right, one *not* simply grasped as a belated reactive response to Western imperialism.<sup>141</sup>

Phokela's work should be seen in view of both the culture of resistance against and subversion of Eurocentrism, particularly his investigative approach through visual artworks. It is an approach that is concerned with cultural history and the ways in which visual representations are central in the writing or construction of history from the advantage position and perspective of those with authority or who possess means to paint history. "Paintings, as in the case with all cultural production," according to Beth Tobin "are not merely reflections of larger social and economic forces; they participate in the production of meaning, in the dynamic construction of identities, and in the structuring within discursive fields of particular positionalities."<sup>142</sup> Furthermore, paintings are cultural products, so central in the production of meaning and history. They are not simply records of history but rather produce history and in themselves are historical products and cultural artifacts that embody history or are historical embodiments.

Phokela's investigative paintings reveal that modern Europe is a formation of intercourses with other cultures and not as puritanical as the colonial mission imposingly made up to be. They also partake in the postcolonial critique that takes history as one of its major subjects of inquiry by examining consequences of imperialism, colonialism, capitalism and modernity. Colonial contacts and power relations between the colonizer and the colonized are examined. The postcolonial

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<sup>141</sup> Edward Said, (1998), *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>142</sup> Beth Fowkes Tobin, *Picturing Imperial Power: Colonial Subjects in Eighteenth-Century British Painting* (Durham: Duke University Press 1999), 1.

critique contests visibility and the construction of identity whilst reflecting on problematic representations of former colonized subjects' histories, identities and contributions towards the making of the (modern) world or modernity at large. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin better explain this in writing:

The post-colonial task, therefore is not simply to contest the message of history, which has so often relegated individual post-colonial societies to footnotes to the march of progress, but also to engage the medium of narrativity itself, to reinscribe the 'rhetoric', the heterogeneity of historical representation...<sup>143</sup>

In addition to the post-colonial task, it is apt to provide "a usefully broader working definition" of postcolonialism as articulated by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature*:

We use the term "post-colonial"...to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression. [...] What each of these literatures has in common beyond their special and distinctive regional characteristics is that they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of their imperial center.<sup>144</sup>

The above definition of post-colonialism speaks to similar traits or concerns that characterize postmodernism. The former is concerned with "dismantling the Centre/Margin binarism of imperial discourse" and its "decentering of discourse, the focus on the significance of language and writing in the construction of experience, the use of the subversive strategies of mimicry, parody and irony" are all concerns that overlap with those of the latter, whose mission is "the deconstruction of the centralized, logocentric master narrative of European culture".<sup>145</sup> It might seem easy to pair postcolonialism and postmodernism with respect to their notably shared

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<sup>143</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds.), (1999), *Ibid.*, 356.

<sup>144</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, (2002), *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

undertaking to question and rupture historically established singularity and to destabilize (white European) master narratives, and doing so by revealing its plurality and fragmentation, both of which bring to light *other* significant narratives that have been repressed and subordinated. It is, however, important also to note that postcolonialism “is a sustained attention to the imperial process in colonial and neo-colonial societies, and an examination of the strategies to subvert the actual material and discursive effects of that process”.<sup>146</sup> In this regard, postcolonialism should not be (easily) equated as (simply) synonymous with postmodernism taking into account Kwame Appiah’s argument not only that “the post in post-colonialism is very different from that in postmodernism”<sup>147</sup> but most importantly there are consequences regarding the specificity of contexts, events and experiences.<sup>148</sup> For instance, postcolonial experiences and textual responses have different engagements with the consequences of modernity or modernization on traditional society in Europe or North America and colonized society in Africa or Australia, adding to “the disenchantment that followed when the promise of progress and social upliftment was betrayed either by the colonizer or their successors”.<sup>149</sup>

### ***The Construction of Modern Europe***

Until recently with the intervention of postcolonial studies, the *writing* of (world) history has been dominantly a European project. By writing, I refer to the

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>148</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, *My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 137-157.

<sup>149</sup> Simon Gikandi, “Reading the Referent: Postcolonialism and the Writing of Modernity” in *Reading the ‘New’ Literature in a Postcolonial Era*, ed. Susheila Nasta (Cambridge: The English Association, 2000), 97.

documented past and present human events in structurally organized forms or institutionalized systems. Writing here is not restricted to words on paper but also includes visual narratives and representations in the form of plastic arts. In the context of this chapter, *writing* refers to word and visual texts. With respect to the written word, Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued that the academic discourse regarding the writing of history belongs to and remains the sovereign and theoretical domain of Europe. Even, for all subaltern histories such as those named ‘Indian,’ ‘Chinese,’ and ‘Kenyan,’ are variations modeled on a master narrative that could be called ‘the history of Europe’.<sup>150</sup> Chakrabarty’s argument views theoretical configuration of history as Eurocentric, as such assuming not only universality but the authority of having the theoretical prerogative of writing the history of the universe: “Only ‘Europe’ ... is *theoretically* (i.e. at the level of the fundamental categories that shape historical thinking) knowable; all other histories are matters of empirical research that fleshes out a theoretical skeleton which is substantially ‘Europe’.”<sup>151</sup> This argument resonates with Peter Burgess’s argument that not only *all* discursive concepts to narrate history fundamentally a European invention but also “European history is universal history. There will never have been another history which was not European history.”<sup>152</sup> Like Burgess, Chakrabarty’s advocacy of post-colonial history acknowledges that “all histories, no matter what they are about, ultimately have

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<sup>150</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, (2000), *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 29

<sup>152</sup> “Thus European history is universal because anything else is unthinkable. Anything else is excluded by the sovereignty of the thinkable. The Other of Europe history can only be thought by being domesticated, by being transformed into a European concept, by being submitted to the tyranny of the European concept, shuffled within the walls of the European fortress, given new clothing and label which clearly identify it as different, as other, and only then by excluding it. This is the mechanism of “cultural identity”: assimilate to exclude... We can only exclude by first assimilating, by first incorporating the other into the concept of who we are—namely as a dialectical image of who we are not. The other becomes part of us. We become the other.” J. Peter Burgess, “European Borders: History Of Space/Space Of History” in <http://www.ctheory.net/printer.asp?id=55>, 2.

‘Europe’...rather than returning to atavistic, nativist histories, or rejecting modernism itself, should invest a narrative that ‘deliberately makes visible, within the very structure of its narrative forms, its own repressive strategies and practices’.<sup>153</sup>

Through Eurocentrism the history of modern Europe has been constructed as uniquely distinct and superior to *other* cultural histories. Questioning this construct, Samir Amin argues that “Eurocentrism is a specifically modern phenomenon, the roots of which go back only to the Renaissance, a phenomenon that did not flourish until the nineteenth century. In this sense it constitutes one dimension of the culture and ideology of the modern capitalist world.”<sup>154</sup> In dispelling the myth of the origins and belonging of Europe and what constitutes European culture, Amin contends that:

The European culture that conquered the world fashioned itself in the course of a history that unfolded in two distinct time periods. Up until the Renaissance, Europe belonged to a regional tributary system that included Europeans and Arabs, Christians and Moslems. But the great part of Europe at the time was located at the periphery of this regional system, whose center was situated around the eastern end of the Mediterranean basin. This Mediterranean basin system prefigured to some extent the subsequent capitalist world system. From the Renaissance on, the capitalist world system shifts its center toward the shores of the Atlantic, while the Mediterranean region becomes, in turn, the periphery. The new European culture reconstructs itself around a myth that created an opposition between an alleged European geographical continuity and the world to the south of the Mediterranean, which forms the new center/periphery boundary. The whole of Eurocentrism lies in this mythic construct.<sup>155</sup>

Amin’s argument illuminates on the mythic foundation that universalizes (history of) Europe as a norm, a master narrative uncontaminated or uninformed by *other* histories (of the Rest) of the world. This myth renders Europe as a complete, coherent, stable and an independent subject with its foundation from the Renaissance, one that itself is built on European civilization, which European scholars tend to only trace to the Greek civilization. Subsequently, as Amin notes, the Renaissance as a moment taking

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<sup>153</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, (1999), *Ibid.*, 357.

<sup>154</sup> Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism* trans. Russell Moore (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989), vii.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

place in the western part of Europe, the Atlantic, becomes not only a juncture signaling the break away from the old Mediterranean constituents, a regional tributary system. It also provides grounds to legitimate the modern Europe whose fabricated (genealogical) ancestry found its basis in Greek thought. In fact, Greece is itself a synthesis of preceding, accumulative (tributary) contributions made by various cultural and geographic regions constituting the old Mediterranean constituents.<sup>156</sup> According to Amin, Greece is one of the formations, “zones” of the “plural reality” of the “Ages of Antiquity” among Egypt, Mesopotamia and Persia. Greece “is formed in the course of the last millennium preceding the Christian era”<sup>157</sup> when there was “no claim to universality,” neither “hierarchical classification” nor “any superior intrinsic values”.<sup>158</sup> Edward Said comments on the “anxieties and agendas on the pure (even purged) images” that tend to be a “construct of a privileged, genealogical useful past, a past in which we [that mostly refers to Europeans who] exclude unwanted elements vestiges, narratives.” And, in referencing Martin Bernal, Said writes:

whereas Greek civilization was known originally to have roots in Egyptian, Semitic, and various other southern and eastern cultures, it was redesigned as “Aryan” during the course of the nineteenth century, its Semitic and African roots either actively purged or hidden from view. Since Greek writers themselves openly acknowledged their culture’s hybrid past, European philologists acquired the ideological habit of passing over these embarrassing passages without comment, in the interest of Attic purity.<sup>159</sup>

Purity of Europe has been achieved by erasing interactive links between (cultural) regions such as Byzantine, North Africa, Spain and the Ottomans all conglomerated under the concept *medieval*. To phrase this point differently, the dynamic interaction

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>158</sup> Samir Amin, (1989), Ibid., 15-17.

<sup>159</sup> Edward Said, (1993), 15-16.

across the Mediterranean and the interior of Africa and Asia had to be omitted or obliterated in written historical texts. This obliteration masks the fact that even the (European) Renaissance has been shaped by decades of encounters and exchanges with the Ottoman Empire, Africa, and Southeast Asia.<sup>160</sup> In referencing Jerry Bretton, Salah Hassan argues that trade and exchange between the Islamic empires and the non-European took place regardless of ideological differences, hence the Renaissance world was indeed a “remarkably international, fluid, and mobile phenomenon”.<sup>161</sup>

Amin strongly argues that the Renaissance Era and the Enlightenment Project primed (new) Europe into becoming aware of the universal scope of its civilization, henceforth capable of conquering the world. Subsequently, the canon of the capitalist economic system and its foundation and premise on the domination of private enterprise, wage labor, and free trade were instituted.<sup>162</sup> At this juncture there begins internationalism or globalism, what Karl Marx—during his time—saw as “the extension of markets into a world market” realized through “expedition of adventurers, colonization”. Marx noted that the (European) “expansion of trade and manufacture accelerated the accumulation of movable capital,” which was undertaken through “animosity”: violence, destruction and oppression of those appropriated and exploited colonized subjects.<sup>163</sup> In speaking about violence in (the making of modern European) history, Marx proclaimed: “This whole interpretation of history appears to be contradicted by the fact of conquest. Up till now violence, war, pillage, rape and

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<sup>160</sup> Salah Hassan, “Fred Wilson’s “Black Venezia”: Fictitious Histories and the Notion of “Truth”” in Fred Wilson: *Speak of Me as I Am* (Cambridge: MIT, 2003), 36.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>162</sup> Samir Amin, (1989), *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>163</sup> Karl Marx in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1978), 82.

slaughter, etc., have been accepted as the driving force of history.” And European colonizers erased histories of those they conquered: “...the destruction of an old civilization by barbarous people and the resulting formation of an entirely new organization of society”.<sup>164</sup>

In line with Marx’s argument, Benin in West Africa exemplifies a country whose palace was destroyed and a great number of significant sculptures and various artifacts were expropriated by the British Empire in the nineteenth-century. Artistic productions of non-Europeans that include African, Asian and Oceanic worlds form part of the most significant and treasured collections ever to be found in northwestern museums, galleries, estates and homes. Even the growing scholarship on the significance of black people in Europe or the West makes evident not only their presence but also most importantly their contribution to the making of European civilization and modern Europe.<sup>165</sup> The same argument could be made about the creative breakthrough and advancement of European modernism: for it would be unthinkable how possible artists such as Eugene Delacroix (1798-1863), Eduard Manet (1832-1883), Henri Matisse (1869-1954), Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) and Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) could have achieved their celebrated avant-gardism if it was not for the *aid* they received from non-Western arts, cultures, knowledge and experiences.

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<sup>164</sup> See Karl Marx, *The Portable Karl Marx*, trans. and ed. by Eugene Kamenka (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 186-187.

<sup>165</sup> For example, see Martin Bernal, Martin. *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, Volume I: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985* (London and New Brunswick: Free Association Books and Rutgers University Press, 1987) and *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, Volume II: The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence* (London and New Brunswick: Free Association Books and Rutgers University Press, 1991); David Dabydeen, John Gilmore and Cecily Jones (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Black British History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Black Eric Martone (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Blacks in European History and Culture* (Westport, USA: Greenwood Press, 2009); and the four volumes on *The Images of Black in Western Art* by David Bindman, Henry Louis Gates Jr. et al (eds.),

Yet, as Salah Hassan and Iftikhar Dadi argue, “Western hegemony and the ideological force of imperialism have made it easy for us to forget that European modernism, and the evolution of its history from the period of the Renaissance to the present, stands on the shoulders of other cultures and civilizations.”<sup>166</sup>

The argument above, as brief as it might seem, should suffice to demonstrate the complexity inherent in the construction of modern Europe as a hybrid formation informed and shaped by closer and distant cultural subjects and geographies. It is therefore problematic not to recognize such hybridity when European purity attempts to disavow the interface in which Europe interacted with its neighboring and distant regions. Such disavowal of external influences is an act of apartheid, which purges or erases contributions of *others* in the course of constructing and institutionalizing history of modern Europe. Thus for Lewis Gordon, Europe is an invention that occurred at the expense of non-Europeans especially when “Europeans began to forget that there was not always a Europe”<sup>167</sup> but a peninsular<sup>168</sup> in the similar argument Chakrabaty makes of provincializing Europe. Robinson makes an important point about the fabrication of Europe as the imagined and autonomous continent whose civilization is racially pure while European kings, popes, episcopals and scholars including artists “consciously” “smuggled” foreign wisdoms, cultures, ideas to shape up or civilize Europe. Cultural materials were central in this conscious smuggling of

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<sup>166</sup> Salah Hassan and Iftikhar Dadi (eds.), “Introduction” in *Unpacking Europe: Towards a Critical Reading* (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen and NAI Publishers, 2001), 15.

<sup>167</sup> Lewis Gordon, *An Introduction to African Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 5.

<sup>168</sup> “...Europe is not a continent but a peninsular projection from a continent [...] In order to fabricate Europe, institutional, cultural and ideological materials were consciously smuggled into this hinterland from afar by kings and popes, episcopals, clerics, and monastic scholars. No reality, then, substantiates the imagined, autonomous European continent,” argues Cedric J. Robinson, *An Anthropology of Marxism* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2001), 33.

foreign goods. Robin Kelly makes an important point in arguing that, European scholars

also stripped all of Africa of any semblance of civilization, using the printed page to eradicate African history and thus reduce a whole continent and its progeny to little more than beasts of burden or brutish heathens. The result is the fabrication of Europe as a discrete, racially pure entity, solely responsible for modernity, on the one hand, and the fabrication of the Negro on the other.<sup>169</sup>

### ***The Invention of Modern Europe through Visual Texts***

In the field of art history, Hassan argues that the invention of “Renaissance Man” as “white, male, cultured and convinced of his cultural superiority,” a rather European self-imaging that took place in the nineteenth century is indebted to men like Jules Michelet and Jacob Burckhardt. Hassan goes on to say such “thesis was affirmed” by scholars like Erwin Panofsky who “projected a notion of Europe, born in the Renaissance, as an embodiment of the spirit that forms the basis of modern humanity.”<sup>170</sup> Besides black characters such as Othello and moors in William Shakespeare’s writings and plays, scholarship on European paintings prior to and after the Renaissance era have revealed not only interactions between white Europeans and black Africans but also the presence of the latter in (the making of) European history.<sup>171</sup> The presence of black in Europe has mainly been erased from European master texts, particularly during the rise of racism, prejudice and xenophobia against non-Europeans in the West. Thus, in line with Karl Marx’s comment on the barbarity of European civilization, Walter Benjamin’s famous pronouncement is apt: “There is

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<sup>169</sup> Robin D.G. Kelly, “Introduction: A Poetic of Anticolonialism” in Aimé Césaire, (2000), *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>170</sup> Salah Hassan, (2003), *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>171</sup> See Note 30.

no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”<sup>172</sup> It is noteworthy that Benjamin’s comment specifically refers to “cultural treasures” that “owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also the anonymous toil of their contemporaries”.<sup>173</sup>

Visual texts such as paintings were cultural forms important in the construction of (modern) European “identity”. Said referred to this “identity” as “the nation or the state,” which “differentiates “us” from “them,” almost always with some degree of xenophobia.”<sup>174</sup> Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have also argued that, “Eurocentrism, like Renaissance perspectives in painting, envisions the world from a single privileged point. It maps the world in a cartography that centralizes and augments Europe while literally “belittling” Africa”.<sup>175</sup> They further note that Eurocentrism “sanitizes Western history while patronizing and even demonizing the non-West; it thinks of itself in terms of its noblest achievements—science, progress, humanism—but of the non-West in terms of its deficiencies, real or imagined”.<sup>176</sup> The construction of European history in painting supplemented the imperial domination carried out through military might.<sup>177</sup> Painting was however a cultural form viable to exercise ideologies of racism and superiority; hegemonic control by informing and dictating a visioning of the world as only concerned with European might. In this regard, painting operated as a visual site and technological apparatus Europeans utilized for veneration

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<sup>172</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Herry Zohn (Glasgow: Fontana, 1973), 258.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>174</sup> Edward Said, (1993), *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>175</sup> See Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1994), 2.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>177</sup> Beth Fowkes Tobin, (1999), *Ibid.*

and narcissism: visually historicizing and inscribing their *own* stories, ideas, discoveries, memories and the visions of the world order that subsequently becomes a dominant narrative.

Arguably, European painters whose paintings became dominant master narratives participated in what “we can better understand [as] the persistence and durability of saturating hegemonic systems like culture” when “nearly every nineteenth-century writer (and the same is true enough of the writers in earlier periods) was extraordinarily well aware of the fact of empire”.<sup>178</sup> Elaborating on this point, Said wrote: “There was virtual unanimity that subject races should be ruled, that they are subject races, that one race deserves and has consistently earned the right to be considered the race whose main mission is to expand beyond its own domain.” This domination was also to be exercised in cultural practices in “that each work of literature or art is special, there was virtual unity of purpose on this score: the empire must be maintained, and it was maintained”.<sup>179</sup> It is for such arguments that Old Masters such as Rubens and Bruegel—whose paintings Phokela appropriates and reworks—also partook, consciously or unconsciously, in the colonizing process through their visual consolidation of European hegemonic systems, through which cultural forms were important in the formation of “national culture”, that in their paintings they represented as “free from worldly affiliations”.<sup>180</sup> These Old Masters reinforced the construction of a purely internalized national identity that not only disaffiliated Europe from non-European cultures but also constructed the latter in

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<sup>178</sup> Edward Said, (1994), *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>179</sup> Edward Said, (1993), *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

whatever manner the former so desired. It reveals a racist arrogance, especially noting that Europeans who, in fact, never set foot in colonized countries uttered the most absurd constructionist discourses of non-Europeans. Take for example greater thinkers such as Frederick Hegel who wrote, “For [Africa] is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it—that is in its northern part—belong to the Asiatic or European World.”<sup>181</sup> Writing Africa out of the “World” history serves to erase any affiliations Africa has with Europe, so much that even the connections that some of the great European thinkers born in and/or have associations with Africa are seldom acknowledged if not deliberately erased. The result is denial of African influences on Europe. To counter this denial and establish the impact of Africa on some of the eminent European scholars in the twentieth-century, Pal Ahluwalia has argued:

The impact of colonial Africa on French theory is pervasive, and its influence can be discerned in such diverse theorists as Louis Althusser, Helene Cixous and Jacques Derrida, who were born in Algeria; Michel Foucault, who considered his time at the University of Tunis and its student movement as formative...as well as Michel Leiris, Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean-Paul Sartre, amongst others.<sup>182</sup>

The erasure of African influences on modern Europe is central in imperial writing, so evident in the collection of information and drawing of the maps of other world regions through travelogues and expedition voyages. Imperial writing enabled most Europeans who in fact never left Europe to comprehend an overseas place “without having seen it” as Tobin explains: “An important part of gaining global dominance is the ability to visualize without actually seeing a place, its people, its plants, and other resources, and this kind of visualization relies on accumulating traces—sketches,

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<sup>181</sup> Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publication, Inc. 1956), 99.

<sup>182</sup> Pal Ahluwalia, *Out of Africa: Post-structural Colonial Roots* (London: Routledge. 2010), 1.

descriptive notes, specimens, measurements—from those places.”<sup>183</sup> In South Africa, for example, white colonial-settler painters such as Thomas William Bowler (1812-1869), John Thomas Baines (1820-1875) and Jacobus Hendrik Pierneef (1886-1957) were instrumental in “this kind of visualization”, which provided information necessary for European colonizers and apartheid architects to know about and exercise dominance over South Africa, indigenous people and their cultures. Take for example Baines, who participated in some of the colonial expeditions in search of gold and riches in the interior of southern Africa as well as championing himself as a painter of wars and battles between indigenous Africans and British colonizers. In their paintings, including Bowler, Baines painted (indigenous) people smaller than the land they occupy, even submerging them into the landscape in ways that render them hazy or shadows, to such an extent that they become non-recognizable if not invisibly present. These types of paintings resemble those of the British Romantic landscape painter Joseph Mallord William Turner’s (1775-1851) picturesque qualities and sublimate representations where a sense of wild nature or uninhibited natural environments overwhelmingly dominate human subjects. Appropriating European the modernist styles of Paul Cezanne’s (1839-1906) primitivism and the Cubist geometrical shapes, Pierneef painted open vast landscapes absent of indigenous Africans, in this way contributing to the colonial-apartheid mission of penetrating and conquering so-called ‘empty’ lands in South Africa.

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<sup>183</sup> Beth Fowkes Tobin, (1999), *Ibid.*, 213.

### ***Framing Johannes Phokela's Paintings***

The foregoing gives ground to argue that writing or painting of history is an exercise of power. It permits those with access and means in controlling sites and technologies of historicizing to inscribe their own stories, ideas, discoveries, memories and the visions of the world order that subsequently become a master narrative. This master narrative is, of course, problematic and disconcerting to non-white-Westerners or subaltern subjects because of its bias, narcissism, self-concern with the desires and positions of those who wrote it. Yet, as the above argument has shown, the master narrative is inherently constituted of various narratives that reveal much about the dominant and subordinate, colonizers and colonized, a point Tobin argues:

Paintings of colonial officials reveal much about the strategies of appropriation and domination that were available to colonists; on the other hand, painting of colonial subjects, the native people who were subjected to colonial state apparatuses, both ideological and repressive, can elucidate the strategies of accommodation, resistance, and subversion that subject peoples employ in their attempts to negotiate their status.<sup>184</sup>

What Tobin alludes to is an act of *returning the gaze* in that the subaltern subjects should use the dominant/colonizer's narratives, to trace and reconstruct their own histories and subjectivities. To perform such an act, Tobin advises that, a *symptomatic reading* of "imperial text" is useful "to recover subaltern subjectivity from elite text", and this means "reading what is not there but is implied and called into existence by series of oppositions."<sup>185</sup> Proposed here is Said's "contrapuntal reading [that] must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of texts to include what was once forcibly

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 12.

excluded.”<sup>186</sup> Tobin perceives this strategic reading similar to Richard Leppert’s use of the notion of a “semiotic ‘present absence’” to describe the way in which the colonized is displaced in colonizer-colonized conversation pieces.<sup>187</sup> An analysis of contrapuntal takes into account both perspectives of the colonized and the colonizer, working with their interwoven histories and entanglements. Underscoring Said’s contrapuntal reading is to reread the European cultural archive in terms of its modern imperialism whose global associations or affiliations that are inherent with “discrepancies” or “fissures” must be debunked in ways that bring to “full view” the “multiple connections of human communities”<sup>188</sup> which are constitutive of “internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them co-existing and interacting with others.”<sup>189</sup> In Said’s words:

As we look back at the cultural archive, we begin to reread it not univocally but *contrapuntally*, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts [...] I believe, we can read and interpret English novels, for example, whose engagement (usually suppressed for the most part) with the West Indies or India, say, it shaped and perhaps even determined by the specific history of colonization, resistance, and finally native nationalism. At this point alternative or new narratives emerge, and they become institutionalized or discursively stable entities.<sup>190</sup>

In appropriating and reworking the Old Masters’ paintings, it is possible to argue that Phokela employs the postcolonial strategies—symptomatic, contrapuntal and semiotic present absence—of reading imperial or colonial visual texts. Phokela, in fact, performs what Stuart Hall referred to as, “The subject of the local, of the margins, can

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Abdirahman A. Hussein, *Edward Said: Criticism and Society* (New York: Verso, 2004), 262.

<sup>189</sup> Edward Said, (1993), *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

only come into representation by, as it were, recovering their own hidden histories.”<sup>191</sup>

In this sense, Phokela excavates and re-interprets the colonial Western narratives, which exist as problematic cultural archives. To phrase it differently: Phokela is *Unpacking Europe*, as Salah Hassan and Iftikhar Dadi state in their project.<sup>192</sup> His discursive paintings reveal how European narratives are neither given nor natural but rather constructs that deserve examination, deconstruction and re-construction in ways that problematize their inherent bias, complicate and expand their limitation. These characteristics are interestingly played out in three of Phokela’s paintings, *Roman Charity* (2002), *Candle Bathing* (1998) and *Land of Cockaigne* (2000), which I select to discuss in what follows.

*Roman Charity* is an appropriation of Rubens’s interpretation of the imprisonment of St Peter, incarcerated to test God’s ability to save him by the doubting Romans (See Figure 1). Sympathizers who fed him milk from the breast of milking mothers saved St Peter. Phokela rewrites St Peter as a naked, shaven-headed black man bound and shackled; he is a prisoner suckling from the breast of a young naked white woman, wearing red shoes. The rendition of these figures, taking note of their bodily gestures and the manner of their interaction, is suggestive of eroticism and sexual connotations. Even the intense emotions, notable in their facial expressions and body language as the black man is so absorbed suckling the white woman’s breast, inscribe sexual innuendos. There is also passionate uneasiness of the two figures, in particular the white woman’s posture, which seems to indicate her self-consciousness

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<sup>191</sup> Beth Fowkes. Tobin, (1999), *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>192</sup> Salah Hassan and Iftikhar Dadi, *Unpacking Europe: A Critical Reader* (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen and NAI Publishers 2001).

about the illegality (or rather transgression) of their furtive rendezvous. Phokela, in this sense, paints a representational scene inscribed with politics of race, gender and sex. The intercourse between these figures exhibits tension, a blend of trepidation and misery in the way they are not to pleasure themselves. It is an apprentice moment where a relationship between different races appears ambivalent, as if Phokela invokes politics of miscegenation by bringing to our attention a sexual intercourse between the colonizer and colonized, an intercourse that was prohibited owing to colonial attitudes regarding racial contamination and purity of black and white races.

I am also prompted to consider the perception of the black man as a threat to white civilization, particularly his sexual penetration of white women. I make this point taking into account Frantz Fanon's argument about the reduction (if not hyper-amplification) of the black man to his body, especially the penis which is exaggerated to construct him as a *Frightening Negro*: "...the Negro is fixated at the genital...The Negro symbolizes the biological danger."<sup>193</sup> "He is a penis."<sup>194</sup> To establish this claim Fanon quotes Michel Cournot who construes the black man's penis as "a sword. When he has thrust it into your wife, she has really felt something. It is a revelation. In the chasm that it has left, your little toy is lost...This is *good-by*...Four Negroes with their penises exposed would fill a cathedral."<sup>195</sup>

In the South African context, Fanon's argument is played out in Lewis Nkosi novel *Mating Birds* (1987), a novel that critiques apartheid's *Immorality Law* for proscribing sexual intercourse between black and white people. As Nkosi writes,

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<sup>193</sup> Frantz Fanon, (1967), *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

“...Kaffir Boy who had the temerity, the audacity to seize a ‘respectable’ white woman in her bungalow and insert his horrible, oversized ‘black thing into her... The very thought of it is enough to bring tears to their [Afrikaner farmers’] eyes”<sup>196</sup>

Another point Fanon makes is that, “A white woman who has had a Negro lover finds it difficult to return to white man.”<sup>197</sup> The consequence of this, according to Etiemble, is “Racial jealousy [which] produces the crimes of racism”.<sup>198</sup> There is also an entrenched belief that sexual intercourse with a black person is different: more physical, more steamy and less emotional. These perceptions subsequently lead to misunderstandings about black sexuality which results in racial ambivalence so charged with desire, fear and hatred of black people as argued by Fanon<sup>199</sup> and Sander Gilman<sup>200</sup>, for example.

I am inclined to consider such crimes of racism as something perhaps played out in Phokela’s *Candle Bathing*, a painting I discuss shortly. But for now I want to continue my discussion of Phokela’s *Roman Charity*, further reading what appears to be an unequal relationship between the black man and white woman not simply within the pictorial domain but also a symptomatic representation of an unequal relationship between the white world and black world, the colonizer and colonized, this being so with respect to political and economic power relations in the real world.

Where this unequal relationship seems perceptible is the manner in which Phokela has visually structured the black man and white woman in the painting. A

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<sup>196</sup> Lewis Nkosi, *Mating Birds* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987), 12.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>200</sup> Sander Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies, Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature,” in *Race, Writing and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 225-231.

careful look at *Roman Charity* would observe that, while the white woman appears anxious and very alert of their (illegally) clandestine act, the black man is deeply lost in suckling her breast. He is like a desperate *child* being fed by his *mother*, so much that as a black man we could not avoid reading his dependence on the (charity of) the white woman, who also could be read as a caring mother. Outside the pictorial domain of the painting, that is, in the real world, we might read this situation in terms of welfare and aiding politics, the relationship between patron and recipient or donor and beneficiary. In other words, such visual depiction suggests a problematic relationship between the wealthy and the needy, developed world and underdeveloped world. Would it be an exaggeration therefore to read the scene as suggestive of Europe as donor and Africa recipient? Or should we construe that Phokela appropriates and reworks the biblical scene to raise questions of politics of economic disparities that have brought about power relations of domination and dependence between the colonizer and the colonized, First World and Third World, the West and the Rest? If we were to read the white woman as mother Europe and the black man as an African child we might perhaps construe that the former is a patron aiding the latter. In this sense, Africa would appear to exist in Phokela's visual re-interpretation as a subject dependent on European aid, and if that being the case (in socio-economic reality in neo-colonial and post-colonial eras) we might as well recall Walter Rodney's seminal argument on *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*<sup>201</sup> through imperialism, colonialism and capitalism, all processes that violently forced Africa to vulnerability, instability and dependency.

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<sup>201</sup> Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London and Dar Es Salaam: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications and Tanzanian Publishing House, 1973).

Another informative reading might perhaps be that, Phokela treats the (European) white woman not only as the sympathizer of the conditions endured by (African) black man but also a caring subject that therefore shares the struggle of the black man. I make this reading observing that, in Phokela's painting, the black man and white woman visually come across as intimate subjects whose interaction is suggestive of bonding to share a struggle of subordination against (European) white male domination. Their intimate bonding is also highly suggestive of cross-race sexual intercourse that has troubled racist authorities or regimes. Thus it would not be far-fetched to read herein a played out racial Oedipus Complex, particularly with reference to Shulamith Firestone's argument regarding the relationship between the black man and white woman as bonding of two subordinates against oppression by the white man.<sup>202</sup> The two make a sympathetic identification "Because both have been castrated (i.e. made impotent, powerless) in the same way by the white Father... They have a special bond in oppression the same way that the mother and child are united against the father."<sup>203</sup>

If Phokela's *Roman Charity* could be read in terms of the sympathy the white woman has towards the black man and their bonding against the white man's oppression, then his *Candle Bathing* provides a different treatment of the relationship

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<sup>202</sup> Shulamith Firestone explains that in the race hierarchical relations within the nuclear family the white man is father, the white woman wife-and-mother, her status dependent on his; the blacks, like children, are his property, their physical differentiation branding them the subservient class, in the way that children form so easily distinguishable a servile class vis-à-vis adults. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1970), 98.

<sup>203</sup> "The vicarious nature of this struggle against the white man's domination is akin to mother's vicarious identification with the son against the father. The woman has no real hope of her own self-determined struggle, for her it's all lost from the beginning; she is defined in *toto* as the appendage of the white man, she lives under his day-to-day surveillance isolated from her sisters: she has less aggressive strength. But the mother (white female) knows that is not herself, then at least her son (black male) is potentially 'make', that is, powerful." Shulamith Firestone, (1970), *Ibid.*, 98-99.

between black and white subjects. In the latter painting, what could be observed seems to be a teaming together of white woman with white man in an act of castrating a black man, symbolically expressed in the shaving off of his hair (See Figure 2). In the Bible story, Delilah played on Samson's weakness by dampening his strength and thus making him weak. With *Candle Bathing*, Phokela appropriates Ruben's Samson and transforms him into a black man while Delilah a white woman; both figures are depicted as nudes. Samson is fast asleep while a baldhead manservant shaves his hair. The event is lit with a candle held by a woman servant with a cigarette or joint in her mouth. Next to them, there are two female nudes who appear to be engaged in their own (sexual) world while a third semi-nude female is at a distance, standing in the dark staring with a sense of disgust at the castration of the black man. This semi-nude female figure appears in isolation, as she stands alone against a subdued background in which two seemingly female figures are submerged. To push the castration scene to the foreground of the painting, Phokela places the active figures on red drapery. The drapery also creates an intense mood established through color contrast between the pinkish-white skin of the female nudes and dark-black male nude all treated with *chiaroscuro* which exhibits Phokela's command of the European master's painting language or fine art tools. An interesting contrast is played out in the manner that all the white figures are active while the black figure is inactive in his deep sleep. These visual qualities provide a melodramatic aura in the castration scene of the black man, whilst also imploring a number of suggestive readings of which four are important to discuss.

First, through the semi-nude female figure, we might want to read here a sense of disgust at the violent castration of the black man by her fellow white women and white man; in this regard we consider her to indicate or represent some sector/proportion of European population that disapprove of the ill-treatment of non-whites in Europe. We thus learn not to essentialize white European attitudes toward non-Europeans. Second we might also read a sense of anger in her facial expression and bodily gesture: she is enraged by the castration of the black man. A third reading could be that the black man is castrated for reasons that have to do with his sexual desire for and/or an engagement with white European women; he is therefore punished for being a threat to white *purity*. This speaks to Etiemble's point, I made earlier, about *racial jealousy* which seemed to have subjected white men to exercise *crimes of racism* against black men who cross the *color line*. The crimes of racism include the physical castration of black men in Adolf Hitler's Germany; in Jim Crow's United States of America black men were lynched for looking at and accused of raping white women; in apartheid South Africa imposed laws such as the *Immorality Act* not only prohibited but also granted punishing and imprisoning persons involved in racially mixed sexual unions or intercourses; black men (and black women) had endured most of such penalties. Take for example Lewis Nkosi's novel *Mating Birds* (1987) in which a black man awaits execution (having been accused) of raping a white woman. To a greater extent, in all these different contexts, the prohibitive laws and practices against racially mixed sexual unions was to conserve racial purity mainly on the terms of white male patriarchy whose undertaking was to regulate sexual access of black men to white women. Racial segregation was thus justified on the ground of protecting

sexual desires and intercourse of white women with black men, meanwhile white men sexually helped themselves to black women through subjugation, rape, harassment and violence.

The fourth reading might consider the castration act as a political moment or economic process through which European imperialism cripples Africa, an act of “under-developing Africa” a la Walter Rodney’s thesis. Such reading is based on the creative imaginative way that Phokela has reworked the Biblical narrative of Samson and Delilah, as a metaphorical critique and indictment of Europe’s expropriation of Africa’s natural resources or raw material: in this symptomatic reading, Europe is represented by the white man and women who are shaving off the black man’s hair, a black man who represents Africa; the shaving of his hair is suggestive of the expropriation of Africa’s resources and without which Africa is thus a disabled or crippled continent, weak in strength and lacking self-sustenance. Here, my attempt is to read a symbolic slumber of the black African man, what could be considered an exploitation of mineral resources so shrewdly exercised under the impression that Africa is independent and free, especially in neo-colonial and post-colonial dispensations. Perhaps this slumber represents an illusion, a well-deserved *rest* following Africa’s hard fought independence that seems to have not manifest into any positive reality for the majority except for a few political leaders, entrepreneurs, elite and bourgeoisie in view of corruption and maladministration in postcolonial Africa.

Phokela further elaborates on the theme of European expropriation of material resources from underdeveloped and developing countries (like Africa) in his *Land of Cockaigne* (See Figure 3), a painting derived from Bruegel’s image of paradise and

the acquisitive pursuit of perfection of the same title, and of Rubens' *Garden of Love*, depicting a feast of indulgence and intoxication. Both paintings by Bruegel and Rubens are indicative of spoils, excess and opulence, which Phokela rewrites in ways that conceptually and symbolically forward a critique of European imperialism and plundering. Thus Phokela's main interest is in the seventeenth century European history, a time of finance and commerce, when the first world bank was created, the first stock exchange, the first multinational companies; it was when the West was expanding—there was this rush to grab land, and the Dutch were the masters of it.<sup>204</sup> This was after the Dutch were conquered, oppressed and exploited by the Spanish; then Dutch colonized Indonesia and South Africa; following that the British took over South Africa from Dutch, and after the British, South Africa was ruled by Afrikaners.

The visual rendering of *Land of Cockaigne* is eye grabbing in the manner in which Phokela paints a deeply rich blazing ultramarine blue sky that vanishes into dark violet-blue separated by horizontal black-like-sea water from an indefinite yellow ground. The yellow and blue fields are treated flat whilst separating the painting into two planes, a sky background and a landscape extending from the middle ground to the foreground. In the center of the painting, there is a garden pedestal fountain on which kneels a female nude figure spewing milk from her breasts into the open mouths of the four stout white male figures lying beneath, three of these figures are lying on their back and one on his side. Next to one of the figures is a Bible that invokes missionaries' indoctrination of natives, the exchange of land and relinquishing of indigenous cultural practices/beliefs for Christianity. The missionary project was

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<sup>204</sup> See interview by Tracey Murinik, "Johannes Phokela" in *Personal Affects: Power and Poetics in Contemporary South African Art* (New York and Cape Town: Museum for African Art and Spier, 2005), 119.

also instrumental in the appropriation of colonized countries' natural resources through imperialism, colonialism and capitalism. In the foreground of the painting, there is a pig with a slit in the middle of its back, which resembles a toy moneybox. "I'm looking at a particular period," comments Phokela, "and I'm trying to compare it to the world economic situation right now. There seem to be so many similarities..."<sup>205</sup> This leads Eddie Chambers to contend that Phokela "looks back to look forward,"<sup>206</sup> while Bruce Haines argues that:

If there has been a shift of the former colonial spaces to the center, the bifurcation of the colonizer and the colonized remains dominant in the exchange of goods. For example, the exchange of natural resources are mined in Africa for small change compared to the exponential profits of the high technology centers that buy the mineral for processing.<sup>207</sup>

Haines's argument also speaks to the unfinished project of decolonization given the continuing exploitative exchange of African natural resources for small profits, which is often abused by corrupt politicians, leadership, businesses and petit-bourgeois, all of whom to Fanon operate as the "intermediary" "of being the transmission line between the nation and a capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today put on the mask of neo-colonialism."<sup>208</sup> In paintings such as *Land of Cockaigne*, Phokela seems to illuminate the continuing imperatives of imperialism, colonialism and capitalism; thus Brenton Maart writes:

Phokela's work may...be viewed as an act of insurgency against today's remainders of European colonial action, being and thought. It may be possible that, through his references, Phokela underlines his key intention: to question the enduring system of colonial values that perpetuate themselves through symbols, signs and icons.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Eddie Chambers, "Godfried Donkor, Michael Forbes, Johannes Phokela" in *There is no Redemption and Origin of End* (London: Future Factory Far Ahead Publications, The City Gallery, 2002), 28.

<sup>207</sup> Bruce Haines, "Johannes Phokela: Changing The Title" in *Unpacking Europe: Towards a Critical Reading*, eds. Salah Hassan and Ifikhar Dadi (2001), Ibid., 381.

<sup>208</sup> Frantz Fanon, (1963), Ibid., 152.

<sup>209</sup> Brenton Maart, "Johannes Phokela" in *Art South Africa*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2006), 72.

If that is the case, it is apt therefore to argue that Phokela's undertaking participates in and contributes in the on-going project of decolonization, as strongly espoused by Frantz Fanon<sup>210</sup> and Ngugi wa Thiong'o.<sup>211</sup> As Jacques Depelchin would argue, it is also important to assert the "decolonization of history"<sup>212</sup> in order to voice up its "silences" in Africa, silences that have also muted any questions and calls for justice; a justice which remains an-*other* unfinished business given that there have been no reparations or restitutions regarding atrocities of history on violated subjects through slavery, imperialism, colonialism and apartheid. In fact, it is partly with respect to this unrealized justice that Depelchin writes: "Among those who have suffered enslavement, colonization, steady and relentless economic exploitation, cultural asphyxiation, religious persecution, gender, race and class discrimination and political repression, silences should be seen as facts."<sup>213</sup> Such silences are an important departing point where history should be rectified through inclusive practices of both re-reading and re-writing, one of which is Said's *contrapuntal* strategies which disrupt the silences on violence, exploitation and murder. *Contrapuntal* reading, in this regard, is enabling reading with which I have framed Phokela's paintings, particularly the reflectively imaginative way in which he recovers hidden histories and re-inserts that which is forcibly excluded from imperial texts. Thus it is important to discuss here an emphasis on his insertion of black African subjects/figures in a white-only scenario and the use of the grid over his final image.

By inserting black Africans in "white-only scenarios" painted by European

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<sup>210</sup> See Frantz Fanon, (1963), *Ibid.*, 35-106.

<sup>211</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o, (1994), *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>212</sup> Jacques Depelchin, *Silences in Africa History: Between the Syndromes of Discovery and Abolition* (Dar Es Salaam: Mkuki ba Nyota Publishers 2005), 2.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

masters, Phokela ruptures and reorders the construction of European purity. In illuminating their different skin tones, in particular the inclusion of the black figures, Phokela reminds us of Homi Bhabha's argument about what Fanon calls "the epidermal schema" in referring to the fetish of colonial discourse. "Skin as the key signifier of cultural and racial difference in the stereotype," writes Bhabha, "is the most visible of the fetishes, recognized as 'common knowledge' in a range of cultural, political and historical discourses, and plays a public part in the racial drama that is enacted every day in colonial societies."<sup>214</sup> This racial drama was central during the colonial contact, for example, manifested racial prejudices, antagonism and violence due to (sexual) intercourse between the colonizer and the colonized, which has been omitted from the European master paintings. Phokela retrieves and makes it a center of his paintings in a way that Bhabha would explain in terms of "visibility", which "gives forces to the argument that the skin, as a signifier of discrimination, must be produced or processed as visible."<sup>215</sup> So, producing the black skin in relation to the white skin, Phokela recalls the colonial racial drama, making us think of European discrimination and the exercise of power against the colonized.

As in the inverse of Richard Leppert's notion of semiotics of "present absence", Phokela makes black Africans visibly present and re-establishes their intercourse with their white-others. In Said's words, Phokela puts an "emphasis [on] and voice to what was once forcibly excluded" in the visual texts of empire. It is a reflectively imaginative approach of visual rewriting which also indicts imperialism and colonialism as noted in the imprisonment of St Peter in *Roman Charity* and

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<sup>214</sup> Homi Bhabha, (1994), *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

castration of Samson in *Candle Bathing*. Phokela's strategy to make visible black Africans also critiques the inherent racism in the rationale which underscores the invention of oil paint as the medium to (dominantly if not only) paint the white flesh. As Paul O'Kane argues, "Phokela's craft brings home the unpalatable fact that the entire great tradition of nudes in oils was a 'white thing'".<sup>216</sup> In painting black Africans with the master's tools and inserting them into originally "white-only scenarios", Phokela dispels European's insidious desire for racial purity as constructed in the history of art and historical paintings. In painting black Africans in the same technical quality of the master, Phokela invests them with the same quality with which Europeans' bodies have been idealized in the genre of nude painting. Through painting the nude—which was mainly a European grant and reserve in art history—Phokela lays claim to the art and culture of the classical period; in so doing demonstrating his right to such legacy at the same time he is circumventing Europe's self-contained subjectivity that has been historically denied to non-Europeans. The nude genre thus becomes no longer a reserve for European artists but an artistic practice which non-European artists are entitled to use within and beyond Europe.

It is worth noting that cultural practices that either originate from within Europe or were imported from elsewhere, were appropriated into becoming European and have been exported to European/settler colonies and the world at large. The dissemination of European culture is explained by Peter Ekeh as the civilizing mission or imperial expansion, which "has cast its shadow and substance on the rest of the

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<sup>216</sup> Paul O'Kane, "Johannes Phokela" in *Third Text*, Vol. 14/43 (1998), 103.

world.”<sup>217</sup> The imperial expansion occurred within and outside the European continent, and consequently “European culture and civilization” became “the new reference point and the new centerpiece of modernity in mankind’s remolded experience and history”. Outside Europe, the imperial expansion brought about nation states Ekeh defined as European “fragments”, which include Australia, New Zealand, North America and South Africa, in all of which there “was room for the free flow and transfer of European cultures to these new lands”.<sup>218</sup> The “flow and transfer” of cultures were not a one way street, cultures and various goods from these “new lands” or rather colonies reached and affected Europe, as well. Thus Naoki Sakai makes a pointed argument in writing, “Just as the West is dispersed all over the world so the Rest is also scattered even through the heartland of European civilization.”<sup>219</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that South Africa has somewhat emulated some of the European cultures, values and practices including prejudices. Take for example, “white-only scenarios” notable in the painting of European Old Masters was enacted through apartheid laws that segregated different races into “white-only” and “non-black” areas and socio-economic activities. Apartheid was a South African era of the Afrikaner National Party ruling, which instituted racial laws that denied black Africans rights to human quality, equality and development. The Afrikaner government went as far as erasing black Africans including their languages, identities and cultural symbols from its (artificial) construction of South African national

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<sup>217</sup> Peter Ekeh, “A Comparative View of South Africa as Fragment Culture” in *Toward Peace and Security in Southern Africa*, ed. Harvey Glickman (New York: Gordon and Breach Publishers, 1990), 3.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>219</sup> Naoki Sakai, “Dislocation of the West and the Status of Humanities” in Salah Hassan and Iftikahar Dadi (eds.), (2001), *Ibid.*, 213.

identity. Black Africans became an invisible presence while brutally exploited for the development and sustenance of modern South Africa, economically, socially and culturally. It is important to note that racial segregation did not start with the Afrikaner regime; according to Aletta Norval it “initially emerged as a defensive strategy developed by English-speaking liberals in order to consolidate white supremacy...by excluding ‘the Natives’ as other”.<sup>220</sup> So, when Phokela engages with iconic paintings of European Masters, particularly his insertion of black figures in ‘white-only scenarios’ he probes further back into the history of colonization and apartheid. As Eddie Chambers explains,

Phokela raises questions about white supremacy and white settler domination of Southern Africa by a startling and unusual device. He takes a calculated (and yet at times playful) look at the Dutch and European painting that has come to symbolize Europe’s greatness and Europe’s God-given right to embark on its colonial project.<sup>221</sup>

Although the Portuguese were the earliest (if not first) to stop over and explore South Africa especially around the Cape seaboard, it should be remembered that the first Europeans to *settle* in South Africa were Dutch in 1651<sup>222</sup> and this period was exactly during the Dutch Golden Age. At this time, while the Dutch were colonizing South Africa, Dutch and Flemish master painters such as Bruegel, Rubens, Van Dyk and Rembrandt were producing some of the celebrated works of art in Europe. This recalls Said’s argument referenced earlier, regarding European writers and painters who were

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<sup>220</sup> Aletta J. Norval, *Deconstructing Apartheid Discourse* (London and New York: Verso 1996), 29.

<sup>221</sup> Eddie Chambers, (2002), *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>222</sup> Historical accounts explain that, due to constant shipwrecks, death of sailors because of hunger and sickness which frustrated success of trading with the East (India), the VOC decided to establish refreshment station in Cape Town. Most of the resources including human labour, materials, the means of producing food and other needful refreshments for the establishment and sustenance of the VOC station were of the natives and slaves. The use/need for local resources was evident in the Dutch settlers’ motivation to move into the interior of South Africa for substantial and quality needful products. Moving inland brought about the development of farms through appropriating, stealing and possessing for example native land, cattle and servants. This was the Dutch colonial penetration of South Africa which involved numerous battles with the natives.

aware of European colonialism but opted to be complicit. Dutch colonialism and the complicity of the Dutch and Flemish master painters are Phokela's preoccupation, taking note of his comment:

As for Dutch genre paintings they portrayed a certain European lifestyle coinciding with a period in history that saw the arrival of Europeans in South Africa. This was the only visual reference available, utopian in many ways, the harsh realities of war and famine left out. The subsequent cultural collusion is significant and became an essential source for my ideas.<sup>223</sup>

In engaging with iconic images of these European masters Phokela reflects on these parallel historical moments or events, inviting an examination of their implications in the contemporary era. It might be argued that Phokela indicts colonialism by Dutch and British, including Afrikaner apartheid all of whose consequences involve the oppression, exploitation, persecution, suffering, exclusion and erasure of black Africans from the South African nationalist imaginary. Such a predicament extends to black Africans who immigrated to Europe in earlier centuries as for instance traders, artisans, laborers, servants or slaves. It would seem, to be black is to be the *other* of white: the negation of the latter's ideological construct and fantasy, the deletion of the former in white people's desire for an anomalous and impossible "communal unity" argued by Benedict Anderson as *Imagined Communities*.<sup>224</sup> It is this white imagined community noted by Anderson as the "Eurocentric provincialism [which] remained quite undisturbed"<sup>225</sup> that Phokela questions, challenges and exposes in his paintings.

The importance of the grids in Phokela's paintings is framing them into compartments. Technically, Phokela's use of the grids tend either to enhance the

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<sup>223</sup> Bruce Haines, "In Conversation with Johannes Phokela" in [www.simonmeeffineart.com](http://www.simonmeeffineart.com)

<sup>224</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London and New York: Verso, 1991).

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

painting and its compositional organization or obstruct the otherwise well rendered surface qualities. At best, as in *Candle Bathing*, the grids contain and frame the painting within a triptych of panels. They animate the painted scenes into a kind of storyboard and compartments. The painting appears as a sequence of three fragmented scenes forming a whole. On the left side are Delilah and the old woman-servant with a candle; in the middle section there is a male-servant cutting Samson's hair and two female nudes; on the right side there is a female nude slanting at a distance and staring at the shaving event. Samson's figure cut across these three grids. Another reading of the white grids might be considered in view of (class and/or racial) segregating boundaries: for example, in both colonial and apartheid South Africa, segregation was effectively imagined, felt and performed. Thus Jacques Derrida considered apartheid as a word that "references a concept and reality",<sup>226</sup> and I consider his definition of apartheid interesting in thinking about a way to complicate the grids in Phokela's paintings:

APARTHEID: by itself the word occupies the terrain like a concentration camp. System of partition, barbed wire, crowds of mapped out solitude ... the glaring harshness of abstract essence (*heid*) seems to speculate in another regime of abstraction, that of confined separation. The word concentrates separation, raises it to another power and sets separation itself *apart*: 'apartitionality', something like that. By isolating into being apart in some sort of essence or hypostasis, the word corrupts it into a quasi-ontological segregation. At every point, like all racism, it tends to pass segregation off as natural—and as the very law of the origin. Such is the monstrosity of this political idiom.<sup>227</sup>

A partition or compartmentalization of South Africa through apartheid laws was primarily intended to curb black people within the township and rural reserves to enter (except with permission) areas designated for "whites only". It is in this manner that

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<sup>226</sup> Jacques Derrida, "But, beyond... (Open Letter to Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon)" in *Race, Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 362.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

we might also read the white grids in Phokela's paintings. For he has rendered them visible, exposing them to be seen instead of being hidden boundaries whose purpose is to order and constrain. In other words, by treating them as visible boundaries on the surface of his paintings, Phokela prompts us to question the neutrality of the framed space, as Terence Doohan explains: "The image is no longer imprisoned within the neutralized grid of the frame; instead the grid is seen, no longer invisible and neutral, as a culturally meaningful sign." In this regard, Phokela's work "undermines the universal pretense in Western art and his grids and re-workings allow us to interrogate the implied neutrality of the ideals expressed in these works".<sup>228</sup>

### ***Johannes Phokela's Painting: Towards a Critical Re-interpretation***

Leading up to the conclusion, further discussion and a more critical interpretation regarding Phokela's project are needed to unpack its impact and limitation as well. To start with, Phokela's insertion of black subjects in these white-only historical scenes are rewritten as victims and subordinates despite their visible presence. In *Candle Bathing*, Phokela's black Samson is motionless, deep in his sleep and at the mercy of the white women surrounding him while the white man castrates him. The castration of the black person, arguably, could have been made possible owing to the *decoy* of the white woman, if we exercise an inter-textual reading of this scene/moment with reference to the Biblical narrative that Delilah seduced and tricked Samson to reveal the secret of his powers, which proved to be his hair. One might even further infer that Phokela presents a case in which white women are made to be

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<sup>228</sup> Terrance Doohan, "The Framing of Europe" in *Fixations* (Nottingham: Art Exchange Gallery, 2000).

both a beacon of *desire* and *destruction*, both of which underscore the destiny of black men in a white male dominated society.

In *Roman Charity*, Phokela venerates the white woman as provider of charity and rescuer of subordinated black man under white male domination. She therefore embodies characteristics of benevolence which is supposedly predicated on the assumption that (such white) woman is a moral caretaker -giver, particularly in her sympathetic identification with the black (male) victim. It is also possible to read this white woman as rebellious against white male authority in her acts of (illegally) feeding the black prisoner; in this regard we might as well consider both the black man and white woman to be subordinates bonding against white male power. Yet their subordination is of unequal status: the white woman's active role in helping the black man indicates her privileged position (of operation) as compared to the (absolute) castration of the black man who is dependent on her sympathy or charity.

To phrase it differently, in Phokela's paintings, the black man has no subjectivity or agency of his own; Phokela retrieves him from the shackles of history and presents him not only as still the victim of white male domination but also a sexual/eroticized body (object) vulnerable to the (appetite of) white women. In so doing, it might be argued that Phokela's (decisive) focus on black people as victims or subjects of tragedy undermines the fact that black people in Europe were not only slaves, servants, street beggars and villains but also traders, arm generals, chief officers, pilgrims, ambassadors, clerks and scholars among many highly respectable professionals and ranking in society. In short, Phokela's project is a partial representation of black people in European (art) history, particularly given their

various identities, experiences and positions, many of which were highly respectable and whose influential contribution is an integral part of European achievement and vitality culturally, economically, socially and politically. Recent scholarship on black people in the West testifies to their significant status and contribution in the making up of modern Europe,<sup>229</sup> a status and contribution that equally deserves recognition and acknowledgement in the event that racial stereotypes so instrumental in reinforcing the dehumanization of black people remain contemporary apparitions.

Moreover, it is also possible to argue that Phokela has rendered his black male figures impotent and not “threatening” in their victimhood re-presentation. They are thus domesticated as passive subjects, represented without liberating subjectivity or subversive agency in their dependence on white women. In cases where they are threatening, such reading is either symbolically coded in visual inscriptions that demand inter-textual reading or references (as I have exercised regarding the castration of black men in *Candle Bathing*, for example). In some way, they come across as disaster or losers, notwithstanding their entrenchment in their colonial state of being unfree from or fixed within the spell of white power. Black figures are therefore decontextualized and de-historicized from any black-oriented historical context, and rather transfixed within a primarily overwhelming white world that determines their fate. There is also a sense of humiliation in the ways in which they are depicted so much that nothing seems visually assertive and empowering about them in Phokela’s paintings; instead they somewhat come to view as empty of active and self-determining personalities. That is to say they deny black viewers any sense of

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<sup>229</sup> See Note number 165.

*pleasure* in (their sort of) humanness.<sup>230</sup> If Phokela makes us laugh by taking out his biting satire on the Old Masters' iconic paintings, we however do so mainly at the sight of being subjected to consume the victimhood, passivity, castration, absurdity or the folly of black men. This is all the while observing and perhaps appreciating the maneuvering acts of white women who embody positive and negative characteristics: on the one hand these women are depicted as moral care-givers and saviors whilst on the other they are seductresses so centrally active in the demise of black men under oppressive circumstances.

Finally, all of Phokela's inserted figures in rewriting (art) history are black men, which prompts a serious query about not simply the exclusion of black women from his work, but equally so, his failure to take into account the importance of black women in European history. This therefore implicates Phokela with the patriarchal tendencies of writing black women out of (European) art history, at the same time erasing and denying their significant participation in and contribution to the making of the modern world. It is an alarming tendency given the continuing marginality of black women and the serious need not only for black women but also men to take into account and exercise gendered perspectives in their interventions in the re-writing of art *history*. I make this argument considering that gender matters are not and should not be merely about, for and by women but equally concern everyone, particularly given that the brunt of European domination was and continues to be shared by both men and women, especially those who exist in the repressive margins of colonial, neo-

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<sup>230</sup> See for example Manthia Diawara, "Black Spectatorship: Problem of Identification and Resistance" in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

colonial and post-colonial circumstances. For this reason, it could be argued that, the absence of black women in Phokela's paintings might be indicative of a problem that histories, identities, experiences and desires of black women tend to be secondary if not relegated to the realm of insignificance by (black) male authors, artists and critics. This, in some way, reveals the limitation or blind spots of Phokela's undertaking regarding the patriarchal tendencies to oppress, exclude, neglect and being insensitive towards (black) women's concerns. It also calls into question Phokela's awareness or ignorance regarding gendered perspectives and gender sensitivities, in particular with respect to the kind of postcolonial interventions that pay attention to or engage with feminism in some way. Michael Awkward discusses *a black man's place in black feminist criticism*.<sup>231</sup> We might also add that, Phokela deprives black women of any sense of pleasure in looking at his paintings, recalling bell hook's critique of *black female spectators*.<sup>232</sup>

Considering the above mentioned, Phokela not only keeps the white European subjects alive and active but also gives them some unrelenting privilege in his paintings. It would seem that his studies and stay in England and access to European countries afforded him an opportunity to acquire and be influenced by the white ethnocentrism whose academic training and cultural sensibilities in painting or visual arts have circumscribed and tamed him to develop no artistic signature, creative trait and cultural identity free and independent from that of the European Masters' manners and ways of looking at and seeing the world. For his paintings could be easily reduced to

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<sup>231</sup> Michael Awkward, "A Black Man's Place in Black Feminist Criticism" in *The Black Feminist Reader*, eds. Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 88-108.

<sup>232</sup> bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 115-131.

mimicry which, in the very critique of the Masters also reproduces and keeps the Masters' creative craft and artistic sensibilities alive and central in his contemporary visual art practices.

It could be further argued that, this sort of *mimicry*<sup>233</sup> is a limited copy-version of European Masters' work with the exception of his intervention at the level of content rather than form, by mainly inserting black male figures all of whom remain victims and no threat to the status quo, as I have already noted. Also, it would seem that the time Phokela spent in the West isolated and dissuaded him from looking and engaging with "other" cultural worlds and experiences that do not make Europe and its cultural tradition or artistic conventions their main focus and center of reference or dominating source of creative inspiration. What appears to be problematic at the core of Phokela's mimicry is an obsession with European sensibility, an obsessive condition that comes across as a colonial dependency syndrome: that he cannot do without the Master's tools; as such, he cannot speak through his own or other voice but only through that of the European Master. In short, Phokela's paintings do not quite read as radical intervention or assault on Eurocentrism and white ethnocentrism, even if their potency rests on disturbing or spoiling the exclusive white-only scenes, through inserting black male figures. I make this critique with reference to Audre Lorde's argument that "*For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.* They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never

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<sup>233</sup> For a theoretical discussion of *mimicry* see Chapter 4, "Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse" in Homi Bhabha, (1994), *Ibid.*, 85-92. And one example of a critique of Bhabha's mimicry is Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 62-65.

enable us to bring about genuine change.”<sup>234</sup>

The foregoing argument is a similar problem to Said’s theory of contrapuntal reading. However, it over-focuses on European subjects in a manner that prioritizes and privileges the always already dominating subjects as centre of attention even on occasions that are concerned with non-European subjects. As Simon Gikandi writes: “The primary limitation of this kind of reading, however, is that it unwittingly makes the metropolitan text the primary referent, or host, while the postcolonial text (and thus experience) serves as its guest.”<sup>235</sup> Neil Lazarus levels a similar critique against Chakrabarty’s proposition to “provincializing” Europe in writing, “His critique is directed against a progressivist or historicist conception of modernity – one that privileges ‘the West’ and views the ‘non-West’ as its non-modern remainder.”<sup>236</sup>

Besides the aforementioned problems or limitations, it is however apt to express that Phokela’s work foregrounds itself as political statements and creative strategies. Rather than opposing the white western-dominant and exclusive history, Phokela’s postcolonial strategies creatively and politically complicate and expand history. He calls for the recognition and inclusion of (other) *histories* whilst positing biting critiques of imperialism and colonialism, by extension apartheid. His visual trajectories in the genre of paintings acknowledge, contest, re-claim, re-interpret and re-articulate cultural identities, human presences and the consequences of colonial contacts that are manifest within and beyond Europe or the West, as West Naoki Sakai

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<sup>234</sup> Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” in *Feminism & ‘Race*, ed. Kum-Kum Bhavnani (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 91.

<sup>235</sup> Simon Gikandi, “Reading the Referent: Postcolonialism and the Writing of Modernity” in *Reading the ‘New’ Literatures in a Postcolonial Era*, eds. Susheila Nasta (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 93.

<sup>236</sup> Neil Lazarus, *National and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1999), 29.

has argued to be everywhere in the Rest, just as the Rest is everywhere in the West.<sup>237</sup> Or in line with Paul Gilroy's argument that "Black people are products of the modern world, with unique historical legacy rooted [not only] in slavery [but also in the history preceding slavery and modernity]; Blacks are hybrid people with as much claim to the western heritage."<sup>238</sup> Through reflective imaginative paintings, Phokela provides a visual comprehension of the diffusion of these worlds: colonizer and colonized, the West and the Rest, black and white. In so doing, he speaks to Sakai's eloquent argument that:

We are not at all hesitant to acknowledge our indebtedness to the intellectual and cultural legacies of Europe. In this respect, we are willing to find the traces of European invention in all of us. In the project of *Traces*, however, we will not seek to distinguish ourselves from the West or from the Rest but rather to re-articulate the very distinction between the West-and-the-Rest in such a way as to allow us to see the traces of the West as well as of the non-West in all of us.<sup>239</sup>

In conclusion, it should be noted that I make these comments without undermining or reducing the significance of Phokela's work, nor imposing and demanding more than he has set up himself to dealing with. Rather, they are exercised to extend the limited scope of the work, opening up avenues in which issues could be complicated and problematized reflectively. It is in this reflective exercise or critical practice that works of art become important sites of dialogue not only of that which is visually present (and contained) within their domain but also that which is left out (or operates outside) of such domains. In this way, I (also continue to) exercise Said's *contrapuntal* reading with respect to calling for attention to that which is either forcibly excluded or

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<sup>237</sup> Naoki Sakai. (2001), *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>238</sup> Cited in Robin Kelly's "Foreword" in Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), xix.

<sup>239</sup> Naoki Sakai, (2001), *Ibid.*, 214.

neglected, consciously or unconsciously, in significant postcolonial interventions such as Johannes Phokela's paintings.

## CHAPTER 2

### HUMANIZING BLACK SUBJECTS: ZWELETHU MTHETHWA'S PROCLAMATIONS AND COLOR PHOTOGRAPHS

Photographs of informal settlements prior to the elections in 1994 were mostly black-and-white images. The photographers weren't shooting for themselves, they were on assignment and black and white was used to suit political agendas of the time. For me, these images missed a lot of the color of informal settlements. I want to give dignity back to the sitters. I want them to have a sense of pride, and for me, color is a dignifying vehicle. The fact they've allowed me into their personal spaces meant that I had to dignify them.

Zwelethu Mthethwa (2010)<sup>240</sup>

One of the characteristics of photography by black South African artists is twofold. It is a responsive practice to the negativity associated with depressing societal conditions and a mission to provide a positive imagery of black subjects through photographic portraits. The former involves photographs that depict oppression, violence, poverty, agony and displeasing images of black subjects operating in the margins of society. This sort of photography has assigned itself the responsibility to record and document lives of black people who, because of colonialism and apartheid, including capitalism, have been forced to live and work under the most despicable socio-economic conditions. Committed in black and white, this photography is commonly associated with the work of documentary photographers and photojournalist,<sup>241</sup> at the same time assigned an activist role as politically engaged struggle photography<sup>242</sup> both fitting in art historical categories such as commentary art, protest art and resistance art.<sup>243</sup> Darren Newbury partly captures this:

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<sup>240</sup> Cited in Okwui Enwezor, (2010), *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>242</sup> See Okwui Enwezor, *Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life*, eds. Okwui Enwezor and Rory Bestor (New York: International Center of Photography, 2013), 33-5.

<sup>243</sup> See for example Sue Williamson, (1989). *Ibid.*

As photography was put to work by the apartheid state in the oppressive bureaucracy of the pass system, so too the medium was appropriated as a means of exposing injustice and indicting the brutal suppression of dissent. This opposition dominated the representation of apartheid in newspapers, books, and exhibitions that circulated internationally from the 1950s through to the 1990s.<sup>244</sup>

The latter is concerned with images that are optimistic and affirming, sometimes ordinary whilst other times banal, in ways that forward subtle and nuanced representations of black people's identities, experiences, aspirations and situated-ness. Although not completely averse to conventional qualities, this photography veers towards contemporary sensibilities; hence in some instances it is experimental and innovative. In this category, photographers have sought to engage with the complexities of black people's lives and they tend to be considered in the context of fine arts, that realm of plastics arts associated with creative imagination and aesthetic values.<sup>245</sup> While these categories are fraught with overlaps and peculiar indifferences, there seems to be a conviction in differentiating them taking cognizance of Okwui Enwezor's comments:

There is an apparent tension here between what "fine art" photography conveys and what "mere" photojournalism depicts. One seemingly operates within rarefied vision of art as a context with no responsibility toward social commentary or moral empathy. The other is produced solely as social commentary, in which subjects and situations become mere specimens and illustrations of a given moral code, a code to be transformed into advocacy for victims in need of sympathy. A further distinction between black-and-white and color photography could be summarized this way: the former tends to mediate, thereby historicizing, positioning, and freezing its subjects in the past; while the latter is consumed with the immediacy of the image, the encounter with the real, and thus tends to position its subjects in a shifting, contingent present.<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Darren Newbury, "Sizwe Bansi and The Strong Room of Dreams: Photographic Histories After Apartheid," in Okwui Enwezor and Rory Bester (eds.), (2013), *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>245</sup> "However," argues Andries Oliphant, "even a visual practice with a social function, the question of aesthetics—in terms of pictorial composition—remains relevant and applicable to photography to such an extent that rigid distinctions drawn between the artistic and documentary properties and functions of photography are problematic simplifications of the medium." Andries Oliphant, "Writing with light: Textures of Life in the Early Photography of Cedric Nunn" in *Cedric Nunn: Call and Response*, ed. Ralf-P. Seippel (Ostfildern and Johannesburg: Hatje Cantz Verlag and Fourthwall Books, 2012), 91.

<sup>246</sup> Okwui Enwezor, (2010), *Ibid.*, 102.

Zwelethu Mthethwa falls in the latter group, owing not just to the scholarly reading and framing as well as curatorial positioning of his renowned life-size color photographs in opposition to documentary and photojournalist photography but as also evinced by his own proclamations in the epigraph.<sup>247</sup> Take Michael Godby's point that "Mthethwa sets himself apart from traditional methods of representation".<sup>248</sup> Enwezor also perceives such methods to be of a "photography [which] suffered from myopia"<sup>249</sup> as it "was often a target of the critique that what it tended to portray of life under apartheid exploited the system, rather than inform a deeper understanding of how the society engaged the challenge of resisting it."<sup>250</sup>

Mthethwa, therefore, kick-started "his career by seeing a path that led to a *cul-de-sac*" and sought to challenge "this by drawing an ambivalent line between his artistic intentions and reportage, especially the kind of brutal, grainy realism normally associated with black-and-white documentary photography."<sup>251</sup> Thus, from earlier on in his art career Mthethwa decisively elected neither to "be a photojournalist" nor a documentary but "a fine arts photographer"<sup>252</sup> which seemed to have overcome the problematic limits of commentary expressions or protest representations that were accused of serving ideologies espoused by political movements immersed in the

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<sup>247</sup> See also Bongi Dhlomo, "Zwelethu Mthethwa Talks About His Photographs" in *Liberated Voices: Contemporary Art from South Africa*, eds. Frank Herreman and Mark D'Amato (New York: The Museum for African Modern Art and Prestel, 1999), 65-79.

<sup>248</sup> According to Michael Godby color operates in a way "that Mthethwa distinguishes his work from that of contemporary documentary photographers of similar subject-matter primarily by his use of color and its capacity, in his view, to communicate the dignity and humanity of his subjects – in Mthethwa's *Nguni* language, their *Ubuntu*." Michael Godby, "Documentary Portraiture: Zwelethu Mthethwa's Invention of a New Photographic Genre" in *Zwelethu Mthethwa: New Works* (Cape Town: iArt Gallery 2011), 11.

<sup>249</sup> Okwui Enwezor, (2010), *Ibid.* 101. For a counter-argument to Enwezor's comments see Jon Soske, "In Defense of Social Documentary Photography" in *Bonani Africa 2010*, eds. Omar Badsha, Mads Nørgraard and Jeeva Rajgopaul (Cape Town: South African History Online, 2010), 3.

<sup>250</sup> Okwui Enwezor, (2010), *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>252</sup> Cited in Okwui Enwezor, (2010), *Ibid.*, 102.

struggle against apartheid. Even Mthethwa himself positions his photography in the realm of fine arts not merely to stay away from documentary tendencies of recording or depicting events, places and peoples but also to exercise reflective approaches informed by observational, imaginative, conceptual and analytical principles so important in contemporary art practices attuned with aesthetically inclined representations. Yet, Luari Firstenberg argues that Mthethwa's work is indicative of "an amalgamated style of both traditional social documentary and the aesthetic operations of contemporary photography"<sup>253</sup> and thus his "images are dangerously similar to, and could be mistaken for, a variety of 1980s South African photojournalism, which took an activist position at the time".<sup>254</sup> This amalgamation and Mthethwa's positioning as a fine arts photography could be attributed to his art education and training at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town (UCT) in South Africa as well as at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in New York, United States of America. Mthethwa's background and art education are important to an understanding (of the political background and aesthetic aspects) of his color photography, thus is apt to narrate his abridged biography.

Mthethwa was born in 1960 in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa and his initial passion in art began by doing drawings at an age of six years old. At twelve years of age he got his first camera which would later become his professional instrument and visual language in negotiating the world of images. Watching movies in community recreational center halls was another source of his inspiration and

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<sup>253</sup> Lauri Firstenberg, "Postcoloniality, Performance, and Photographic Portraiture" in *The Short Story: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (Munich: Prestel, 2001), 178.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

encouragement to visual arts. His structured art education began when he attended (1979-1980) an informal art school known as the South African Institute of Race Relations' Abangani Open School in Durban, one of few privately funded and run institutions for purposes of offering art classes to black students who were denied formal education in fine art during apartheid South Africa. Mthethwa went to Abangani Open School after he dropped out of his first year pre-med degree at the University of Zululand. The Open School was also important for Mthethwa as one of his art teachers, artist Charles Sokhaya Nkosi [b.1949], advised him to apply to study at Michaelis, UCT. The Abangani Open School also enabled him to develop an art portfolio which was required for his UCT application. For admission to the white UCT, Mthethwa had to apply for permission from the apartheid government (Minister of Education). This application for permission owes to apartheid policies of racial segregation where there were white-only institutions and black-only institutions,<sup>255</sup> the latter having no art education and training including facilities like photography under the apartheid Bantu Education system. Hence Mthethwa had to apply to study at UCT. Granted the permission, Mthethwa entered UCT and received a Diploma (1984) and an Advanced Diploma (1986) in Fine Art.

It was in the 1980s during his studies at UCT when Mthethwa initially came across the informal settlement of Crossroads, which he began shooting in 1990s and would eventually launch his photographic career with the photographic series of the same title in 1996. Mthethwa's early photographic works in the later 1980s and early

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<sup>255</sup> Durban-Westville (now known as Durban University of Technology) since 1963 and University of Fort Hare in 1971 onwards were the only exceptions under apartheid's racially separate education to offer fine arts in black established or administrated universities.

1990s were small black and white photographs not merely resembling, but building on a similar kind of photographic trajectory if not tradition already practiced by documentary photographers such as Omar Badsha (b.1942), Cedric Nun (b.1957), Santu Mofokeng (b.1956), Ernest Cole (140-1990) and David Goldblatt (b.1930) among others. In post-1994 South Africa Mthethwa turned not only away from but also against this tradition of small black and white photography and produced large-scale color photographs by criticizing and condemning this tradition.<sup>256</sup>

This turn has a history traceable to the late 1989, particularly owing to his postgraduate studies at Rochester Institute of Technology in the United States of America where he completed a Master's degree.<sup>257</sup> Mthethwa was introduced to color photography, what would become a major trait or artistic signature in his oeuvre from the 1990s onwards. After his studies in the USA, he returned to Cape Town where he worked in the business sector while producing art part-time, especially colorful pastel drawings that won him prizes locally, whilst advancing his photography which got an international boost just two years after his appointment as a photography and drawing lecturer (1994-2000) at Michaelis, UCT.

Mthethwa's reputation on the international art scene, arguably, is owed to two events amongst others. One is the end of apartheid and the advent of democracy in

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<sup>256</sup> "Back in the 1980s, when he was a student at the Michaelis School of Fine Art at the University of Cape Town, and Crossroads was, in his words, "in fashion," he too went to create images in the famous squatter camp, like so many other artists and students at the time. Taking pictures and engaging with the affairs at Crossroads was a rite of passage for young artists and progressive activists of his generation. But in retrospect, after art school, and after apartheid, Mthethwa began to repudiate both the content and tone of this earlier type purely documentary work. The result did not diverge substantially from the theme of portraying the lives of the poor that had been a mainstay of committed photography in South Africa for more than a decade. Mthethwa claims to have found a novel approach to this subject by introducing color and an interactive element to his portraiture" according to John Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 263-264.

<sup>257</sup> Mthethwa explained: "When I studied at Michaelis they did not have color facilities. Then I won a Fulbright Scholarship and went to Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT)...At RIT we had 22 color darkrooms as well as nine black-and-white labs to ourselves. That was when I started to study color." Sean O'Toole "In Conversation with Zwelethu Mthethwa" in the *Artthrob*, No. 83, (2004), <http://www.artthrob.co.za/04july/news/mthethwa.html>

South Africa, a moment that witnesses the re-entry of South Africa into the global arena. This moment thus corresponds to “the status of South African photography,” which according to Martin Barnes “has been a timely coincidence that the post-apartheid period coincide with the rise to prominence that began in the 1990s, of photography in the international contemporary art world.”<sup>258</sup> Another, an important moment in South African art history is Enwezor’s *Second Johannesburg Biennale* in 1997, which extended the exhibition and writing of Mthethwa’s work from local to international venues, adding to his invitation for international events and his receiving awards.<sup>259</sup> Thus at the turn of the 1990s, Mthethwa’s international recognition became part of a broader discourse of African photographers whose

Photography has been a remarkably dynamic, creatively sophisticated, and artistically important component of African visual culture for over a century. But the recognition of African photographers and the unique visual language they have developed has come quite late. Until recently, works of African photography have not been examined within the history of photography or, for that matter, contemporary African art.<sup>260</sup>

Mthethwa is one of those African photographers whose recognition came at the closing of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty first century, the latter being a millennium considered to be “Africa’s turn”<sup>261</sup> and “African century”.<sup>262</sup> Both these notional dictums, on the one hand, challenge *Afro-pessimism*, that negative

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<sup>258</sup> Martin Barnes, “Foreword” in *Figures and Fictions: Contemporary South African Photography*, ed. Tamar Garb (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl Publishers, 2011), 8.

<sup>259</sup> “Mthethwa first came to international attention at the Second Johannesburg Biennale in 1997, where he exhibited early photographs from the series. “Bolstered by a growing curatorial interest in and market for contemporary photography from Africa, he quickly entered the global art circuit,” writes Paul Wilson, “The Photographic Object: Utopia in Zwelethu Mthethwa’s Interiors,” in *Photographies*, 8:1, (2015), 107.

<sup>260</sup> Okwui Enwezor, *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2006), 24.

<sup>261</sup> See Edward Miguel, *Africa’s Turn* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009).

<sup>262</sup> The notion of *African century* is attributed to the former president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, who uttered it in two of his speeches: “Thabo Mbeki’s Victory Speech” BBC News, 3 June 1999 in <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/monitoring/360349.stm> and “African Diaspora in the 21st Century: An Address by Thabo Mbeki, President of South Africa” at the University of West Indies, Kingston, Jamaica, 30 June 2003 in <http://www.nathanielturner.com/africandiaspora21stcentury.htm>.

portrayal of African subjects in representation<sup>263</sup> and the negative interpretation<sup>264</sup> of African lives and ideals or the negative codification of black subjects.<sup>265</sup> They are in fact captured in Thabo Mbeki's comment that, in spite of the difficulties, Africa "is continuing her rise from the ashes."<sup>266</sup> On the other, they reflectively espouse Afro-optimism, an undertaking that is akin to photographing black people in a human light, what could be called a "bearable lightness of being,"<sup>267</sup> that airy saturating human quality permeating Mthethwa's artworks described by Enwezor "as if the portrait placed a light of visibility around participants in the photographic project".<sup>268</sup>

### ***Mthethwa's Humanizing Mission***

Through his photographs (including drawings) Mthethwa claims to *restore the dignity and pride* of black people living in the informal settlements that exist on the margins of urban South Africa. Central in his pronouncements is to *show a humanness* of these marginalized black people and thus his undertaking is indicative of a self-appointed responsibility I call a humanizing mission, especially owing to "a presumption" that led Enwezor to consider him "a sort of white knight".<sup>269</sup> Simon Njami makes a similar observation but points to Mthethwa's implicated self-driving interest: "The job of critical review that he has initiated concerns none but himself,

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<sup>263</sup> See Okwui Enwezor, (2006), *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>264</sup> Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (California: University of California Press, 2001), 1.

<sup>265</sup> John Peffer, (2009), *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>266</sup> Thabo Mbeki's "I am an African" Speech delivered at the Progressive Governance Regional Conference, Sandton, 28th July 2005 <http://www.dirco.gov.za/docs/speeches/2005/mbek0802.htm>

<sup>267</sup> This is an inverse of Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984).

<sup>268</sup> Okwui Enwezor, (2010), *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-103.

like a personal therapy, a labor of asceticism and research.”<sup>270</sup> This conjecture is evident in many of Mthethwa’s comments, in particular noticing his seeming preoccupation with the use of photography as a curative device or redemptive instrument. Take for example his perception that “the end product of the camera”, which “is the photograph, offers a different aspect to healing. Doctors depend on the dispensary and pharmacist to heal patients, whereas the camera diagnoses the condition with a photograph and immediately begins the healing process.”<sup>271</sup>

It would seem Mthethwa’s dictum, given the timing, as it was uttered in the late 1990s, rhymed with the public discourse of healing the wounds inflicted by colonial apartheid,<sup>272</sup> a discourse facilitated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Among its objectives, the “TRC was established by legislation in 1995 to work on the country’s collective memory as a gateway to a better future”<sup>273</sup> in ways that establish a collectively shared history and envision a novel type of national civic. In its negotiation terms and desired ends both premised on and articulating the perspective of reconciliation, according to Chabani Manganyi, the TRC also “acted as a psychological bridge between a violent past and a post-authoritarian future”.<sup>274</sup> To achieve these objectives, particularly for the health of nation-building, the TRC encouraged and popularized acts of confession, forgiveness and healing – all expressed in what Daniel Herwitz dubs “Tutu’s

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<sup>270</sup> Simon Njami, “A contemporary myth” in *Zwelethu Mthethwa*, ed. Alberto Anaut (Madrid: PhotoBolsillo/LA FABRICA, 2011), no page number.

<sup>271</sup> Bongi Dhlomo, (1999), *Ibid.*, 65-79.

<sup>272</sup> This combination connotes extension of colonialism to apartheid and how the latter becomes an intensification and unapologetic epitome of the former in the process of modernization in South Africa.

<sup>273</sup> Chabani Manganyi (ed.), “Transitions”, in *On Becoming a Democracy: Transition and Transformation in South African Society* (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 2004), 8.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

language”, whose biblical or religious inflections are “a call upon the South African heritage of ubuntu because it is about people becoming people (becoming human) only through the care of the community as a whole”.<sup>275</sup> It is this “care” of the community in harmony with the rhetorical mission of nation-building, which Mthethwa supposedly exercises or advances in his artistic practice; albeit a restorative care decisively focusing on the disadvantaged black people trapped in the informal settlements on the margins of colonial modernity.

It should be noted that the focus of this chapter is on Mthethwa’s *proclamations* that frame and situate his photography within the discourse of (African) humanism, one that is partially in line with various inflections of scholars, intellectuals, activists and creative agents such as C.R.L. James, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, and Steve Biko. I say partially for the reason that Mthethwa’s project is not in the radical sense of Frantz Fanon’s call for decolonization in order to produce a new humanity.<sup>276</sup> Rather, it has resonance or speaks to some of the ideas/ideals espoused by James, Césaire, Fanon and Biko. In some sense, it should be understood in view of Colin Richards’s explanation, with reference to Said, of a humanism that “has a profound possibility for understanding the critical force of creativity and the work of the imagination in developing civil society”.<sup>277</sup> For Richards, characterization of such humanism involves “resistance, communality and

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<sup>275</sup> Daniel Herwitz *Race and Reconciliation: Essays from the New South Africa* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 17.

<sup>276</sup> “Decolonization, which sets to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder. But it cannot come as a result of magical practices, nor of a natural shock, nor of a friendly understanding... Decolonization is a meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature”, hence it is “marked by violence.” Frantz Fanon, (1963), *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>277</sup> Colin Richards, “Aftermath: Value and Violence in Contemporary South African Art,” in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, eds. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 264.

commitment”<sup>278</sup> all part of an ethical responsibility to be confronted in contemporary artistic practices by South African artists in their quest to “imagine new possibilities for human being, agency, and relentless in art.”<sup>279</sup> It is with this foregoing understanding I have sought to frame and read Mthethwa’s proclamations, albeit also thinking of his *humanness* with respect to James’ *critical humanism* articulated by Brian Alleyne as “centered on human needs and creative potential,” holding “fast to a vision of a better society” in which he “imagines people as makers of life projects, individually and collectively. It is a particular kind of social imaginary that works with the dual premises of agents and structures” as well as purchases from principles of “the ‘sociological imagination’ that it should enable the understanding of how the social and historical interact with the personal.” Of course, Alleyne notes too, that although James embraced humanism which is predicated on “a vision of history that encompassed all of humanity”, he and numerous detractors<sup>280</sup> have critiqued the distasteful features of “Eurocentric variants of humanism” including its “claims to speak on behalf of all people”, adding “to expose universalist rhetoric as a disguise for domination and exploitation”.<sup>281</sup>

### ***Dehumanization as Thingification***

It is such disguised domination and exploitation through European colonialism at whose central thesis was an epistemic violence Fanon revealed to be a

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<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 264.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 280.

<sup>280</sup> See for example Frantz Fanon, (1963), Ibid., Aimé Césaire, (2000), Ibid., and Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave, 2004).

<sup>281</sup> Brian A. Alleyne, “C.L.R. James, Critical Humanist” in *Beyond Boundaries: C.L.R. James and Postnational Studies*, ed. Christopher Gair (London: Pluto Press, 2006), 175-6.

dehumanizing pursuit by “a succession of negations of man and an avalanche of murders” of non-Europeans, particularly black subjects.<sup>282</sup> At the turn of the twentieth century when colonies were gaining independence from European imperialists, apartheid intensified and prolonged this dehumanization in South Africa. It is a dehumanization defined by Bernadette Atuahene as “the failure to recognize an individual or group’s humanness. When an individual or community’s humanity is invisible, they are no longer regarded as humans having the mental acumen, soul, or agency necessary to enter in to social contract.”<sup>283</sup> Another apt description of dehumanization is *thingification* argued by Césaire and *thingness* by Fanon, an objectifying reduction which articulates the ordeal black subjects have been subjected to endure through epistemic violence embedded in slavery, colonial and apartheid regimes. These regimes were instrumental in reducing black people to an *object*, a *thing* to be utilized and in service of white people instead of a human being who deserves freedom, self-hood and respect. Also to note is the emergence, or arrival of modernity that in South Africa and other colonies went hand-in-hand with these regimes, as exemplified by the rise of industrialization and urbanization along with the appropriation of land, material resources and human labor of the colonized subjects. African natives who opposed and resisted these regimes were penalized, persecuted and murdered in the course of colonial modernization which together with practices of slavery extended to apartheid’s complication of racial oppression, segregation through

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<sup>282</sup> Frantz Fanon, (1963), *Ibid.*, 312.

<sup>283</sup> Bernadette Atuahene, *We Want What’s Ours: Learning from South Africa’s Land Restitution Program* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 31.

the imposition of various Acts that included *Dompas*,<sup>284</sup> Separate Amenities Act,<sup>285</sup> Group Areas Act/Urban Areas Act,<sup>286</sup> and Immorality Act,<sup>287</sup> among others.

These acts legally enabled violation of black people and secured the confiscation of vast areas of their land which was effective in their *thingification*, as Atuahens asserts: “Law, not war, was the final means of conquest.”<sup>288</sup> It was a legalized dispossession that forced Africans to non-citizenship, non-existence and invisibility politically, socially, culturally, religiously and economically except as non-beings mainly necessary for cheap labor. Imposed laws also isolated and regulated movements of black people at the same time arresting their advancement as modern or cosmopolitan subjects, by forcing them to Bantustans or homelands in underdeveloped rural areas as well as conscripting them in townships and informal settlements in the peripheries of urban areas. Similar to “the Arab” that Fanon encountered in the French colonized Algeria, black South Africans became permanent aliens in their own country, lived in a state of absolute depersonalization as the hostile social structure wrote them out from where they belonged<sup>289</sup> under colonial apartheid conditions, not *estranged their humanity* as Homi Bhabha would say,<sup>290</sup> but rather dehumanized them. In fact, the establishment of these remote black parklands also became imperative as breeding of and reverses for cheap labor so required in cultivating and sustaining

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<sup>284</sup> Introduced in 1923, an internal passbook that black people had to carry all the time as proof of their permits in urban areas and cities reserved for white people. Without it black people would be arrested and sent to “homelands”, rural areas reserved for black natives.

<sup>285</sup> It was introduced in 1953 to legalize the inequalities between black and white people by segregating public facilities such as institutions, transportation, parks, toilets, and many other facilities.

<sup>286</sup> Introduced in 1950 to legalize segregation of South African geographical spaces and their uses according to racial arrangement. This was to specifically restrict urban areas and cities for white people by excluding and regulating their access to black people.

<sup>287</sup> It was introduced in 1927 and amended in 1950 to prohibit extramarital sex between white people and people of other races or non-white people. Its original purpose was to prohibited sex between black and white peoples.

<sup>288</sup> Bernadette Atuahene, (2014), *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>289</sup> Cited in Homi Bhabha, (1994), *Ibid.*, 40-41.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-42.

whiteness that dictated modern South Africa.

Mthethwa's project, in its ambition or modesty, efficacy or limit, apparently not only restores dignity but also participates in questioning and addressing consequences of the above noted dehumanization or *thingification* in democratic South Africa. The very process of dignity restoration is implicated in critical practices for engaging with consequences of dehumanizing regimes. Thus to *show humanness* of his selected black subjects should be read as both a political call and an act in addressing a problem, an address that, on one level, is a *utopian* desire in the sense Paul Wilson has read Mthethwa's interiors,<sup>291</sup> and, on another, a *desire* for respect and *recognition* in view of Fanon's argument:

As soon as I desire I am asking to be considered. I am not merely here-and-now, sealed into thingness. I am for somewhere else and for something else. I demand that notice be taken of my negating activity insofar as I pursue something other than life; insofar as I do battle for the creation of a human world—that is, of a world of reciprocal recognitions.<sup>292</sup>

At the core of Fanon's argument is a political call for liberation and transformation, not restricted to local but stretched to a worldwide reciprocal recognition that makes effectively possible what he meant by "new humanism". For such humanism to occur, Richards argues that contemporary South African art has to engage with the discourse of violence embodied in the history that continues to shape democratic South Africa.<sup>293</sup>

Mthethwa engages this humanism through life-size colorful photography,

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<sup>291</sup> "The utopian text or image in this model functions not as a concrete blueprint, but as a thought experiment in imagining a better world – one that inevitably, and necessarily, fails, thereby revealing the ideological limitations of the experiment itself. In juxtaposing permanence with ephemerality, the face-mounted photographs hold these conflicting utopian tendencies in a productive tension." Paul Wilson, (2015), *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>292</sup> Frantz Fanon, (1963), *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>293</sup> Colin Richards, (2008), *Ibid.*, 265.

especially his *Portraiture* series. His undertaking is neither to record nor document his sitters and their social spaces as *abject*<sup>294</sup> or *wretched of the earth*.<sup>295</sup> It is to humanize them in ways that also recall Steve Biko's articulation of *Black Consciousness*, which not only "seeks to give positivity in the outlook of the black people to their problems"<sup>296</sup> but most importantly as "a quest for true humanity... to bestow upon South Africa the greatest possible gift—a more human face".<sup>297</sup> What Biko called for regarding such "a gift", according to Andries Oliphant, was "not something to receive but something to give" in the fight "not only for freedom from oppression...but also for...a greater humanization of South Africa".<sup>298</sup> It should be noted that, if such desire for "true humanity" is to be effectively meaningful, what needs to be factored in also is Fanon's urge for the *re-humanization* of humanity from which black Africans have been both dehumanized and excluded.<sup>299</sup> This is particularly so with regard to Oliphant's explication of who Biko had in mind in using "the metaphorical phrase "human face": "African".<sup>300</sup> Thus "Biko's exhortation draws its energy from the positive potential of the oppressed [Africans] not only to liberate themselves but also to effect a fundamental transformation in the world in which they live".<sup>301</sup> It is with this preceding understanding of Biko's philosophical thoughts I want to consider Mthethwa's humanizing mission, and to do so especially with reference to his

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<sup>294</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 72.

<sup>295</sup> Frantz Fanon, (1963), *Ibid.*

<sup>296</sup> Steve Biko, (2004), *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>298</sup> Andries Oliphant, "A Human Face: Biko's Conception of African Culture and Humanism" in *Biko Lives! Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko*, eds. Andile Mngxitama, Amanda Alexander and Nigel C. Gibson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2008), 214.

<sup>299</sup> Frantz Fanon, (1963), *Ibid.*, 314.

<sup>300</sup> Andries Oliphant, (2008), *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

proclamation that “What I choose to show is that people living in those not very good looking conditions have the energy to turn that around and make their homes aesthetically pleasing.”<sup>302</sup>

### ***African Humanism***

The emphasis should be on the assertion that Mthethwa not merely shows the marginalized black people’s creative energy in making their homes aesthetically pleasing. He also appropriates their creativity in the Biko sense of “drawing energy from the positive potential of the oppressed” in order to forward visual representations that posit a shift of perceptions about marginalized subjects, particularly those perceptions that regard them as the *wretched of the earth*. It is in this light that Mthethwa’s project further points to Biko’s quest and vision in the motion of *not* (only) *receiving but* (also) *giving* in the creative form of restoring dignity and pride of black subjects through color photography. It is a benevolent motion, one predicated on reciprocal exchanges between the photographed and photographer. Such motion, according Oliphant, is a “central aspect of Biko’s political philosophy [which] is based on a cultural specific humanist concept” and “can be described as a form of African humanism.”<sup>303</sup> Through the critical lens of Black Consciousness, Biko has uncompromisingly argued that black people should focus on themselves instead of unnecessarily concerning themselves with white people,<sup>304</sup> and supposedly no wonder Mthethwa exclusively photographs black subjects, given that hardly any white

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<sup>302</sup> Lauren Clifford-Holmes, “Mthethwa’s balancing act” in *Mail & Guardian*, April 108, 2010, 7.

<sup>303</sup> Andries Oliphant, (2008), *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>304</sup> Steve Biko (2004), *Ibid.* 96. Yet this argument should not imply a sense of disinterest or non-attention to white people, given that Biko was very critical of whites and whiteness, especially recalling his renowned biting critique of racial apartheid and white liberals, in fact whiteness, in South Africa.

subjects feature in his photographic oeuvre! Biko's primary concern was focusing energies and resources to address the plight of black people, in this way performing Black Consciousness' self-reflection, "an inward-looking process" in order to be equipped for an outward-looking and engaging with a brutal anti-black society in ways that "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 country of his birth."<sup>305</sup>

Biko's African humanism is grounded on some "fundamental aspects" that constitute African culture.<sup>306</sup> Its concern is a society in which human-centeredness is emphasized instead of "a formation in the service of an economic idea or some other nonhuman goal".<sup>307</sup> Thus it is always "incumbent on Africans to draw on this human-centered culture in their struggle for liberation from colonialism, [apartheid,] inequality, and oppression".<sup>308</sup> The appeal to human-centeredness should not merely imply indifference to the socio-economy which is central in structurally constraining or enabling emancipatory means and possibilities for a sound African livelihood. Rather it should be taken to mean an African sensibility based not on economic ideas rooted in greed and selfishness, whose consequences are oppression and exploitation instead of communalism, sharing and caring. Another consideration is that, the centeredness of humans in African culture might be perceived in view of the

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>306</sup> For which Oliphant provides a useful summary: "Human-centeredness; intimacy, trust; belief in the inherent goodness of human beings; communalism and cooperativeness; caring and sharing; collective ownership; a monotheistic religion with a benevolent God and ancestral deities; a situation-experiencing mind-set; communicativeness; and a closeness to nature" Andries Oliphant, (2008), Ibid., 217.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid., 227.

prominence of the human figure in the artworks of most visual artists in South Africa, especially black artists who have not explored and invested *much* in non-figurative or abstract works of art. Another plausible explanation might depend on the argument that art during apartheid was mainly responsive to human experiences, in particular the violation of the black body. In fact, the struggle against apartheid, a struggle in which art also participated, was about freeing the oppressed black body; thus its dominance in artistic representations should not be surprising. Njabulo Ndebele asserts this point, arguing that “the ordinary daily lives of people should be the direct focus of political interest because they constitute the very content of the struggle, for the struggle involves people not abstraction.”<sup>309</sup> Photographic images have been part of such creative representations including cultural practices and political acts that centered the human figure, adding to the portraiture genre which is always already known for its “depiction of the figure, a tradition which Olu Oguibe argues is the singular, most important sustaining framework for photography in Africa”.<sup>310</sup>

Mthethwa’s photography is part of this long-standing tradition of figurative depiction in African photography and (adding to its link to Biko’s notion of human-centeredness) lends itself to another African concept: *ubuntu*,<sup>311</sup> an Nguni expression that means *umuntu ngumntu ngabantu* and its translation to English is “people are people because of other people”. This understanding is indebted to Mthethwa’s humanizing mission, which according to Enwezor is a “reflection on the relationship

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<sup>309</sup> Njabulo Ndebele, (2006), *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>310</sup> Cited in Darren Newbury, (2013), *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>311</sup> “A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened when others are able and good, for he [or] she ... belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than they are.” Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*. New York: Doubleday 1999), 33.

between photography and humanism” and thus the “recognition embodied in *ubuntu*” is not dissimilar to the European “idea of ‘being for the other’”.<sup>312</sup> I would also add, the idea of (the self) *being with others*. In some sense, *ubuntu*<sup>313</sup> is articulated not only through photographing his sitters but in the relations Mthethwa develops with the people he photographs as well. Working with them as participating *collaborators* instead of being mere objects or objectified subjects is another form of enacting *ubuntu*, as Mthethwa explains

I do engage in discussions with the people I photograph. Basically I explain to them what I am doing. I clarify the historical and social context of the project before taking the picture. For them to believe in the project I always promise to bring them the photographs, and I do. This enhances my work relationship with them, and I feel that once this relationship is established, they stop being “subjects” and become collaborators on the project.<sup>314</sup>

In addition, Mthethwa wants “people to be comfortable with how they are seen” and in return make himself “feel very comfortable when people are happy with how I have portrayed them”.<sup>315</sup> It is this negotiated relationship and the context in which it takes place that we are able to confer the applicability of the philosophical ideas of *being with and for others* in Mthethwa’s humanizing mission. This is evidently reiterated in his comment: “Through understanding the people with whom I have interacted I have found it possible to understand myself and the work I am doing. By empowering other people with photographs, I am empowered as a photographer.”<sup>316</sup> Such an undertaking, therefore, fosters another reading that Mthethwa decisively defies

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<sup>312</sup> Okwui Enwezor, (2010), *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>313</sup> “We need to be critical and cautious in our appreciation of this term; it can and has been manipulated to service just about any purpose: ahistorical, ‘colonial’ nostalgias, suspect solidarity politics, currents of cultural correctness, and overheated fantasies about free market. The term is a magnet to the triumphalist hubris we often find in ideas of an African Renaissance, of ‘Rainbowism’ and, indeed, democracy.” Colin Richards, (2008), *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>314</sup> Bongi Dhlomo, (1999), *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>315</sup> Sean O’Toole, (2004), *Ibid.*

<sup>316</sup> Bongi Dhlomo, (1999), *Ibid.*, 79.

treating them in the problematic way of ethnographic and anthropological representations.<sup>317</sup>

### ***Interior Portraits: Color as Dignifying Vehicle***

Color is a central device for Mthethwa's humanizing mission as it enables him to explore what Godby considers to be "individual human values" and "sufficient drama"<sup>318</sup> and according to Simon Njami "an expression of intimacy with the soul" and "represents light".<sup>319</sup> To Tamar Garb, it "confers a three-dimensional complexity on lived experience...and asserting the presence and contemporaneity of the scene"<sup>320</sup> whereas for Annie Coombes it "allows an element of agency not usually present in the more familiar documentary photographs of township life".<sup>321</sup> The importance of color in Mthethwa's photography, a visual property he himself holds to be "a dignifying vehicle"<sup>322</sup> that seems impossible through "black-and-white reportage [which] was itself complicit in denying inhabitants of settlements like Crossroads any claim to subjecthood".<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> For Enwezor, Mthethwa's use of "color" "allegedly contests the anthropological tendency of reportage and restores its subjects to their position as people with proper names and proper places—that is to say, as humans" Enwezor, (2010), *Ibid.*, 102. See also critical arguments on ethnography, documentary and portraiture as "three dominant categories of representation" in Tamar Garb (ed.), (2011), *Ibid.*, 11-25.

<sup>318</sup> Michael Godby, "The Drama of Color: Zwelethu Mthethwa's Portraits", *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, No. 10 (1999), 47-48.

<sup>319</sup> Simon Njami, (2011), *Ibid.*

<sup>320</sup> Tamar Garb, (2011), *Ibid.* 60.

<sup>321</sup> Annie E. Coombes, *History after Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 190.

<sup>322</sup> It is worth noting that color for Mthethwa's use has neither symbolic meaning nor a reference to anything other than being a vehicle in dignifying marginalized black subjects. It is rather the aesthetic quality of color I consider tuned with Mthethwa's mission. This comprehension has to do with some of the riveting effects of color: its appealing value with regard to the arresting impact it commands on the eyesight, the visual lyricism and poeticism it exudes; the seductive qualities and possible reproduction of (an enhanced, embellished or a distorted) reality in (photographic) representation.

<sup>323</sup> Enwezor, (2010), *Ibid.*, 104.

The aesthetic effect of color (including scale) in Mthethwa's photographs is profound in rendering the representation of his black subjects and their personal spaces in meaningful ways, as could be observed in his series of *Interior Portraits* (1995-2005), especially earlier ones taken from the informal settlement of Crossroads (1996), hence commonly referred to by the same name. These *Interior Portraits* are known for their details, particularly the astonishing effervescent colors and information dazzling the walls notable for their striking posters, packaging papers, advertising pages from magazines and newspapers all functioning as surface decorative wallpapers including table cloths and bedcovers that make these interiors spatially airy and unique. It is these wallpapers, in the form of recycled commercial advertisements ranging from food, alcohol to soaps and related consumer products, which give these interiors aesthetic appeal and inimitable significance. Lauri Firstenberg perceives them as "repetitive patterns of surplus...which create a kind of Warholian grid as a backdrop"<sup>324</sup> against which we observe assertive if not stoic stances of the shack dwellers, whose facial expressions are often framed and captured in zealous and intense seriousness, as they look straight at the viewer in various photographs. These shack dwellers are photographed either standing tall or sitting down or reclining on tools, sofas and beds.

These details are visual traits or representational characteristics that render these *Interior Portraits* distinct and pictorially striking not only at the level of aesthetics but also the meaning Mthethwa explores, adding to the politics on socio-economic conditions that give rise to and structure the livelihood or atrocity of these

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<sup>324</sup> Lauri Firstenberg, (2001), *Ibid.*, 179.

shacks and their inhabitants' subject-hood and agency. In fact, they have established Mthethwa's photographic signature and brought to view his pronouncements to illuminate the humanity of shack dwellers, by treating them as individual human beings with values, dignity and pride. Thus he has decisively photographed each individual, at times in pairs, other times family groups within the comfort of their own spaces, spaces they have constructed using materials such as corrugated iron, wood, cardboard, and plastic sheets, including packaging papers, printed posters, pages from magazines and newspapers that decorate the interior walls. The significance of the creative capacity or agency of these shack dwellers in recycling these "ready-mades",<sup>325</sup> which are in fact discards or trash whose utility cannot be underestimated noting Coombes's reading that Mthethwa's "photographs clearly embrace the creative ways in which individuals extend the limited means at their disposal for expressing individuality (limited through either the restrictions of social control or economic constraints) by projecting an ideal personality via the small spaces that do remain in their control—in this case their shacks".<sup>326</sup>

Similar interior details and representational strategies are evident in *Pregnant Woman* and *Mother and Child* (both dating to 2000), a series of photographs capturing a black woman during her pregnancy and just after giving birth in her shack dwelling, notable for its architectural interior of deep luminous blue colored walls in the front or reception room and advertisement wallpapers in the bedroom. In the *Pregnant Woman* series, she is either seated in a reclining position or lying down in ways that suggest a sense of discomfort or tiredness owing to many months of carrying a growing baby

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<sup>325</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>326</sup> Annie Coombes, (2003), Ibid., 189.

ready to be born anytime by the look of her ballooned stomach size (See Figures 4-5). In *Mother and Child*, she is holding, breastfeeding or tending her baby, either seated on the bed or floor, or standing somewhere in the room (See Figures 6-7). There are moments in both series when she is looking directly at the camera, with a sort of penetrating stare that is suggestive of returning the gaze as if to defy any sympathy the viewer might have toward her and the baby. The hanging clothes from the hanger on the walls and suitcases piled up to make up for a bedside table with books on top indicates a home with no closet or cupboard. Hers is a house of make-do, a dwelling indicative of improvisation in the socio-economic circumstances that black people are deprived of proper housing. Yet, for Coombes such photography of Mthethwa makes it “possible to argue that his subjects are represented in such a way that they ‘own’ their own space. They are neither defined primarily as the ‘victims’ of apartheid, nor are they necessarily oblivious to the limitations of their environment.”<sup>327</sup>

There is another reading of Mthethwa’s photographs. With regard to the make-do in the organizational set-up of this woman’s house in which she wrestles with her pregnancy and nursing of her infant whose fate is precariously unknown and especially observing some of her facial and bodily expressions in most of the photographs, they do not indicate a sense of contentment. While Mthethwa’s pronouncements are assertive about restoring dignity, visually evident in some of the photographs. This brings something else to the fore: detectable is not just the dignity of the person/sitter but her enduring experience, adding to the aesthetic attraction of the architectural interiors made out of the colorfully dazzling walls. In this regard, it

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<sup>327</sup> Ibid., 190.

seems that what is at stake is not the actual persons but their energy that Mthethwa appropriates and brings to our viewing attention, as he expounds: “The portraits aren’t political images. I’m looking at the personal, aesthetic spaces around individuals. I wanted to capture the colors and designs that signify different economic positions, different backgrounds.”<sup>328</sup> Aside from his questionable statement that *the portraits aren’t political images*,<sup>329</sup> what is poignantly revealing is the overwhelming, if not seductive, *effect* of the interior *colors* and *designs* which tend to overshadow the human figures.

As in many of Mthethwa’s *Interior Portraits*, observed here is a sense of duality. On one level, the vivid decorative surface of the vibrant color wallpapers creates a spatial airiness, somehow animating the curbing size of these small dwellings at the same time permeating them with a countenance of conversational alluring verve or dynamism. On another level, there is an alarming strain between these very dramatically vivid colorful wallpapers and the sitters, a tension resulting from the overwhelming effect of the advertised commercial products. As Godby argues, “On one register, the commercial origin of much of the colorful imagery communicates a peculiar tension between the individuality of the portrait subject and the mass market of the consumer products; and, on another, the dramatic brilliance of the color seems to explode the claustrophobic dimensions of these tiny domestic spaces with an

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<sup>328</sup> Zwelethu Mthethwa, Interview with Rory Bester in *Democracy’s Images* (Umeå, Sweden: BildMuseet, 1998), 82-83.

<sup>329</sup> Simon Njami contradicts this statement in arguing that Mthethwa’s “approach is eminently political, even if the author would deny it. It is political in the sense that it questions society, forcing us to focus on something which we do not necessarily wish to see. Because seeing is knowing, and knowledge implies that he who knows takes on some responsibility, since when that condition is examined, a moment of awareness is reached.” Simon Njami, (2011), *Ibid.*

expression of transcendent and irresistible energy.”<sup>330</sup>

### ***Interior Portraits: Towards a Critical Reception***

Despite the redemptive value and affect of Mthethwa’s work, and more specifically his interior portraits among other series, his overall oeuvre has been met with some scepticism and discerning critique. The examples are plenty. For Godby, Mthethwa’s *Interior Portraits* are riddled with “blatant consumerism of the imagery [which] provides a disconcerting tension with the extreme poverty of the households”<sup>331</sup> whereas Coombes reads Mthethwa’s work to “effectively aestheticize poverty”.<sup>332</sup> Following on these critical observations, John Peffer poses an indicting question as to “where the “dignity” is in photographs” whose “color takes over the image, almost obscuring the human figure at its center...also visually overwhelmed by the outward signs of the world of fungible goods,”<sup>333</sup> Enwezor echoes such criticisms in arguing about a figure that is not “the most prominent elements of the photograph”, hence “the image is as much a study of the interior architecture as it is a portrait of its occupant.”<sup>334</sup> Arguably, criticisms by Coombes and Enwezor would seem justified by Wilson’s encounter with Mthethwa’s photographs in an exhibition space: “Having previously seen the photographs only as printed or digital reproductions, what surprised me in the exhibition at the Studio Museum was how decisively my interest shifted from human figures to domestic interiors.”<sup>335</sup> There is also Firstenberg’s take

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<sup>330</sup> Michael Godby, (1999), *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>332</sup> Annie Coombes, (2003), *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>333</sup> John Peffer, (2009), *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>334</sup> Okwui Enwezor, (2010), *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>335</sup> Paul Wilson, (2015), *Ibid.*, 108.

that, “In their high gloss, massive format, and lamination, Mthethwa’s color photographs have now taken new form for the purposes of the international market, collapsing back into spectacle.”<sup>336</sup> And Godby considers such spectacle to have the potential to “erase any interest in the identity of the sitter” as well as ‘collapse’ Mthethwa’s photographs to the status of mute aesthetic form...<sup>337</sup> This indictment is also evident in Emily Speers Mears’s comments that Mthethwa’s photographs “are striking social commentary and negotiate successfully the thin line between representation and exploitation”.<sup>338</sup>

Although Enwezor shares some of the foregoing criticisms, in particular the questionable color aesthetic in some of Mthethwa’s photographs, he also argues for an *appreciation* of “Mthethwa’s commitment to color” which makes the interior “settings explode in a kind of candy-tinted jubilation”, an effect that would be impossible in black and white as the scenes would be “more dingy and despairing, more susceptible to reportorial disjuncture.”<sup>339</sup> In countering Firstenberg’s critique of Mthethwa’s *high gloss, massive format and lamination color photographs*, Wilson argues for the importance of considering them in terms of “a mounting process favoured in the globalizing art world that both amplifies color and promises to eliminate the distance between viewer and subjects”.<sup>340</sup> Wilson’s argument points to an important element in regards to Mthethwa’s relation with his sitters, a relation that features strongly as an integral aspect of his humanizing mission.

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<sup>336</sup> Lauri Firstenberg, (2001), *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>337</sup> Michael Godby, (1999), *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>338</sup> Emily Speers Mears, “Zwelethu Mthethwa” in *Artthrob*, No. 67, 2003, <http://www.artthrob.co.za/03mar/reviews/shainman.html>

<sup>339</sup> Okwui Enwezor, (2010), *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>340</sup> Paul Wilson, (2015), *Ibid.*, 108.

### ***Individuality and Subjectivity***

It is necessary to discuss the relation between viewer and subject in order to illuminate the selfhood, individuality and subjectivity, of the sitters, as well as Mthethwa's achieved visual rendition of dignity. A powerful image that seems to capture Mthethwa's proclamation, especially bringing into view the sitters' sense of selfhood is *Untitled*, from the *Interior Portraits* (2001), featuring two Xhosa male graduate initiates, an image used for the cover of his book *Zwelethu Mthethwa* (2010).<sup>341</sup> In this photograph (See Figure 8), Mthethwa manages to highlight the individuality and subject-hood of his subjects. Occupying the center of the pictorial domain are two young men seated on a wooden bench, against a flat cream-like wall made of Masonite boards, an architectural interior without distractive color decorative wallpapers. These men are in a house with minimum furniture, except for a green wooden cupboard on top of which are two cooking pots and a kettle on a primus stove. These domestic utensils make a curious still life, and together with the men's poses show a careful compositional organization. It is a neatly orchestrated photographic portrait, so graceful the interior setting also observing the spotless clean house and its diamond-patterned white and light-brownish linoleum floor tiles. It is an uncluttered home even with the small vegetable cardboard box behind the young men and the slightly showing butternuts and some orange-red vegetables behind the green cupboard. The reflected light on the shiny silver kettle and pots re-inscribes the cleanliness of the house, notwithstanding to be speaking to Mthethwa's objective to

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<sup>341</sup> Isolde Brielmaier (eds.), *Zwelethu Mthethwa* (New York: Aperture, 2010).

show the best positive sides of his sitters: to visually capture and illuminate their creative maneuvers and applied energy in rendering *their homes aesthetically pleasing* in spite of the appalling socio-economic conditions of the informal settlements.

Such pleasing aesthetic and human respectability are most evident in the young men, who are dressed in semi-formal but elegant attire: check jackets, pale khaki trousers, button-down shirts, dark shoes and porkpie hats. The colors of their attire are limited to kaki, brown and soft olive green, dark shoes all matching with the flat background wall and diamond-patterned floor. The young men's attire signals their new manhood status, as fresh graduates from a Xhosa initiation ritual, having been transformed from boys to men. These new men look handsome as they stare directly at the camera lens with which Mthethwa manages to frame and capture them in the dignified sense they are and expected to be as ritualized man in terms of Xhosa culture. As new man, they have to be elegant: dress neat and smart, exhibit manners of gentlemen and maturity in ways that distinguish them from boys.<sup>342</sup> Their outlooks and expressions are constitutive elements that signify the dignity and pride Mthethwa is after in his photography.

As in most of Mthethwa's photographs, there is also the palpable composure and assertiveness of the photographed individuals who look directly at the camera and in so doing not only stare back at the photographer but also return back the viewer's gaze. At play here is a three-way exchange: the look of the photographer, through his lens, at the photographed; the looking back of the photographed at the photographer's

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<sup>342</sup> For a brief explanation on the Clothes of Xhosa Graduate Initiates, see Lin Simpson, "Clothes that make the man" in *Times Live: Sunday Times*, April 11, 2010, <http://www.timeslive.co.za/lifestyle/2010/04/11/clothes-that-make-the-man>

camera lens; which by extension when the image of the photographed is on display another exchange takes place between the photographed and the viewer.<sup>343</sup> Of note is Mthethwa's orchestration of this reciprocal exchange between these three parties, which is a deliberate procedure necessary in producing sound "portraiture", which according to Godby, "inevitably involves some amount of stage-management...and engagement between subject and photographer".<sup>344</sup> It is awareness possible to decipher, noting Mthethwa's explanation about the *politics of the gaze, psychology of interaction* and *scale* of the photographs:

And with most of the portraits I prefer it if people look at the camera because then they are returning the gaze. That for me comes from the fact that in South Africa the gaze is a political thing. In South Africa, where black people were seen as non-citizens, they were not allowed to return the gaze, but for me when they stare back it's like they are saying, "I am here, I have the power to look at you. You are looking at me, but I am also looking at you." For me, that's the whole psychology of the interaction and if the photographs are small the subjects will be seen as objects because of the scale, but when they are big they match your size and they have presence. So it's very important to show those photographs big. It's crucial for the encounter. The other thing is that...I find large-scale photography very intimate because you can enter the photograph, so you can see the details, you can become part the image.<sup>345</sup>

It is through these carefully factored elements of interaction in the negotiated relationship between the photographed and photographer that Mthethwa brings to effect in unearthing the individuality and subjectivity of his sitters. Paul Wilson's reading of the "face-mounting" of Mthethwa's photographs augment the foregoing, particularly illuminating on how it "amplifies that potential" and "complicating the experience of intimacy" during "a fraught visual encounter between the viewer and

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<sup>343</sup> In this exchange, the subjection of the photographed by the photographer is so important to note. It is a subjection that both invites and prepares the photographed to participate in the construction of his or her narrative which makes up the final pictured scene, what also becomes Mthethwa's photographic representation of the black subject in the margins. This preparedness to be photographed is what Roland Barthes explains as the constitution of the (to be) photographed self in the process of posing and instantaneously making another body available for his/herself, as such transforming her/himself *in advance into an image*. "This transformation is an active one" given that "the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it". Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 10.

<sup>344</sup> Michael Godby, (2011), *Ibid.*, 14-15.

<sup>345</sup> Cited in Tamar Garb, (2011), *Ibid.*, 286.

subject”.<sup>346</sup> Even a closer inspection into the sitters’ poses and gestures should point out a sense of comfort, yet firm demeanors, as observed in the Xhosa male graduate initiates.

*The Brave Ones* (2011) is another series that attests to Mthethwa’s accomplished dignifying photography, a series whose setting is not the informal settlement marked by neither questions of socio-economic and poverty nor lack and poor housing for black people (See Figures 9-11). Set up in a lush open landscape, this photographic series focuses on religious identity and liminal experiences of young male devotees belonging to the Nazareth Baptist African Church, popularly known as Shembe. The Shembe Church is part of a complex religious tradition of African Independent Churches that appropriated and reformulated western Christianity with African forms of worshipping. It is a somewhat religious mixture of African and Christian rituals but practiced in African terms that are concerned with healing, socio-cultural guidance and uniting various elements of living and ancestral worlds.<sup>347</sup> The ceremony Mthethwa has observed is an important moment in the lives of these young devotees who, together with other members, come together to perform their invented religious mixture of African and Christian rituals, a mixture also signified by their attire.

Besides spiritual and curative customs, the mission of such Africanized Christianity is identity construction and reaffirmation, marking and guiding various transitions in the evolution of African men and women. Of note in Mthethwa’s

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<sup>346</sup> Paul Wilson, (2015), *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>347</sup> Nomboniso Gasa, “Reading Dress, Worship, Ritual and Divines in Zwelethu Mthethwa’s Shembe Series” in *Zwelethu Mthethwa: New Works* (Cape Town: iArt Gallery 2011), 21-24.

photographic series of Shembe is the creative ways in which he both exposes and establishes the context wherein multi-layered identities are enacted or manifest, particularly, in the young men's curious uniform. He does so by photographing the young men who, in their quasi-feminine uniform, pose in fascinating manners that gesture towards masculine and feminine identities. What is profound about such identities is their multiplicity, flexibility and instability all revealed through the playfulness and the performative, as well as coy, postures of the young men. These young devotees visually exude a beautiful sense of affection and gentleness in their postures, some holding of hands and wrapping arms around each other's shoulders whilst in others leaning, resting and balancing on each other, even with others on tree trunks. There is also tenderly closeness between those who are photographed in pairs, as if enacting brotherly love or masculine interconnection. In this way, Mthethwa has managed to bring forth a sense of intimate relationship amongst these young male devotees, as Mthethwa tells: "I'm not interested in recording the ritual, I'm interested in the chemistry between two individuals, that's what it is for me."<sup>348</sup> Their poses and postures oscillate between masculine and feminine demeanors, at the same time suggestive of sexual connections amongst the young men. Perhaps they embody both genders (including sexual) identifications, which are also denoted by their multilayered uniform of the pleated skirts, button-down shirts, bow ties, boots, athletic socks, decorative berets and helmets worn by the young men. The multilayered uniform is indicative of a combination of influences that point to colonial-missionary and modern sensibilities that in their contemporary aesthetics are at once religious

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<sup>348</sup> Tamar Garb, (2011), *Ibid.*, 286.

whilst also cultural dress-costumes for a distinct Shembe identity. In such a contemporary hybrid dress code, these young devotees are both marked individually and collectively in their church membership.

Of note, Mthethwa's interests lie primarily in the young male devotees that he arranges in ways that remove them from the actual church ceremonial ritual to an isolated wilderness, in this way locating them within lush scenery which visually presents itself in the realm of pictorial landscape genre. In fact, a staged setting is established in which these young devotees, like most if not all his sitters, are supposed to become themselves, performing with and for the photographer in the process of constructing and producing them as subjects of his representation. Away from the rest of the *Shembe* congregation, the young followers are rendered available for Mthethwa's undertaking, the core of which seems to reside in their uniform and the cultural and religious histories and symbolism they carry more than the Shembe religious institute and practices. As Mthethwa explains:

I am not interested in the ritual. What fascinates me is how and why people clothe themselves in these different ways. That is why the setting is a forest, the landscape, because I love the KwaZulu-Natal landscape, I love the greens, I love the hills. For me, by separating them from the ritual and anchoring them in that landscape, I am telling you a story. I am not interested in the church per se... For me the young men were just amazing because of the clash of identities. You know, where does the bow tie come from, why are they wearing bow ties during the day? Because in the western tradition it's considered formal evening attire. Why do their shirts look like women's blouses with frills? Where do the pith fit in – do they still signify a soldier's uniform? It's fascinating.<sup>349</sup>

Towards conclusion I want to discuss Mthethwa's *Common Ground* series (2008), which like the series *Quartz Miners* (2007-2008), *Coal Miners* (2008) and *Contemporary Gladiators* (2008) includes photographs taken from outside South

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<sup>349</sup> Ibid., 285-6.

Africa. *Common Ground* comprises photographs dealing with the remnants of the Hurricane Katrina disaster in New Orleans, Louisiana and (his earlier) photographs of wildfire disasters in informal settlements in Langa and Khayelitsha townships, Cape Town (See Figures 12-14). In this regard, the *Common Ground* series is a dialogical project between the United States of America and South Africa as it assembles together photographs of somewhat similar disasters of marginalized black communities: images of wreckages of houses and homes destroyed by wildfires in Cape Town and floods in New Orleans. In this dialogue, Mthethwa undertook “to create a bridge of communality between two different, but also similar spaces and circumstances”<sup>350</sup> not limited to natural disasters given their associated factors such as socio-economic difficulties so distressing for black people. It is with this understanding I share Enwezor’s reading that “*Common Ground* examines the visual logic of bricolage and the aesthetic of fragmentation as each relates to the architecture of informal settlements”<sup>351</sup> and more so Simon Njami’s take as “a testimony of savage urbanization, where walls and windows are material, and annihilates poverty and precariousness”.<sup>352</sup> These readings are concerned with the socio-economic circumstances detrimental to the wellness and livelihood of people subjected to survive in the periphery of modern society which is structurally under the spell of global capitalism, an economic system which has proved most unfair if not vicious towards the black majority.

In *Common Ground*, Mthethwa seems to have either suspended his driving

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<sup>350</sup> “A Conversation with Zwelethu Mthethwa,” in Isolde Brielmaier (ed.), (2010), *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>351</sup> Okwui Enwezor, (2010), *Ibid.*, 108-9.

<sup>352</sup> Simon Njami, (2011), *Ibid.*

quest regarding dignity if or opted to probe the dark circumstances that deprive the possible flourishing of dignity and pride of people living under despicable socio-economic conditions. It would seem he is after the context, one that is marked by disaster and distress, adding to the disorientating results of less if not zero caring for the black poor whose engineered distasteful sense of being or non-being is metaphorically represented by or inferred in the rust, damaged and deterioration of the houses, wreckages and homes from heavy floods and wildfires.

To photographically engage the wreckages of post-Katrina and Langa-Khayelitsha townships-squatter-camps, for Mthethwa, is to both literally and metaphorically examine consequences of the disasters that are cancerous to the post-colonial polity. It is to invite reflective investigations on the threatening conditions that make possible such disorientating disasters, which are mostly if not the only common recurrences in black communities, for instance. In fact, such disasters remind us of the precariousness of the post-colonial, post-modern or post-apartheid moments, at the same time reinstating the unpredictable yet most certainly dis-easing time in which we are living.

Of interest, in viewing *Common Ground*, is noticing the minimal presence or rather absence of inhabitants of these destroyed communities, what could be considered either the non-apparent presence or invisible presence of black experiences. With this reading, it is therefore necessary to guard against reduction of the photographs to a sole focus on the wreckages of the post-events, in this line of thinking restrict our engagements with aesthetic formalities or visual properties of photography that yield no insight on the human experiences. This argument is

indebted to the knowledge that Mthethwa's driving quest is the humanness of black subjects. It is an argument not averse to the reading of Mthethwa's photographic language, aesthetics and formal properties, all of which are important artistic qualities that in fact have established both the distinctiveness and significance of his photography. Moreover, the *Common Ground* series is imaginatively reflective and indicative of conceptual principles in the way in which he has treated its compositions and spatial planes, negated conventional perspectives as well as circumventing depths and focal points. A closer look also reveals how the photographic contents tend to reside on the surface, existing on the horizontal foreground of the picture plane; a visual treatment Enwezor reads as uncertainty or ambivalence:

By eschewing any focal point, he consciously rendered these images ambiguous. The fact that we are unable to fix the images to a specific space heightens the ambiguity; they collapse into each other, and seem to explore the same pictorial continuum of urban decay. Perhaps this is the point: combining images of spaces occupied by marginalized Africans in South Africa and those of the neglected neighborhoods occupied by Africans in South Africa-Americans in post-Katrina New Orleans drives our attention here to concerns for how black life tends to fare under situations of social inequality.<sup>353</sup>

Another reading to make regarding the invisible presence of black people in the *Common Ground* photographs is the notion of erasure, not in the restricted literal but open metaphoric sense of thinking about the wildfires *burning down* and floods *wiping out* black communities, not to mention *death*, that ultimate and permanent termination of (black) lives in the world. Thus, erasure, in this context, should also be considered with an understanding of anti-black-lives in view of the workings of non-caring institutions that structurally organize and impose not only racial inequalities but also crippling social systems that severely affect the black majority in a world whose socio-

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<sup>353</sup> Okwui Enwezor, (2010), *Ibid.*, 108-9.

economic infrastructure is a monopoly of white people, a monopoly so effective in disenfranchising black people living in communities such as those destroyed by the wildfires in Cape Town and floods in New Orleans. It is this very white monopoly in the form of pervasive imperial capitalism that exploits, injures and kills black people, most of whom constitute the majority surviving below quality life expectations, are unemployed and vulnerable, cheap laborers in countries such as South Africa and the United States of America.<sup>354</sup>

This critical thinking about the socio-political context should apply also to Mthethwa's other photographic series that capture the brick and mine workers as well as children scavenging discards in dumping sites. Referred to here are *Quartz Miners* (See Figure 15), *Coal Miners* (See Figure 16-17) and *Contemporary Gladiators* (See Figures 18-19), some of which Enwezor critiques<sup>355</sup> but Njami reveres.<sup>356</sup> In these photographs evident, as is the case with the *Common Ground* series, is not so much restoration of dignity and pride, it is more so a critical commentary on the despicable being-ness of these black subjects that are not by choice but dictating economic circumstances or systems forced to labor: black men in mineral and coal miners, black women breaking stones and children in dump heaps searching for recyclable discards

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<sup>354</sup> Some are the black people Mthethwa has committed to photograph, of course decisively opting, as his proclamations inform us, not to focus on the gruesome side of their experiences and socio-economic conditions in which they live. It is his conscious exploration of the *bearable lightness* of the marginalized subjects coupled with the aesthetic quality of visual representations that made Mthethwa's photographs appreciated. Yet, to passively or totally accept Mthethwa's proclamations as *the final word* on the meaning of and provocations solicited by his photographs is to limit both the photographs and our reading of them, adding to exercising depoliticized and decontextualized readings, as is the case by Michael Godby, (2011), *Ibid.*, 12-15.

<sup>355</sup> "In this work, Mthethwa deviates from a method more natural to his pictorial concerns, in which portraiture is the central feature. Instead, these bleak images appear as concessions to the documentary work his work has previously avoided. This documentary turn appears ill-suited to the careful compositional control that made Mthethwa's previous portrait works exercises in magisterial realism." Okwui Enwezor, (2010), *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>356</sup> "Perhaps it is with his last series that the photographer, unbeknownst to himself, enters into the sphere of philosophy. With *Contemporary Gladiators*, 2008 he finally dares to get past the phase of merely recording, of neutral titles which pretend to relate just the simple reality of the images, to reach a stance which affirms the narrations that until then had only been underlying his work." Simon Njami, (2011), *Ibid.*

either for food or trade. One thing common across their locations and activities is the economic factor, a structurally organized condition that forces black people to submit their labor for exploitation and abuse for survival, as means that are always already ends in themselves, given the consequences of life's hazards inherent in the environments in which they are subjected to toil. Such appalling settings have nothing healthy, nor rewarding, particularly noting Njami's reading of how Mthethwa "is undertaking a systematic census" of the brick workers, mine workers and sugar cane cutters, as "self-sacrificing workers" and "modern-day slaves who, far from seeming to come from some humanitarian campaign, move us with their attitudes and expressions in spite of the brutality seen in the background or foreground of the dehumanized landscape".<sup>357</sup>

### ***Critical Reception: An Appraisal***

At this juncture, I feel it is necessary to provide an appraisal as a way of not only responding to the critical reception of Mthethwa's work, but to offer an alternative reading that would contextualize it squarely in post-apartheid South Africa and the latest discourses of contemporary art practices. Though not always negative, Godby stands as example of the most the most vocal critics of Mthethwa's work. Starting with the most appraised *Line of Negotiation: Sugar Cane* (2003-2008) series (See Figures 20-21), one could argue that it should be seen in the context of dehumanization of black workers as "modern-day slaves" regardless of them being

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<sup>357</sup> Simon Njami, (2011), Ibid.

recognized as “majestic portraits”<sup>358</sup> or black “subjects” whose presentation of “themselves to the camera reveals a large part of their identity” and “the stature of subjecthood”.<sup>359</sup> Of course, there is no doubt in Enwezor’s apt exposition that Mthethwa “casts a probing yet sympathetic eye on the men he photographs, without dispossessing them of mystery. Part of his focus is on the land, the other on manual labor and agricultural production. These images draw out the quandary of the black workers, especially their tenuous situation on the land.”<sup>360</sup> Nor is there quarrel with Godby’s reading of the characteristic that “the sugarcane cutters are exemplars of stoic endurance.”<sup>361</sup>

It is important to emphasize, here, is the reading of the inextricable relation between the land and labor and production or capital– all phenomena that are unavoidably implicated in the politics of colonial conquest, apartheid racism and imperial capitalism in democratic South Africa. Thus, it is fitting that Enwezor reads the *Sugar Cane* series as “an interrogation of a political landscape and its supporting economic system; namely, the imbrication of global capitalism in the post-apartheid landscape”<sup>362</sup> as well as a probing of “the social logic and economic dimension of colonial land practices and the apartheid policies that subtend them”.<sup>363</sup> This predicament is more so noting the consequences that resulted from the African National Congress-led government in not prioritizing the ownership and control of South Africa’s major economic industries and revenues, adding to submitting to global

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<sup>358</sup> Okwui Enwezor, (2010), *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>359</sup> Michael Godby, (2011), *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>360</sup> For an elaborate reading of the *Sugar Cane* series, see Okwui Enwezor, (2010), *Ibid.*, 109-113.

<sup>361</sup> Michael Godby, (2011), *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>362</sup> Okwui Enwezor, (2006), *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>363</sup> Okwui Enwezor, (2010), *Ibid.*, 109.

capitalism through its acceptance of free-market liberal policies all proving disastrous for any transformation necessary to improve the lives of the black majority in South Africa.<sup>364</sup>

Curiously, Godby perceives the above latter readings of Mthethwa's photographs as spoiled by or tempered with materialist, socio-historical and political attributions, hence they are problematic on the grounds that they "obscure the two basic principles that underpin his project, which are his understanding of the transparency of the photographic medium and his appropriation of the conventions of honorific portraiture".<sup>365</sup> With reference to Mthethwa's *selected* interviews Godby makes weak arguments, one of which is that, just because the farm on which the sugarcane cutters were photographed "belongs to Mthethwa's brother should probably preclude any political significance in these photographs of labor". Godby goes on to argue about a "comparison" Mthethwa makes "of these workers with Japanese *samurai*, on account of their machetes and loose-fitting clothes, [thus] should remove them from any ideological vanguard on land rights and labor conditions and confirm...that these figures are involved in a rather more abstract contest."<sup>366</sup> Three points are worth noting in response to Godby's argument.

One is Godby's reading of labor on terms that should preclude the political, socio-historical and materialist attributes in Mthethwa's photographs. This argument is problematic in reading the photographs outside of a context so charged with and evidently known for its power relations with regard to socio-economic inequities,

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<sup>364</sup> For example see Chapter 3: "The De-Industrialization of South Africa" by Moeletsi Mbeki, *Architects of Poverty: Why African Capitalism Needs Changing* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2009), 63-100.

<sup>365</sup> Michael Godby, (2011), *Ibid.*, 12-15.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

those politics that are always already at play in all aspects of life and its everyday practices in South Africa.<sup>367</sup> Godby seems to call for depoliticized and decontextualized readings as if the black subjects depicted and engaged in Mthethwa's photographs are conceived outside of a fraught and persisting colonial apartheid history, one built on and which continues to exercise some of the vicious principles of slavery whose consequences remain active in structurally organizing social and economic conditions that give rise to the inevitable plight of labor and its accompanying exploitations and abuses in farms, mines and other menial employment organizations. It would appear in Godby's reading that even Mthethwa and his photographic practice are not implicated in such a predicament, let alone that Mthethwa is in a position to *interrupt the workers' work literally, taking up their time in order to fix them on the spot, as they have to stop working to have their portraits taken.*<sup>368</sup> Access, interruption and fixing these sugarcane cutters is unlikely without power relations, precisely because Mthethwa is the brother of the owner and these men not only *know* that but also *their place*. Thus they have to submit to the photographer's interrupting request and gaze as they do to their master, Mthethwa's brother the farm owner. Mthethwa himself not only points out such power relations, especially the awareness of the farm workers' place in a relation marked not by mutual reciprocity but hierarchical transactions between the superordinate and subordinate, as Bronwyn Law-Viljoen explains:

Mthethwa confesses that he was surprised to be reminded of the differences between himself

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<sup>367</sup> On epistemic racism see Michael MacDonald, *Why Racism Matters in South Africa* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2006) and Xolela Mangcu (ed.), *The Color of Our Future: Does Race Matter in Post-Apartheid South Africa?* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2015).

<sup>368</sup> Bronwyn Law-Viljoen, "Interrupting Mythologies" in *Artthrob*, Issue No. 80, 2004, <http://www.artthrob.co.za/04apr/reviews/shainman.html>

and the sugarcane workers. He spent several months at a few farms in order to get to know and be familiar to the people he wanted to photograph. He did not want to be an intruder, and assumed that since he was from Durban and was a black photographer, they would see him as one of them. To have them convey to him, by politely refusing to eat with him, the enormous class and economic differences between them, shifted the political and social ground of the issues in which his photographs would inevitably be embedded.<sup>369</sup>

Evident in the above explanation is the master and servant relation, notwithstanding its subtle but active operation irrespective of a not (racially) visible yet present (class) superiority-inferiority complex between the empowered and subordinated. In the context of economy and labor, this master and servant relation, has a history traceable to practices of slavery that have persisted through colonialism to apartheid and now democracy. At the core of such unrelenting imperial regimes is the question of economy whose systematic institutionalization and operation is the breeding of inequalities between have and have nots, privileged and disenfranchised, employer and employed, owner and owned all played in terms of class, one however structurally informed and systematically organized by institutionalized racism in South Africa.

This brings me to point two, which is about the ownership of the sugarcane farm by Mthethwa's brother. A reflective way to consider this point is to recall Frantz Fanon's argument on neo-colonialism and the petit black bourgeoisie in the post-colony: "The national bourgeoisie steps into the shoes of the former European settlement" knowing "its mission has nothing to do with transforming the nation; it consists, prosaically, of being the transmission line between the nation and a capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the mask of neo-colonialism".<sup>370</sup> From Fanon's argument we are able to extract lessons that warn and

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<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

<sup>370</sup> Frantz Fanon, (1963), Ibid.,152.

enable us to distrust the petit black bourgeoisie which takes over from the former colonial apartheid capitalists, precisely because the transfer of leadership in political and economic positions (including even the slight ownership of institutions responsible for South Africa's socio-economics) from white to black people have already proved no guarantees in addressing the institutionalized structures and systems of slavery and colonial apartheid that have no best interests of the historically colonized, segregated, repressed, exploited and condemned black men and women. "The leader," Nigel Gibson writes, in whose person the populace found a representative of national unity against colonial domination, inevitably becomes a new source of domination, overseeing the accumulation of capital."<sup>371</sup>

It is important at this juncture to emphasize that the idiom of *an old wine in a new bottle* is neither an exaggeration nor a cryptic illumination of the continuing colonial apartheid practices in democratic South Africa, particularly if we sincerely probe into the African National Congress led-governance, most of whose key black politicians and their behaviors are testimonies to Fanon's prophetic theorization and critique of neo-colonialism in Africa. Take for example the recent Marikana event, for which one of the ANC political-leader-turned-businessman and now Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa was implicated in the authorization of the state police to shoot protesting mineworkers, thirty-four of whom were killed and seventy-eight injured and many arrested.<sup>372</sup> What an irony knowing Ramaphosa was once a leading activist in the workers unions and a key politician during the negotiations that lead to the

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<sup>371</sup> Nigel Gibson, *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 184

<sup>372</sup> See "Marikana Massacre 16 August 2012" in <http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/marikana-massacre-16-august-2012>

democratic election in 1994, inauguration of Truth and Reconciliation in 1995 and endorsement of a new Constitution in 1996.<sup>373</sup> To be implicated in the Marikana massacre speaks in no uncertain terms to Fanon's warning not only about the replay of colonial apartheid practices but also a regressive sort of nationalism that is "anti-national" in the post-colony:

The nationalist bourgeoisie with practically no economic power...not engaged in production, invention, construction or labor...enters, soul in peace, on the terrible anti-national path of a bourgeoisie, flatly, stupidly, cynically bourgeoisie. For them nationalization does not mean governing the state with regard to new social relations...[but] quite simply the transfer into native hands of those unfair advantages which are legacies of the colonial period...Enormous sums are spent on displays of ostentation, cars, houses...They will prove themselves incapable of triumphantly putting into practice a program with even a minimum humanist content, in spite of fine-sounding declarations...that come straight out of European treatises on moral and political philosophy.<sup>374</sup>

With the foregoing in mind, one can basically argue the fact that Mthethwa had access and was able to interrupt and fix on the spot these black men laboring on a sugarcane farm owned by his brother are more than enough reasons to invite an examination of the history of farming, ownership of property, domination and manipulation of the labor industry since slavery through colonialism to apartheid and the present quandary of black subjects in democratic South Africa. This is a history known for brutal regimes that were systematically instrumental in dispossessing Africans of their land and forcing them into cheap labor through imposed laws and epistemic violence. This is a persistent history, which in Gibson's words remains

one constant: pressure on the peasantry to sacrifice even more than they did in the colonial period: "The exploitation of agricultural workers will be intensified and made legitimate. Using two or three slogans, these new [black] colonialists will demand an enormous amount of work from the agricultural laborers, in the name of national effort of course."<sup>375</sup>

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<sup>373</sup> See for example, Jacques Otto, "How Cyril Ramaphosa obtained his wealth" in <http://www.news24.com/MyNews24/How-Cyril-Ramaphosa-obtained-his-wealth-20150713>

<sup>374</sup> Frantz Fanon, (1963), *Ibid.*, 149-63.

<sup>375</sup> Nigel Gibson, (2003), *Ibid.*, 184.

Mthethwa's interrupting photo shoot could also be read as symptomatic of this enormous amount of work demanded from the sugarcane cutters in spite of his intent to portray them as dignified human beings in a context that subjugates and undignifies people. It is therefore improbably absurd to think that, in such context, black farm workers, most of whom are exploited and abused laborers, are working on farms by choice or will, also noting Godby's unpersuasive argument that:

Like the *Interior Portraits*, which are also impoverished and makeshift, the sugarcane cutters are exemplars of stoic endurance. But their filthy condition—they are blackened by the cane that has to be burnt before it is harvested—and their landscape setting tend to confirm Mthethwa's contention that they represent the futility of humankind's ongoing struggle against nature.<sup>376</sup>

To totally rely on Mthethwa's apolitical and ahistorical comments about his work, as Godby does here, seems a slippage into intellectual complicities,<sup>377</sup> to say the least. Thus the artist's intention has to be subjected to examination and criticism, equally so his artworks.

Consequently, one could assert that Godby's reading of Mthethwa's figures as involved in a rather abstract contest. Such is a shortsighted if not flawed reading, knowing that black lives are contesting their meaning, identities, experiences, and desires both at abstract and concrete levels. Whilst abstract contest is necessary for the metaphysical conceptualization or theorizing of the world and its experiences, it however risks being out of touch and possibly disdain of the concrete or materiality that is best comprehended experientially. It is similar to the attitude of privileging the theoretical or conceptual over, above and at the expense of the experiential or praxis in

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<sup>376</sup> Michael Godby, (2011), *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>377</sup> For a detailed argument on this subject see Mark Sanders, *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

some quarters of post-colonialism that have been critiqued by scholars calling for a materialist reading.<sup>378</sup> In fact, it is the material predicament that has proved to be the greatest hindrance or problem that makes black lives the *abject* and *wretched of the earth*. Thus black lives are irreducible to abstraction, they are the sum comprised of emotion, mental and physical which constitutes the materialist contest of their being and becoming in the world is as important as their abstract contest in artistic representations be they symbolical or literal. Their contest, or rather fight and struggle is of a material nature dictating their everyday practices in a society fraught with non-abstract inequalities. This is also to argue that Godby's advocacy for an abstract universalism, which seems to owe its protocols to (colonial) western ideals, however, privileges the theoretical over the practical matter, a cerebral instead of physical experiences. Thus, in discussing Fanon's argument on the existential phenomenon of being black in an oppressive and exploitative context, Gibson's argument is instructive that "it is never enough to dismiss a way of thought without engaging the social condition that produces it."<sup>379</sup> It was for similar concerns that James, Aimé Césaire, Fanon and Said among others criticized the universality of humanism while at the same time they embraced, appropriated and reworked some of its qualities. Thus the notion of critical humanism that Richards argues for in contemporary South African artists, of whom Mthethwa is one.

There is another argument to be made here. To look at Mthethwa's sugarcane series, including the mine series, is not only to be furnished with principles associated

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<sup>378</sup> See for example Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (London/New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>379</sup> Nigel Gibson, (2003), *Ibid.*, 204.

with “the transparency of the photographic medium and conventions of honorific portraiture”, as Godby reductively contests and albeit prescribes. It is also to be invited to read other prompting narratives, provoked curiosities and solicited questions that both rest within and outside of the picture frame. It is with this understanding that viewers don’t only receive from but also bring *things* – for instance information, projections, and baggage – with them to works of art. Of course, this interaction between the photograph and spectator is induced by the visual construction of the subject and its aesthetic qualities, such being the rendition of content and form both owing to the photographer’s creative ability. It is in this complex and dynamic exchange that artworks are not merely objects in and for themselves, nor is their meaning solely dependent on the artist’s intention and explanation; they are also sites for a variety of thoughts, reflections, appreciations or contestation of subjects, ideas, knowledge, experiences, aspirations and so forth.

Therefore, in concluding, I share Enwezor’s thoughts on the “adoption of photography as a mode of working and method of analysis”<sup>380</sup> not only of subjects pertaining or limited to the artist’s intentions or viewpoints, nor only of contents or forms of the photographic image, but also concerns that inform and connect with them, within the context of their production and social, political, cultural and economic relations in society. Roland Barthes’ notion of “the extension of a field” in reading photographs is useful here, by which he “perceive[s] quite familiarly as a consequence of” the *spectator*’s “knowledge” and “culture”.<sup>381</sup> Barthes’ proposition speaks to the contextual approach with which Mthethwa’s photographs should be

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<sup>380</sup> Okwui Enwezor, (2006), *Ibid.*, 34

<sup>381</sup> Roland Barthes, (1981), *Ibid.*, 25.

attended, of course doing so without undermining or writing out matters of form and aesthetic considerations.

It is also such extension of a field or contextual approach that enables me to question the rationale in justifying the designation of Mthethwa's sitters as *Untitled* instead of naming them in a photographic project that undertakes to restore their dignity and pride or show their humanness. Mthethwa makes questionable generalization, not only about his Zulu culture and "many cultures in Africa" where the "collective" or communal "is more significant than the individual"<sup>382</sup> but about the assumption that names of people are not significant and thus do not deserve to be known. In discussing names and naming practices in isiZulu fiction, Innocentia Mhlambi articulates how names are rooted in culture and have cultural significance for individuals in Zulu cultural traditions.<sup>383</sup> Mhlambi's articulation contradicts not only Mthethwa's explanation but also Godby, who labors on an elaborate justification of Mthethwa's problematic generalization about the significance of naming in Zulu culture.<sup>384</sup> Even Enwezor got it wrong to argue that Mthethwa's use of "color, which allegedly contests the anthropological tendency of reportage and restores its subjects their position as people with proper names and proper place – that is to say, as humans".<sup>385</sup> *Untitled* is not a proper name but implies "having no right or claim".<sup>386</sup> The informal settlements where Mthethwa's subjects make do and wrestle to survive are not a *proper place* but colonial apartheid constructions and impositions, thus it is a

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<sup>382</sup> Isolde Brielmaier (ed.), (2011), *Ibid.*, 93-4.

<sup>383</sup> See Chapter 3, "Act of naming: The detective plot in Masondo's fiction" by Innocentia Jabulisile Mhlambi, *African-Language Literatures: Perspectives on IsiZulu Fiction and Popular Black Television Series* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2012), 73-97.

<sup>384</sup> See Godby, (2010), *Ibid.*, 16

<sup>385</sup> Enwezor, (2010), *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>386</sup> According to Dictionary.com - <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/untitled?s=t>

misplaced argument to accept such debasing predicament or appalling improper housing in democratic South Africa. To designate the sitters *Untitled* contradicts the argument that Mthethwa restores their position as people with *proper names*.

Besides the foregoing critique, Mthethwa's photography is a significant contribution to the project of critical humanism that sought to critique the dehumanization of black subjects at the very same time undertaking to restore their humanity. Through his proclamations and color photography, whose underlying premise or thesis I have referred to as a humanizing mission, Mthethwa contributes a visual dimension to the field of visual art and cultural studies within the faculty of humanities. It is his contribution, on one level, to humanize black subjects surviving in the periphery of global modernity whilst, on another, to critique the conditions that give rise and sustain their dehumanization that I sought to discuss in this chapter.

CHAPTER 3  
CULTURAL APPROPRIATION IN PEET PIENAAR'S  
*I WANT TO TELL YOU SOMETHING*

This chapter focuses on Peet Pienaar's (b. 1971) proposal for and the actual surgical performance artwork titled *I Want To Tell You Something* (2000). This artwork exemplifies the problematic of appropriation owing to its racial and gendered implications that recall politics of *self* and *other*, particularly when terms and practices of appropriation are an exercise only favourable to the appropriator; in this case, a white male who is a beneficiary of historical events that include slavery, colonialism and apartheid.<sup>387</sup> My main focus is to demonstrate how Pienaar's work illustrates problems resulting when a white privileged artist appropriates black subjects. Pienaar appropriated and performed a Xhosa male circumcision ritual called *ulwaluko*<sup>388</sup> and invited a black female medical doctor to circumcise him. The procedure was videotaped and projected as a video installation with his severed foreskin bottled in a glass jar for sale, in a commercial gallery space, where it was auctioned on the Internet (See Figure 22).

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<sup>387</sup> Achille Mbembe explains that, "A particular set of canonical meanings has been attributed to these events." First, is the relegation of African "individual subjectivities" "to lifeless form or identity (*objecthood*)" "by alienating the African self from itself (self-division)." Second, is "property" "dispossession, a process in which juridical and economic procedures have led to material expropriation. This was followed by ... the falsification of Africa's history by the Other, which resulted in a state of exteriority (*estrangement*) and deracination." Third is "historical degradation" which "has plunged African subject not only into humiliation, debasement, and nameless suffering but also into a zone of nonbeing and social death characterized by the denial of dignity, heavy psychic damage, and the torment of exile" Achille Mbembe "African Modes of Self-Writing" in *Public Culture*, 14(1) (2002). Mbembe's explanation provides background information in understanding why in contemporary South Africa, a country marked by lingering historical conditions black subjects are still grappling with reclaiming and restoring their selfhood.

<sup>388</sup> In a simplified sense, *ulwaluko* refers to an initiation ritual performed to transform boyhood to manhood through a series of processes and activities among which circumcision is crucial. See V.Z Gitywa, *Male Initiation in Ciskei: formal Incorporation into Bantu Society* (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation: University of Fort Hare, Alice, 1976) and Lumka Funani, *Circumcision Among the Ama-Xhosa: A Medical Investigation* (South Africa: Stockville, 1990).

I consider Pienaar's work in the context of appropriation and performance art, by looking at both Pienaar's written proposal for and the videotaped *performance*. His artwork also operates within the context of conceptual art, where creative strategies and ideas are considered as propositions, praxis and object – all (taken as) part of the artwork. For, ideas inform (and/or can be themselves) the final product. So, my reading of *I Want To Tell You Something* moves between Pienaar's proposed and performed ideas. I argue that through problematic appropriation and the employment of a black woman to circumcise him, Pienaar's surgical performance artwork is sensational. Pienaar sentimentalizes and de-substantiates the *ulwaluko* ritual, making it into a commodity, for commercial public consumption. He co-opts a black woman into an art context in which her significance is most useful as a means to towards his ends, also not without intention to stir controversy. The black woman's participation in Pienaar's performance art is premised on both her race and gender, both of which are indicative of (enacted) power relations – between the dominating and subordinate– in an act of appropriation. The problem with such appropriation is noted by Edward Said who “has long understood, in every cultural appropriation there are those who act and those who are acted upon, and for those whose memories and cultural identities are manipulated by aesthetic, academic, economic, or political appropriation, the consequences can be disquieting or painful...”<sup>389</sup>

This cultural appropriation is apparent in the South African visual art context, one in which white (and particularly male) artists have dominated the domain of representation, representing themselves and others. Colonialism and apartheid,

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<sup>389</sup> Cited in Robert S. Nelson, “Appropriation” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1996), 127.

including their leftovers in democratic South Africa, enable racial, class, gender and sex domination. Black artists and subjects tend to exist and operate within the restriction informed by persisting *inequalities* that, to a greater extent, have been internalized and accepted by the majority of South African population as normalized order of things,<sup>390</sup> thus legitimating hierarchical arrangements and value systems of white supremacy and black inferiority. Even appropriation of white subjects by black artists, when it occurs, is rarely equivalent to appropriation of black subjects by white artists.<sup>391</sup> This inequality is embedded in social, education and economic privileges that permeate white artists' position of power while most black artists endure the opposite. Ivor Powell confirms this racially unequal representation in writing: "It is almost unheard of for a black artist to represent a white person" while some white artists made their "reputation precisely by making representations of people of other races", and this makes evident the "colour bar". "White artists, in short, were the masters and mistresses of the entire spectrum of experience; they could interpret anything they chose."<sup>392</sup> This nonreciprocal relationship between white and black South African artists speaks to Frantz Fanon's argument that "The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man."<sup>393</sup>

My argument considers Pienaar's work as resonant, reminiscent and nostalgic

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<sup>390</sup> I use the phrase "normalized order of things" with reference to Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Les Mots et les choses (New York: Vintage Books, 1973).

<sup>391</sup> While not taking for granted Michel Foucault's argument that power operates on multiple levels in the hierarchic scale, given the South African context inequality in particular of visual art practice in which appropriation of black subjects by white artists is not equivalent, Foucault's argument would fall short. Yet I share that power is not only consigned to subjects occupying top positions in the pyramid hierarchy but also power operates in all levels. Even those at lower levels have power within their ranks. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge and the Politics of Meaning: Selected interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham and Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

<sup>392</sup> Ivor Powell, "...us blacks... - Self-construction and the Politics of Modernism" in *Persons and Pictures: The Modernist Eye in Africa*, ed. Ricky Burnett (Johannesburg: Newtown Gallery, 1995), 15.

<sup>393</sup> Frantz Fanon, (1967), *Ibid.*, 110.

of European appropriations and representations that portrayed African culture problematically. This is a portrayal of black subjects as objects, primitive and exotic, among a number of problematic tendencies, practices and dehumanizing forms. In the form of revisionist colonialism or apartheid, as Olu Oguibe would put it, this appropriation or representation “brings to the fore the continued white license to the black body”.<sup>394</sup> Or, the “punitive practice of stripping, beating, and otherwise violating black bodies in public as sign of white power and ownership”,<sup>395</sup> to use Coco Fusco’s words.

### ***Appropriation: Towards a Critical Definition***

In the context of this chapter, appropriation means borrowing, referencing, extracting or taking of those aspects of culture – language, forms of expression and experiences – or the actual (human) body by another (different race and gender), for any creative and expressive use as modes of representation. Appropriation in this sense is the exercise (by artists) of re/constructing and re/constituting validated personal or political identities and projections from cultural fragments or forms derived from *other* cultures and experiences. In explaining appropriation, Robert Nelson writes:

Etymologically, the word “appropriation” could hardly be simpler or more innocent ... “to appropriate” today means to take something for one’s own use and the adjective “appropriate” means annexed or attached, belonging to oneself, private, and suitable or proper. “Appropriate” also has more sinister connotations, implying an improper taking of something

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<sup>394</sup> Olu Oguibe, “Beyond Visual Pleasure: A Brief Reflection on the Works of Contemporary African Women Artists” in *Gendered Visions: The Art of Contemporary Africana Women Artists*, ed. Salah Hassan (New Brunswick: Africa World Press, 1996), 69.

<sup>395</sup> Coco Fusco, “The Bodies That Were Not Ours: Black Performers, Black Performance” in *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, No. 5 (1996), 29.

and even abduction or theft. Taken positively or pejoratively, appropriation is not passive, objective, or disinterested, but active, subjective, and motivated.<sup>396</sup>

I propose two concerns about appropriation. First, if appropriation is rendered effectively, its discursive forms and modes of representation should avoid vulgarizing and violating the aesthetic sensibilities of the appropriated *other*. Appropriation should be a productive activity that discursively engages *equally all* concerned subjects—the appropriator (artist) and the appropriated (subject). Put differently, through appropriation and representation, the visual object should open up panoramas for *new* insights rather than reiterate or extend historical problems that render the appropriated into prey. Appropriation should be a useful means that functions to broaden and enhance the artist’s subject matter, content and form enabling the visual object to provoke a critical dialogue. In this approach, in which “appropriation does succeed” as Nelson suggests, “it works silently, breaching the body’s defences like a foreign organism and insinuating itself within, as if it were natural and wholly benign”.<sup>397</sup>

The second proposition about appropriation concerns a problem when appropriation advocates and reinforces *otherness*.<sup>398</sup> The problem is rendering appropriated subjects in ways that strip off their subjectivity, relegating them to *objecthood*, and making them the *other* in representation. It is reinscribing the binaries. The problem is, when contents and subjectivities – in fact actual bodies and

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<sup>396</sup> Robert S. Nelson, (1996), *Ibid.*, 117-118.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>398</sup> In referencing Todorov, Peter Mason speaks of “various sorts of otherness: the other in oneself (*je est un autre*); the otherness of groups within the society in which we live to which we do not belong (women as seen by men; men as seen by women; the rich for the poor; the ‘mad’ in the eyes of the ‘normal’ ...); the otherness of those who are external to us, other in terms of language, customs, etc... the otherness of those who are external to us, otherness of what is external and distant to me...” Among these various sorts of *otherness*, I am not concerned with the first one, “the other in oneself”, rather I am referring to the latter ones. See Peter Mason, *Deconstructing America: Representations of the Other* (London: Routledge, 1999), 2.

experiences – premised on aesthetic sensibilities of the appropriated are obscured: in the process of assimilative appropriation, the *other* is fractured and depreciated. In this negative manner, according to Linda Bryant, “the artist is a predator in a process that culturally and socially disenfranchises appropriated groups. And the art becomes the vehicle through which historical, social and political inequalities are reinforced.” Thus, this form of appropriation “means an unequal exchange between parties, no more no less. It is the process by which one party benefits to the detriment of the other”.<sup>399</sup>

### ***Colonialism and Appropriation***

Throughout colonialism, non-Western cultures that include African and black bodies have been the object of problematic appropriation and representation by Westerners. They have been subjected to an appropriation that, according to Welchman, involved “the relocation, annexation or theft of cultural properties—whether objects, ideas or notations—associated with the rise of European colonialism and global capital”.<sup>400</sup> Such an appropriation was “underwritten by the formation of discipline such as anthropology, museology and allied epistemologies of description, collecting, comparison and evaluation”.<sup>401</sup> Through colonialism and even in contemporary practices, cultural appropriation is inherently a double undertaking that involves *adoption* and *excretion*. Adoption implies the seizing and subjugation of

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<sup>399</sup> Linda G. Bryant, “All That She Wants: Transgressions, Appropriations, and Art” in *Bad Girls*, ed. Marcia Turker (New York & Mass: New Museum of Contemporary Art & MIT Press, Mass, 1994), 98-100.

<sup>400</sup> John C. Welchman, “Global Nets: Appropriation and Postmodernity” in *Appropriation: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. David Evans (London: Whitechapel & MIT Press 2009), 194. See also John C. Welchman, *Art After Appropriation: Essays on Art in the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

foreign cultural properties that are re-arranged and re-ordered in ways that, “through digestive incorporation”<sup>402</sup> advance interests and attend satisfaction of the appropriator; it is a kind of nourishing from other sources in generating new texts. Excretion is a form of evacuation or elimination, which either follows after or takes place simultaneously with adoption; it is an act of expulsion that in the process through which the appropriator digestively incorporates foreign bodies also ejects or evicts all that is considered unnecessary, not needed for its intended use. In this sense, appropriation concerns a process through which the appropriator extracts what is useful for his or her own ends, and as such appropriation is predicated on “violent gratifications”,<sup>403</sup> a process notable with colonialism, imperialism, apartheid and capitalism, all of which are epistemic systems notable with their violent act of dis-possession, subjugation and exploitation.

Appropriation of African cultural properties, black bodies and experiences by Europeans has been predicated on these epistemic violent systems. While digestively incorporated into serving European needs and ends, African subjects were simultaneously excreted. The appropriated becomes useful for the former whilst rendered abject for the latter. In this way, the appropriated African subjects are reconfigured into a dubious double: whilst they are useful objects in advancing needs of the appropriator they are also represented as the abnormal, the deviant and thus degraded to make viable the always-shifting re/invention of their *otherness*. In particular during the institutionalization of European “superiority”, stereotyping of African subjects as the different primitive per se informed the binary relationship –

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<sup>402</sup> Ibid., 196

<sup>403</sup> Ibid., 194.

dominating/dominated, superior/inferior, civilized/primitive – between Europe and Africa. In this binary relationship, Europe occupies the “upper pole” and Africa the “lower pole”.<sup>404</sup> The making of European superiority was predicated on the appropriation and thus most representations of African subjects by Europeans reflected racist and sexist perceptions that were prevailing in and outside Europe during the colonial era.<sup>405</sup> The black body in general was viewed as a site that embodied white fear and fantasy, whereas the black male body specifically was viewed as muscular, physically able and sexual, thus useful for slave labour and at the same time a threat to white people (in particular the white male).<sup>406</sup> The black female body served as a totalizing emblem of deviant sexuality and beauty, a disconcerting historical thesis known in representations of the Hottentot Venus, Sarah Baartman.<sup>407</sup> In her appearance in Europe, Baartman came to embody sexual exhibitionism that marks the vulgarity and violation of the black body seized by and for the white gaze.<sup>408</sup>

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<sup>404</sup> “The upper pole feeds narcissism by being the object of symbolic idealization, while the lower pole is devalued and subjected to denial and repression. Being above somebody and being below somebody are fundamental and deep-seated orientating constructions for the racist consciousness” Chabani Manganyi, *Treachery and Innocence: Psychology and Racial Difference in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1991), 45.

<sup>405</sup> Negative images of black subjects, for example, “as icon for deviant sexuality” and “antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty” gained popularity during the eighteenth and in particular nineteenth century. See Sander L. Gilman, “The Hottentot and the Prostitute: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality” in *Race-ing Art History: Critical Readings in Race and Art History*, ed. Kymberly N. Pinder (New York: Routledge, 2002), 121.

<sup>406</sup> This undertaking concerns the encoding of fears and estrangements in images and symbols that in representations were used, privately and publicly, to demonise black people as barbaric and violent *others* physically, emotionally, psychologically and/or mentally. Frantz Fanon described these constructions in particular of an extreme *sexuality* and a *frightening* black Negro. Frantz Fanon, (1967), *Ibid.*,

<sup>407</sup> See for example, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); Deborah Willis’s *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her Hottentot* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010); and Charmaine A. Nelson’s *Representation of the Black Female Subject in Western Art* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>408</sup> A number of visual representations, especially illustrations of the Hottentot Venus made around the 1800s, particularly in England and France, reflected the subjugation of the black body, as a sexualized and primitive other. According to Sander Gilman, “Sarah Bartmann had been exhibited not to show her genitalia, but rather to present to the European audience a different anomaly, one...found riveting... For most Europeans who viewed her, Sarah Bartmann existed only as a collection of sexual parts.” Sander, L. Gilman, (2002), *Ibid.*, 122.

### *Appropriation as a Trope: European Modernist artists*

In nineteenth century paintings, the appropriation and representation of non-European women as sexual objects and for exoticism are discernible. Eugene Delacroix's (1798-1863) painting *Women of Algiers* (1834) objectified the Algerian women "purely for the erotic pleasure of the colonial gaze".<sup>409</sup> Sander Gilman notes that Edouard Manet's (1832-1883) *Olympia* in 1862-63 is "One of the classic works of nineteenth-century [European] art, a work which records the idea of both the sexualized woman and the black woman."<sup>410</sup> Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) is another example of a European artist who exoticised (non-white-European) women of Tahiti, representing them as the primitive other.<sup>411</sup>

Whereas Delacroix, Manet and Gauguin were mainly concerned with the black body, artists such as Henry Matisse (1869-1954), Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and George Braque (1882-1963) rather concentrated on appropriating forms or elements of African cultures (masks and sculptures) to advance their visual language and representations. Visually, African masks and sculptures provided an alternative to the rejection of the naturalism which these European artists were pursuing. While advancing their visual vocabulary, the modernist artists also redefined both modern reception of non-Western objects and so-called (European modern) "high" art.<sup>412</sup>

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<sup>409</sup> Okwui Enwezor and Octavio Zaya, "Colonial Imaginary, Tropes of Disruption: History, Culture, and Representation in the Works of African Photographers" in *In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1996), 24.

<sup>410</sup> Sander L. Gilman, (2002), *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>411</sup> From "1891 until his death in 1903 ... indigenous women were associated in Gauguin's mind, as in the collective colonialist imagination, with natural fecundity and beneficence, as well as with the restoration of male political authority and sexual prerogative", argues Stephen Eisenman, *Nineteenth Century Art: A Critical History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 382.

<sup>412</sup> This motion, Flam and Deutsch art, brought about "new and imaginative ways of conceiving and organizing forms in accordance with abstract ideas ... something new about expression and subject matter." (p. 3) That is, "Primitivism (a cultural concept) and *Primitive art* (a historical designation)" (p. xiv) not only offered European

Manet, Gauguin, Matisse, Picasso and Braque, among others, seem to have established a discourse worth noting. One is that they set up precedence for European settler artists who would also make use of native people and their culture as subject matter of their artistic representations in colonized countries. The other is that they exemplified artists who stretched limitations of European modern art, limitations that were to further advance the subsequent critique of modern art or modernism's artistic mediums and practices such as photography, video art, performance art and conceptual art, for example. Yet, when African (and other non-European) artists appropriate European subjects and art forms, they are derogatively labelled as imitators who produce "third-rate artwork" that "emulates Western Tradition".<sup>413</sup>

### ***The Black Subjects in South African Modern and Contemporary Art***

Depictions of native subjects as exotics and racialized *others* or sexual *types*, all instrumental in producing differentia and inequality between the colonizer and colonized, for ethnographic studies – were common in the work of earlier European artists who either settled or were born in colonized countries. Some of these images were produced for propaganda, to report on colonial conditions while also seeking support from the metropolis in the course of furthering imperialism and capitalism. In such colonial context, imaging of native subjects by Europeans was part of colonialism. They were discursive visuals instrumental for white hegemony not only

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modern art some opportunities for enrichment, but also "played a crucial role in the advancement of twentieth-century art and modern thinking generally. Primitivism [in particular] has underlain both the practice and theory of advanced art, and it has also played an important role in critical writing about that art" (p. xiii) Jack Flam and Miriam Deutch, "Introduction" in *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History* (Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2003).

<sup>413</sup> See Salah Hassan, "The Modernist Experience in Africa Art: Visual Expressions of the Self and Cross-Cultural Aesthetics" in Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor (1999), *Ibid.*, 216.

in assisting the imperial administrative apparatus but also in establishing a particular perception and consciousness about colonized subjects.<sup>414</sup> The colonial imagery of colonized subjects has always projected perceptions and imaginings of Europeans themselves. That is, images of the colonized betrayed the colonizers as they brought to visual evidence European prejudices and predispositions, an imperial discourse that Edward Said articulated and critiqued in *Orientalism*.<sup>415</sup>

If Manet, Matisse, Picasso and Braque were appropriators of black subjects who operated in Europe, in colonial-apartheid South Africa there were artists such as Thomas Bowler (1812-1869), Thomas Baines (1820-1875), Irma Stern (1894-1966), Walter Battiss (1906-1982), Alexis Preller (1911-1975), Cecil Skotnes (1926-2009), Penny Siopis (b.1953) and Pippa Skotnes (b. 1957), amongst others, who in their different ways appropriated and exploited black African subjects. Whereas Baines, Bowler and Stern painted natives in curious re-configurations, Battiss, Preller and Skotnes not only painted natives but also appropriated visual elements, traditional forms and symbols of rock art by San People as well as masks, sculptures and artefacts from West Africa. Some of these artists – i.e. Battiss, Stern and Skotnes – were “bestowed recognition” by art institutions – Suid Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns (South African Academy of Science and Art) – associated with and supported by the apartheid regime.<sup>416</sup> They were recognized for their artistic achievements that contributed not only to South African artistic development locally and abroad but also

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<sup>414</sup> See Paul S. Landua and Deborah D. Kaspin (eds.), *Images & Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa* (California: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>415</sup> Edward Said, (1978). *Ibid.*

<sup>416</sup> See Federico Freschi, “Afrikaner Nationalism, Modernism, Modernity and the Changing Canon of ‘High Art’” in *Visual Century: South African Art in Context, Volume Two 1945-1976*, ed. Lize van Robbroeck (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2011), 15.

to “an ongoing nation-building effort, and the consolidation of a white South African cultural identity underscored by the values of Afrikaner nationalism”.<sup>417</sup>

These developments in South African art were also informed by art movements from Europe (and North America), a point Powell describes: “At every step the reference – and the guarantee – for South African art lies in its connections with a much fetishized international art scene.”<sup>418</sup> Even contemporary artists such as Peet Pienaar continued this tradition of following on artistic developments like conceptual art and performance art from the West, but appropriating local subjects. Thus a brief discussion of conceptual and performance art follows.

### ***Appropriation Mediated: Conceptual and Performance Art Practices***

Conceptual art<sup>419</sup> also set the stage for and strongly influenced performance art at the turn of the twentieth century. Based on critiquing and restructuring conventional understandings, meaning and value endowed upon the art object, conceptual and performance art challenged and negotiated boundaries between art and life (as lived experience). Artists explored ways that rejected and revised certain forms or strategies in making art, in so doing, bringing new understandings of the quintessence of art.<sup>420</sup>

Conceptual art stressed ideas over the concrete object through visual strategies that question the distinction between a “real” object and a work of art. In the Western

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<sup>417</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>418</sup> Ivor Powell, (1995), Ibid., 3.

<sup>419</sup> See Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998).

<sup>420</sup> Some of these strategies included “self-reflectivity by which the work of art is turned on itself and ultimately on the very notion of art” (p. 66); “the disdain for objectness as a *sine qua non* and the move toward ... the ‘dematerialization’ of the art object” and “the pre-eminence of framing, whereby the placement of a work of art and the consequent context become more important to its meaning and significance than its form or its ‘aesthetic’ qualities” (p. 70). See Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe, “Authentic/Ex-Centric at the Venice Biennale: African Conceptualism in Global Context” in *African Arts*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (2001).

tradition, Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe trace conceptual art from Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) and *Fountain* (1917),<sup>421</sup> while Johannes Birringer also notes "All performances are implicated in the history of modernism (after Duchamp)."<sup>422</sup> Berringer argues that performance art has been "radically undisciplined art" because of its creative processes that cannot easily be contained by conventional forms of aesthetics and theories. Its centralizing of the human body is further complicated by its relations and interactions with video art and activism that have "most provocatively challenged the dominant hierarchies of institutional and technological ideologies".<sup>423</sup> Both Hassan/Oguibe and Berringer acknowledge the development of performance art in the West has been due to influences of non-Western cultural practices. In particular, its centring of the human body and ritualistic acts are largely appropriation and transformation of traditional ritual forms and practices such as body art or body decoration, mutilation, modification, scarification, cicatrizing, tattooing, and multiple piercing.

In Europe and North America in the 1960s body art became one of the principal debates in Western art practice and art theory. The human body became the most convenient subject, object and visual site for personal and political expressions. Contemporary artists reconstructed, reinvented and reconstituted the human body. They appropriated non-Western cultural forms associated with ethnic rituals such as body decoration, mutilation, and scarification. These ethnic rituals became a source of creation and inspiration to artists, particularly performance artists and the use of the

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<sup>421</sup> Hassan and Oguibe, (2001), *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>422</sup> Johannes Birringer, *Media & Performance: Along the Border* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 18.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

body in visual representation. Artists used their bodies for self-definition and self-assertion. They redesigned and redefined their status and identities, socially, politically and sexually. The body became a site in which various (personal and societal) experiments with pain, pleasure, desires, phobias and restraints were performed. For example, Gina Pane (1939-1990) and Orlan (b. 1947) in France, Sterlac (b. 1946), and Chris Burden (1946-2015), Cindy Sharman (b. 1954) and Adrian Piper (b. 1948) in the United States of America, are artists who centred their own bodies in their visual art practice. Despite their different strategies of aestheticizing and politicizing their bodies, their work testifies to contemporary attempts to deconstruct conventional notions of the hetero-normative body. Through their live performances which centred their bodies as agencies/subjectivities, they collapsed the line between art practice and life experience, and if not, at the very least they defied the obvious distinction between art as only a *displayed object* and art as a *lived experience*.

In this respect, through performance art, the use of the human body by artists extended visual art forms from being static objects to active re-presentations. The body became a visual language through which innovative and flexible reconfigurations of re-presentations were performed. It became a space, a canvas, surface, a screen; a voice that speaks of, through and for itself as well as on behalf of other bodies. The body became a medium of defining individual identities by being painted, marked, staged or exhibited through enactments by artists.

Artists from other parts of the world have been influenced by these artistic developments – conceptual and performance art – that took shape in Europe and North America. In particular South African white artists have benefited extensively from

European (and North American) developments. given their continuing access since colonialism. For example, settler colonialism and its subsequent enterprises and developments in South Africa established a strong link between South Africa and Europe. This connected South Africa to the West, thus motivating oscillation of Europeans and their descendants between their ancestral land and the colony. Therefore, European art has been a continuous influence to many white South African artists. White South African artists subjected and objectified black bodies under the guise of representation: speaking for or on behalf of the disenfranchised black subjects both during apartheid and in post-apartheid. Like Europeans, their appropriation and representation of the *others* have been symptomatic of power and control. Also, white South Africans view the black body with fascination and fantasy. Okwui Enwezor explains this European impact on white South Africans eloquently, when he writes:

It is no secret that in the aftermath of emancipation it is precisely the ‘terrain of narratives of the past’ that is the most fiercely contested. As we all know, during half a millennium of European presence in South Africa, the spectres, the haunted and historic memory, the glow, the consciousness, the metaphorical speech of European identity has stood solidly on a nationalism of white supremacist ideology.<sup>424</sup>

The appropriation and representation of the *other* by white South African contemporary artists bears witness to the “terrain of narratives of the past”. The problem is that of visual organization – rendition of form and content – that are symptomatic of the persistence of colonial practices: the white supremacist ideology to objectify the *other*. This objectification of the other is evident in works by artists such as Candice Breitz (b. 1972), Penny Siopis (b.1953), Lien Botha (b.1961) and Pippa

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<sup>424</sup> Okwui Enwezor, (1999), *Ibid.*, 384.

Skotnes (b.1957), as critically argued by Enwezor<sup>425</sup> and Oguibe.<sup>426</sup> Their criticisms speak loudly of the domination of white artists that assigned to themselves the responsibility to speak for and on behalf of black subjects. They argue that these white artists visually abuse black South Africans, particularly their artistic framing and representations that render the black female body in objectifying, debasing and annulling ways that are indicative of racial domination and racism. What seems to have troubled Enwezor and Oguibe was pervasive whiteness whose persistence attests to unrelenting colonial and apartheid violence under the guise of speaking for, on behalf of and about black subjects in a country lauded to be democratic.

Dominating the domain of representation in South African visual arts, according to Enwezor, are “highly literate, but nonetheless unreflexive white cultural practitioners unblinkingly intent on representing black subjectivity at the margins of cultural and aesthetic discourse.”<sup>427</sup> What Enwezor finds very troubling is the prolonged history of “unquestioned privilege of whiteness from which everything is refracted,”<sup>428</sup> and from which white art practitioners are afforded ample grounds to appropriate and represent the black body, and to do so as they like because colonial apartheid has produced white people as master-subjects and black people as servant-objects. As such, representational domain is both a reserve for and prerogative of master subjects who have the license to represent themselves and others.

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<sup>425</sup> Okwui Enwezor, (1999), Ibid.

<sup>426</sup> Olu Oguibe, (), Ibid.

<sup>427</sup> Okwui Enwezor, (1999), Ibid., 384-385.

<sup>428</sup> Ibid., 385.

Notwithstanding that whiteness, particularly white South African paternalism, or what Rasheed Araeen calls *the art of benevolent racism*,<sup>429</sup> can no longer be accepted, nor tolerated in the post-colony, more so in a democratic society such as post-apartheid South Africa. Simply because, as Enwezor argues, while white South African art practitioners' pronounced intent appears to be a genuine effort to rescue the black body and retrieve black subjectivity from the margins where colonialism and apartheid have dispensed them, the flip side of what results from their representations of black subjects contribute to sustaining the containment of black subjects within the very same margins.<sup>430</sup> In this regard, the Messiahs are also or become persecutors!

Taking issue with the representation of black subjects by white South African art practitioners, Oguibe focuses on the discourse of gender and race, in particular the objectification of black female bodies in ways that are pathologic, violent, and cannibalistic. Oguibe's pressing concern is how white artists play out racism in what he calls "a gendered vision" in their representations of black women, as he writes:

the employment of black women's bodies in work that, though it seeks justification in the need for cross-racial representation and claims to center black women and the black female experience, on the contrary brings to fore the continued white license to the Black body. In the work of a number of young South African women artists of Caucasian descent, the bodies of Black women are taken without consent or sensitivity, and fed into various, deterministic and very problematic discourses of gender politics in a discriminate manner that is not evident in the representation of women of Caucasian descent.<sup>431</sup>

Enwezor's and Oguibe's criticisms were not without counter-attack, as reactionary and defensive responses are compiled in the book, *Grey Areas: Representation, Identity*

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<sup>429</sup> Rasheed Araeen, "The Art of Benevolent Racism" in *Third Text*, Vol. 14, No. 51 (2000), 57-64.

<sup>430</sup> "Even after the fall of apartheid, the temptation to retrieve the 'native' in his full regalia remains, evidenced in representations that attempt to address the notion of difference and otherness in these images [of white South African artists]. While the primary intention of [their] works may be as critique, the irony is that the artists who embark on them often end up uncritically seduced by their fascination for the abject and docile bodies of African men, women and children" Okwui Enwezor, (1999), *Ibid.*, 388.

<sup>431</sup> Olu Oguibe, (1996), *Ibid.*, 69.

*and Politics in Contemporary South African Art* (1999) edited by Brenda Atkinson and Candice Breitz.<sup>432</sup> There are a number of compelling and unpersuasive responses to Enwezor's and Oguibe's criticisms in *Grey Areas*, but I want to underscore four comments. One is a common criticism coming from different essays in *Grey Areas* that accuse Enwezor of reducing complex relations of cultural difference in contemporary South Africa to racial binary categories of black and white, advantaged and disadvantaged, subject and object. In so doing, he is perceived to disavow not only existing subjectivities and agencies of black people, for not having a voice and for being spoken on their behalf by whites, but also interactions and hybridity between different races and genders. Enwezor is therefore criticized for performing a criticism that, while he comments on existing racial and gender divisions, of course with whiteness possessing power over and above its counter blackness, he also re-inscribes such divisions.<sup>433</sup>

The second comment, which is directed at both Enwezor and Oguibe, is their attack of white women artists on representing black women (bodies). They are accused of conflating or rather equating the representation and speaking on behalf of black women by white women artists. They are also criticized for providing conclusive reading or interpretation of the white South African artists' intentions and motivations behind their work. The criticism is that they fail to take into account the openness and

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<sup>432</sup> See for example articles by Colin Richards "Bobbit's Feast: Violence and Representation in South African Art"; Sue Williamson "Out of line: When do artists and critics go too far?" and others in *Grey Areas: Presentation, Identity and Politics in Contemporary South African Art*, eds. Brenda Atkinson and Candice Breitz, (SA: Chalk Hill Press, 1999)

<sup>433</sup> In addition to Brenda Atkinson and Candice Breitz (eds.) *Grey Areas*, see Brian Keith "Axel, Disembodiment and the Total Body: A Response to Enwezor on Contemporary South African Representation" in *Third Text*, Vol. 12, No. 44 (1998), 3-16; and Ruth Kerkham, "A Deadly Explosive on Her Tongue: White Artists/Black Bodies" in *Third Text*, Vol. 14, No. 50 (2000), 73-86.

open-endedness of meaning in works of art. In charging white women artists for visually abusing black female bodies, they are condemned for protesting, that is speaking and acting, on behalf of black women. In this way, they are perceived to also perform the very critique they level against white women artists whom they construe to speak for and on behalf of black women. In a word, they are charged for being paternalistic in their construed acts of protesting on behalf of and protecting black women from white women artists who violently abuse and cannibalize their black bodies.

What is rather important for my argument herein, particularly with regard to the debate on the politics of representation, is not simply the question of speaking on behalf of, for and about black subjects by white people. It is rather the problematic ways in which such speaking is performed, in particular its harmful effects that are degrading, demeaning, humiliating. The South African black woman curator, writer and administrator Bongi Dhlomo-Mautloa articulates my point when she says: “If there is honesty and sensitivity in the use of a black body in a white artist’s work I have no problem.” That is, “...if the aim is to show off the inhabitants of South Africa without any degradation and discrimination?”<sup>434</sup> I certainly share Dhlomo-Mautloa’s call for sensitivity and objection to degradation and discrimination in representations of black subjects, but I am not sure about the possibility of honesty given the slippery domain of representation, not to mention the complexity of symbolism or metaphors in the ways in which truth or honesty could be coded or faked in creative

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<sup>434</sup> Bongi Dhlomo-Mautloa / Brenda Atkinson, “Interview” in Brenda Atkinson and Candice Breitz (eds.), (1999), *Ibid.*, 123.

production.<sup>435</sup> However, I am aware of the fact that there is no right/correct or wrong/incorrect but rather successful and problematic, even weak representations. There is, of course, no innocent representation but rather complex and ambiguous ways of representing (any) subject or theme. In fact, representation is a messy and ambivalent exercise.

Circling back to *Grey Areas*, one senses the extraordinary outrage from white folks in the contemporary art world in South Africa, when black subjects speak out, especially when they critique or criticize white art, white artists, white authors and white art institutions in South Africa. The reactionary and defensive responses mounted against Enwezor's and Oguibe's criticisms illuminate not only the contestation on representation that is inextricable from social and economic realities in which different races, genders and sexes are situated and are wrestling with in gaining grounds for subjectivity and livelihood in their day-to-day lives in democratic South Africa. These responses also speak to the guarded cultural domain in which representation involves power relations: who has authority and the right to speak, when, about what, where, why and for what ends? Such is the complex politics with respect to why those who speak for others do so and why they (continue) to do so in democratic South Africa, a political era that is supposed to liberate and give voice to historically oppressed and marginalised subjects? More so, what gives white people grounds to continue acting as custodians and guardians of black people? The latter question speaks to the conditions that enable the discourse of power relations and power manipulation when it comes to practices of representation in South African

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<sup>435</sup> I make this point considering questions of *complicities* as argued by Mark Saunders, (2002), *Ibid.*

visual arts context. It should be noted that the conditions that are enabling for subjects to speak are inextricable from social, cultural and economic resources, facilities and infrastructure all of which are essential in the make-up and attainment of individual and collective/group identities, needs and desires. Thus power relations are enabled or disabled by conditions under which subjects operate, interact, think and fantasize about themselves and others. So, it is also noteworthy that representation implicates or is implicated by power relations.

“Power,” in representation Stuart Hall explains, “always operates in conditions of unequal relations.”<sup>436</sup> In discussing works of Edward Said, Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci and Homi Bhabha, Hall argues that power is factored in representation, knowledge, ideas, culture, social relations and economic practices. The consequences of apartheid that have structurally conditioned democratic South Africa to a continuing yet absurd and questionable reality of a white privileged minority group and the black disadvantaged ironically subject the latter to being both a minority and the marginalised in the visual arts arena. As Enwezor observed, “nowhere is the ideology of this racial fundamentalism in the shaping of national identity more potently manifested than in the arena of sports and visual arts. These are modes of culture that, according to Edward Said, occupy the realm of pleasure and leisure, coarsened by brutal exclusion and primitive racial determinism.”<sup>437</sup> In particular the visual arts is a cultural domain that remains dominated by a white bastion. Thus questions of racial domination, racial exclusion, racially infested representation or

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<sup>436</sup> Stuart Hall (ed.) *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1997), 261.

<sup>437</sup> Okwui Enwezor, (1999), *Ibid.*, 379.

misrepresentation exemplify Hall's explanation of the operation of power in conditions of unequal relations between black and white subjects.

The debates of representation in contemporary South African visual arts, as notable in contentious texts by Enwezor, Oguibe and Atkinson/Breitz, provide reasons or rationale to Michael MacDonald's "questions about why races have come to matter in South African history and why they still matter in South African politics".<sup>438</sup> Race and racism have been rendered sensitive topics, mind you, not serious humane experiences, in democratic South Africa, so much so that efforts are made to remove them from public debates, scholarly sites and creative avenues. Thus, in the visual arts context, instead of dealing with questions pertaining to race and racism with regard to politics of representation, key art critics, art theorists and art historians who happen to be white have proposed conceptual shift, by framing the discourse in terms of *grey areas*<sup>439</sup> and *post-identity*.<sup>440</sup> Underlying these proposed concepts is to understand the question of representation anew. There are two important arguments underscoring these debates in post-apartheid South Africa. One argument is the defence for and claim of the right to represent black subjects by white people. The discourse has never or not yet been about black people representing white subjects, because black artists have not done so in any comparable manner that is either positive or negative as noted by Enwezor and Oguibe in the work of the criticized white artists. Otherwise, if black artists have done so, we would all know by now! That black artists have not (yet)

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<sup>438</sup> Michael MacDonald, (2006), *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>439</sup> See Brenda Atkinson and Candice Breitz (eds.), (1999). *Ibid.*

<sup>440</sup> See Liese van der Watt, "Towards an 'Adversarial Aesthetics': A Personal Response to Personal Affects in *Personal Affects: Power and Poetics in Contemporary South African Art*, ed. Sophie Perryer (New York and Cape Town: Museum for African Art and Spier, 2004). I discuss the question of post-identity including post-race and post-black in Chapter 4, "*Are We All Postracial Yet?*": *Reflections on South Africa* of this dissertation.

visually insulted and abused white people (if they will ever do so) in their artistic representations is an interesting question to pose even if there is no answer to it. For such a question speaks to power relations and dynamics and the conditions under which black and white artists have historically operated to date. The conditions are important given the context in which such power relations take place, and are enabled. Black people might have gained political power notable with the dominant black leadership governing democratic South Africa, a leadership that represents diverse South Africa. Yet, black people remain without financial and resource economies that make their political interests viable, especially to establish level planes for equal and mutual relations and engagement between black and white people, men and women, heterosexuals and homo/bisexuals, haves and have-nots. This is more the case in disciplinary fields such as visual arts where black people remain not only a dominated minority still dependent on white patronage and tautology; also black people are still without forceful critical voices that inform and shape art practice at the level of theoretical and discursive written texts.

The non-mutual reciprocity between black and white art practitioners reveals the continuing non-mutual power relations between them, the way they perceive, regard and engage with each other. If black South African art practitioners make any negative comments about whites, they only do so in private corners rather than through their artworks and writings that circulate within accessible public sites.<sup>441</sup> This

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<sup>441</sup> I make this point recalling two arguments. One by Frantz Fanon that, “The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man.” Frantz Fanon, (1967), *Ibid.*, 110. Another by Steve Biko in writing: “the type of black man [i.e. in visual arts] we have today has lost his manhood. Reduced to an obliging shell, he looks with awe at the white power structure and accepts what he regards as the ‘inevitable position’. Deep inside his anger mounts at the accumulating insult [...] In the privacy of his toilet his face twists in silent condemnation of white [visual arts] society but brightens up in sheepish obedience as he comes out hurrying in response to his

is a racial-one-sided politics and attesting to it is the fact that all the controversies that are centrally debated to date have to do with how and why black subjects are represented or excluded from visual texts, written texts, curated exhibitions and art institutions such as galleries, museums, universities, by white people – as noted in Enwezor’s and Oguibe’s criticisms. The problem is twofold: on the one hand there are complaints about negative representations of black people by white people and on the other hand there are heated debates notable with the outrage of white people when they are criticised for their native representation of black people. Such white outrage, of course in defence of being attacked as well as claim for the right to continue representing blacks, is also notable when black people complain about their exclusion from white dominated art institutions.

More than anything, such white outrage is indicative of white racism and defence of whiteness, as it prompts the question: who are these black people to question, ridicule and humiliate the “highly literate, but nonetheless unreflective white cultural practitioners, unblinkingly intent on representing black subjectivity at the margins of cultural and aesthetic discourse”?<sup>442</sup> Added to this question, is the arrogant white assumption that black South Africans are not capable of speaking for themselves, thus they have to be spoken for despite the knowledge that they are aware of the situation and have their own ideas for the sort of changes that would be meaningful to their art and lives. Most black South African art practitioners have opted for silence rather than to voice out not only their grievances but also how the art

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master’s impatient call.” Steve Biko (2004), *Ibid.*, 30-31. Fanon’s and Biko’s comments speak not only to the inflicted fear of black South African art practitioners, but also their silence for not speaking out on the debates that concern the politics of why and how they are represented in visual images, written texts, curated exhibitions and art institutions by white people.

<sup>442</sup> Okwui Enwezor, (1999), *Ibid.*, 384-5.

world should become. Their silence owes to the colonial-apartheid syndrome that they can neither question nor bite the giving hand, the masters who control the art domain and its available opportunities.

### ***Entanglement of Self and Other***

The fourth comment: Despite the valid sentiments expressed in most of the essays in *Grey Areas*, the complexities of entrenched colonial and apartheid leftovers regarding power-relations between the dominating and dominated, white and black, persist. That is, the complexities of the arguments – particularly from the perspective of white art practitioners – reveal the lingering obsession with and indulgence in binarism and/or entanglement of *self* and *other*. While the relationship between *self* and *other* have been central in postcolonial discourses and criticisms that challenge and rethink such binarism and entanglement, in the context of post-apartheid South Africa and more specifically with the debate on the question of visual representation, it is curious to notice that, not black people but white people obsess with this relationship. There is no evidence of any discussion or reflection on black art practitioners on the argument made by white art practitioners that, “Given South Africa’s history, it seems impossible to define oneself, black or white, without the other. It is inescapable.”<sup>443</sup> Such assertion is indicative of the difficulty for many white artists to survive without subjugating the *other* in the search for *self*-identity and affirmation. It seems impossible for white artists not to use or engage the *other* as a convenient subject for self-identification, an identification that is fraught with racial,

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<sup>443</sup> Greg Streak, “The Beauty of Grey” in Brenda Atkinson and Candice Breitz (eds.), (1999), *Ibid.*, 267.

gender and class hierarchies in South Africa. Not only Greg Streak's just afore-referenced point but also Siemon Allen's poignant questions, reflect the intact *self/other* binarism/entanglement: the impossibility of detaching the other from the self. As Allen writes, "I wonder if it is possible (particularly in a race-obsessed South Africa), to speak solely 'of oneself' without implicating the 'other'? How can any self-critical process not make reference to that which is intrinsically present in its critique?"<sup>444</sup>

There are two points I would like to make regarding Allen's questions. One is a poignant point Clive Kellner makes that, "some white South African artists tend to deflect their own experiences through the portrayal of the black subject, as opposed to speaking for their own recollections". Advising against this tendency, Kellner argues, "speaking from one's own position, not through the Other, will contribute to a heterogeneous, yet cohesive, social politik. Perhaps one should speak for the self rather than the other."<sup>445</sup> Two, Allen's questions are relevant to understanding why for the white South African artist, the dominating *self* seems to have no meaning without the black subject, the dominated *other*. Given that apartheid structured South African society in racial grids of hierarchical order, white people occupied top positions marked by excessive privileges that were built at the expense of black exploitation and denigration. At the bottom of the hierarchy there are disadvantaged black people. In other words, what provides comfort and well-being for white people are the privileges they have not only through oppressing and exploiting black people as subservient; but

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<sup>444</sup> Ibid., 35

<sup>445</sup> Clive Kellner, "Cultural Production in Post-Apartheid South Africa" in *Trade Routes: History and Geography* ed. Okwui Enwezor (Johannesburg: Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council, 1997), 30.

also the privilege to know the meaning of such privilege in maintaining themselves, their comfort and well-being. That is, the white privilege of domination only exists by dominating the disenfranchised black people. Thus, the relationship between black and white people is not of mutual interaction; rather, it is of dominating and dominated, empowered and disenfranchised. That is what Streak's comment and Allen's questions illuminate. It is noteworthy that Frantz Fanon's contention that the relationship between black man and white man in racially unequal society has no "converse".<sup>446</sup> I therefore only share the rhetorical question – what is the *self* without the *other* – in that "everyone is ethnocentric, everyone perceives each as Other, everyone has an Otherness."<sup>447</sup> Yet, I am critical of the cultural relationships and social imbalances, economic systems and knowledge that still favour white subjects in South Africa. For they condition practical mechanisms and possibilities that are supposed to offer black subjects the same privileges as white subjects. There is a need to mention that post-apartheid South Africa is still fraught with disparities.<sup>448</sup> The representations of black

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<sup>446</sup> "For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some critics will take it on themselves to remind us that this proposition has a converse. I say that this is false. The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man" Frantz Fanon, (1967), *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>447</sup> Gerald McMaster, "Desperately Seeking Identity in the Space of the Other" in Edward Poitras: Canada xlvi Biennale di Venezia (Canada: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1995), 23.

<sup>448</sup> Thus, my concern is why black subjects are self-defining or self-identifying without objectifying the white subjects. Why don't black subjects occupy the upper pole that feeds narcissism by being the object of symbolic idealization, while the lower pole is devalued and subjected to denial and repression? This is not advocating reversal of power and domination in favour of black subjects; rather my concern is the unlevelled ground on which identity construction or self-definition is carried. It is in that context I find Michel Foucault's argument on power incompetent: his intellectuality hardly provides viable inspirational or ideological sources for transformations which translate into the betterment of the quality of life for black South African humanity where white people control almost all economic, educational, cultural essentials. Besides shying away from discussing race and racism as intrinsic in the discourse of power, Foucault's ideas are more formal than organically integrative with respect to the black South African historical and cultural problem. Theoretically, they are sound but practically they are ineffective. Even if among the marginal subjects there are those having (some) power, it is restrictedly effective within the marginal space they occupy; it is mostly exercised against those powerless within that marginal space. For that power is limited and thus ineffective against those having the overall power in controlling the entire South African art context. This is not to say, there are no possible ways to question, protest or subvert dominating power. It is however to point out that the present predicament of black subjects is primarily a condition perpetuated by the privileged white that is very aware of its power and how to keep manipulating means to sustain its power.

African male circumcision exemplify these disparities in South African contemporary visual art practice, as I would like to sketch out in the following section.

### ***South African White Artists and Male Circumcision Ritual***

In 1990, a white male Jewish photographer, Steve Hilton-Barber (1962-2002) exhibited photographs in which he captured a group of young Northern Sotho male initiates during their circumcision ritual. Through a problematic anthropological gaze, he fixed the initiates as primitive *others*, projecting them in a tourist-orientated spectacle, which elicited an outcry from those for whom the ritual has significance. As a white person, Hilton-Barber was criticized for insensitivity and intrusion, invading and exposing a sacred ritual for public consumption. Questions of access and the right to photograph and represent the sacred African ritual by a white *outsider* informed the heated debate. Brenda Atkinson noted that: “Perceived to be devoid of a discerning and critically engaged ‘political’ agenda, the photographs [by Hilton-Barber] became a widely discussed example of an intrusive (white) voyeurism that sentimentalized and aestheticized racial ‘otherness’ for commercial consumption.”<sup>449</sup>

In his *Abakhwetha* project (1999), Beezy Bailey (b.1962) appropriated aspects of the Xhosa male *ulwaluko* ritual to temporarily convert an apartheid bronze statue of Boer War General Louis Botha, which is situated in front of the South African Parliament building (See Figure 23).<sup>450</sup> In his visual representation, Bailey clothed Botha’s statue with a costume – traditional blanket and crafted hat—and painted the

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<sup>449</sup> Brenda Atkinson, “Introduction” in Brenda Atkinson and Candice Breitz eds.), (1999), *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>450</sup> See Beezy Bailey’s website, <http://www.beezybailey.co.za/new/aba.htm>

face of the statue with white clay. These features are *only* customary with Xhosa novices during their liminal period in seclusion. Bailey appropriated the sacred forms of the circumcision ritual for a visual representation, which was an exhibit for public spectacle. In an absurd way, he disfigured the colonial statue, presumably subverting the identity of white male power and reconstructing it into an image of the primitive *other*. Alternatively, this could be read as a possibility for the white male to partake of the identity of the primitive or it could be as an insensitive attempt to honour South Africa's transition from apartheid to future where white males will undergo circumcision. Another view is that Bailey seems to wish to question Boer/Afrikaner apartheid heroes that publicly represent/occupy position of power through private Xhosa ritual practice. Is this possible and what are the implications? Why can't white South Africans interrogate public monuments through and on South African terms of subjectivity, without utilizing black subjects as strategic vices?

In his visual strategy, Bailey converts the white subject (*self*: symbolic of power, control and civilization) into a black subject (*other*: symbolic of primitivism, exoticism, marginal rural history). This obliteration of cognizable identity functions neither for the interest and empowerment of the black subject, nor for the shifting of power from white to black subjects. Rather it objectifies the black subject by retrieving the image/body of the primitive *other* from his territory of seclusion, the sacred rite of passage from which a white person is forbidden. Thus, Bailey brings the primitive *other* to the public arena for the white gaze (a racial group dominating the city centre) and its habits of exotic contemplation. Obviously, Bailey removes the cultural forms of *ulwaluko* out of their proper context fragmenting and de-

substantiating the *other*. This exercise is damaging to the aesthetic sensibilities of the circumcision ritual, sensibilities that are contingent upon the ritual's "proper" context. Because, in the process of appropriation and representation, "essential ingredients" are edited: doing so not only decontextualizes the (cultural) *other* but also deconstructs and alters traditional meanings, thus forcing the (cultural) *other* into "new" significations that require "new" readings and interpretations.<sup>451</sup> Although this operation could be considered disruptive of traditional notions of the ritual which enables other forms of understanding, the problem is that it forces the cultural *other* into peculiar modes of representations that unavoidably could be considered *demeaning* and *denigrating*.<sup>452</sup> The *other* becomes an objectified-subject who nourishes the white privilege, and desire for an "alter ego": the desire to be the *other*.

### ***On Peet Pienaar's I Want To Tell You Something***

Where Hilton-Barber's photographs intrusively captured and fixed the *Sotho* initiates for commercial consumption and Bailey's converted the Botha statue into a (black) novice by appropriating the *ulwaluko* ritual for a public controversial display,<sup>453</sup> Peet Pienaar's work, *I Want To Tell You Something* (2000), stretched the limits of appropriation and representation. In the following discussion I want to make two arguments regarding Pienaar's proposal and the work. The first argument is that

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<sup>451</sup> Which could be a good thing for works of art to do right but if is done through problematic appropriation that advocates and reinforces otherness in coarse ways, both the artist and his works should not be excused from criticism and disqualification.

<sup>452</sup> Two black South Africans commented: "One threatened to shoot the artist, and asked: 'Why don't you go and do that to your own people?' In another instance, a woman screamed: 'This is disgusting!'" See Tarzan Mbita, <http://www.beezybailey.co.za/new/press/abakw/abakw.htm>

<sup>453</sup> "The statue's transformation provoked a death threat and received extensive international press and TV coverage as a provocative symbol of South Africa's transition" (September 1999)" Ibid.

Pienaar problematizes (the construction of masculine) identity. The second argument is that Pienaar's artistic strategies – of appropriation and representation – are problematic, thus his work falls into a trap: *vulgarization* and *violation* of the *ulwaluko* ritual.

Pienaar's appropriation and performance of *ulwaluko* – specifically the circumcision part – challenge notions of ownership, authenticity, ethnicity and nativity – all of which tend to essentialize identity. Given that Pienaar is not a Xhosa male, his appropriation and performance of the Xhosa ritual could be seen as a cultural crossing, a subversive act that destabilizes both Afrikaner-ness and Xhosa-ness. Any identity expectations characterized by and invested in what constitute Afrikaner male or Xhosa male are challenged. In effect, while Pienaar subverts his own Afrikaner maleness by lending himself to undergo a Xhosa male circumcision ritual of his own invention, he extends his Afrikaner-ness as well as unlocks the Xhosa ritual from being only a Xhosa male practice. In so doing, making the ritual a cultural resource not only to be shared and utilized by others beyond racial and native grouping. He also subjects it into strategic use: as a viable creative rite for reflection and redefinition of individual and collective identities. By undergoing his invented version of a Xhosa circumcision ritual Pienaar does not necessarily abscond his Afrikaner-ness. He rather extends his male formation into being an individual whose (male) identity is a formation of assorted cultural intercourses. In this way, Pienaar's intervention disturbs uniformity/stability of identity. As such, it could be argued that identity is *provisional* as it can be unpredictable in its never stable *being*. Or identity should be considered a frame of reference, a discursive and traveling signifier, at once slippery and at once

dodgy as it is always in the process of *invention* and *becoming*.

Our chaotic contemporary South Africa is constituted of diverse cultures that co-exist and inter-exist. It is an exciting and disconcerting context, one formed of various identities that are realized through appropriation and assimilation. The unavoidable contacts between different cultures encourage individuals and groups to frequently appropriate elements from different cultures to construct and augment their own cultural identities for aesthetic, social, political and economic purposes. Some of these individuals also subject themselves or lend their own bodies to undergo others' cultural rituals. Take for example individuals who convert from one religion to another, individuals who study and practice a combination of various religions or customs tracing their roots from different and distant political and geographic regions. Through appropriation and assimilation often motivated by a search for various subjectivities, individuals mobilize their individuality and collectivity, association and disassociation, conformity and defiance. What seems to arise from such a context and process is a transitional situation, the in-between space, in which there are unavoidable moments, unpreventable exchanges and integrations between different cultural subjects. This context is marked by "hybridity" or "hybridization", what Homi Bhabha considers to be the *present* "moment of transit where a space and time cross in order to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, integration and exclusion".<sup>454</sup> In this context, for instance, being African in South Africa cannot simply be reduced to skin colour and ancestral origin based on geography, ethnicity or nativity, but various characteristics comprised of complex and

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<sup>454</sup> Homi Bhabha, (1994), *Ibid.*, 1.

contradictory sensibilities that inform what is a contemporary African identity. Thus it could be argued that Pienaar's appropriation is critical in challenging conservation of African traditional male initiation rituals within racial and ethnic essentialism. In so doing, Pienaar probes into issues about African manhood, masculinity and identity, a point also noted by Enwezor in writing: "In this performance he was after two things: the concept of African masculinity which is achieved through the coming of age ritual undergone by Xhosa males, and the relationship of taboo to culture, and the symbolic legitimation of cultural identity."<sup>455</sup>

While the foregoing demonstrates the potential of Pienaar's work in questioning and illuminating serious matters regarding African manhood/masculinity and cultural identity, a critically close reading of Pienaar's appropriation would reveal problems, in particular with respect to both the use of the ritual and the black woman. To understand this problem, let me explain. In his proposal of intent in which he references "the Xhosa circumcision ritual of *ulwaluko*", Pienaar makes three problematic statements that raise serious questions regarding his performance artwork. Firstly, Pienaar writes, "In African tradition you are not a man unless you are circumcised..." Undoubtedly, various practices of male circumcision rituals are found in many African cultures across the continent, although each culture has its own rituals and expectations. In fact, not every African culture practices circumcision. Thus, it is pertinent to ask: which African tradition is Pienaar talking about? Is he totalizing the

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<sup>455</sup> Okwui Enwezor, "The Enigma of the Rainbow Nation: Contemporary South African Art at the Crossroads of History" in Sophie Perryer (ed.), (2004), *Ibid.*, 37.

African continent as one imagined coherent cultural entity?<sup>456</sup> His reference to Africa illustrates the danger of being uninformed and risks in simplistic borrowing from subordinated indigenous cultures. Pienaar's ignorance confirms Bryant's caution when she writes: "Perhaps the most peculiar and most damaging fallout from such [cultural, racial and gender] referencing in contemporary art and popular culture is the impact that improper or inaccurate references have. This occurs when the artist appropriates the indigenous form without knowledge or understanding, and uses it out of context."<sup>457</sup>

In the second statement Pienaar writes, "My idea for the exhibition is to get a black [woman] medical doctor to circumcise me live in the gallery." His motivation is that, "My use of a black [woman] medical doctor explores the poor trust us white South Africans have when it comes to professional help like medical, law etc.... For men, this issue is specially huge, specially because it is the penis which is being treated..." I am curious as to why Pienaar chose to use a black medical doctor, in fact a black woman, and not, for example, white medical doctor, white men or women. Why black and woman? In a closer reading of Pienaar's statement, evident are the binary opposites: black/white, male/female, traditional/modern. Even more revealing is that Pienaar needed the visible difference of otherness which black renders in South Africa. Pienaar is not interested in her ethnicity or cultural affiliation—he just wanted a black woman—because ethnicity or cultural affiliation in this case would not necessarily enable the *total* visible difference of otherness which racial (black) and

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<sup>456</sup> Valentine Mudimbe's texts problematize the idea and construction of Africa, as well as illuminate the problems and complexities in totalizing Africa. See Valentine Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), and *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

<sup>457</sup> Linda G. Bryant, (1994), *Ibid.*, 105.

gender (sexual) identities offer.

Pienaar's white licence to use the black medical doctor both appropriates and displaces the black woman into a white (male) dominated art domain. He not only draws her into an art context, an artistic discourse foreign to her medical practice but also domesticates her to provide a labour service in carrying out the circumcision operation. Of course, with her black identity at stake, Pienaar enacts the exercise of racial dichotomy: the unspoken imbalances of power relations between black and white. The white artist has the idea/mind, and therefore is a *thinker*; while the black doctor performs the service, and therefore is *labour*. I need to mention that, the black doctor's medical skills in the context of Pienaar's performance art piece are only significant to meet the artist/thinker's ends. The black doctor is a useful skilled labourer and aestheticized racial *other*. In fact, in displacing the black woman medical doctor and the *ulwaluko* ritual, Pienaar appropriates both of them, in a scenario reminiscent of colonialism. The implication here is that both appropriation and displacement are an exercise of white male power to choose whatever and whoever, at whatever and whoever's expense. Pienaar targets the most historically oppressed subject, "women of African descent [who] suffer double jeopardy as the marginalized other"<sup>458</sup> to use the words of Salah Hassan and Dorothy Desir-Davis. I perceive most black women in the South African context to suffer *triple jeopardy* as the marginalized *other* in the sense that she is positioned within the lowest echelon of the hierarchy: white men at the top, followed by white women, then black men and finally at the bottom are black women. Pienaar's co-option of the black woman reminds me of Haki

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<sup>458</sup> Salah Hassan and Dorothy Desir-Davis, "Introduction" in Salah Hassan (ed.), (1996), *Ibid.*, 1.

Madhubuti who wrote that “White men do not fear Black women. The white man’s relationship to Black women traditionally [in the discourse of colonialism and slavery] has been one of use, sexually and otherwise... White men do fear Black men.”<sup>459</sup>

Pienaar invokes another problem. Traditionally, in Xhosa culture, women do not circumcise males and their participation in the *ulwaluko* ritual is restricted to the margins. Therefore, what is Pienaar advocating and establishing by centring the black woman: is he putting her in (another) jeopardy, turning her against cultural expectations that are seriously demanded by her people, particularly the traditionalists? Is Pienaar mocking the *ulwaluko* ritual? Is he creating rupture? Or is he being ironic? Concerning irony, I am reminded of Donald Kuspit’s problem with the “Pseudo-avant-garde art [which] confirms the decadence of criticality and the ‘redesign’ of the already known by ironic appropriation of it... Irony is no longer really critical, or rather it is comfortable for criticality, a criticality that causes no self-questioning.”<sup>460</sup> What makes Pienaar’s ironic appropriation more problematic is his *insensitivity* and *disrespect*. Besides his lack of “criticality that causes no self-questioning,” the black woman is stripped of (her own) cultural meaning, values and purpose while at the same time given cultural meaning (or subjectivity) by a white male. In effect, Pienaar’s appropriation reflects how white South Africans view black women: palatable subjects that can be domesticated and manipulated and exploited for ends that benefit their appropriators.

In Pienaar’s performance art, the black woman is a silenced figure with a

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<sup>459</sup> Haki R. Madhubuti, *Black Men: Obsolete, Single, Dangerous? Afrikan American Families in Transition: Essays in Discovery, Solution and Hope* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1991), 70.

<sup>460</sup> Donald Kuspit, *The Culture Of The Avant-Garde Artist* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 102.

scalpel (symbolic of dagger) in her hands, one that is invested with consequences. Her presence is only to execute, to carry the butcher's job, remove the white foreskin, *inqambi* (dirt thing). Like many oppressed black women in domestic work, she has to clean the white dirt. Pienaar repositions the black woman into "her place" of domestic servitude. Her domestication is resonant to the "black female attendant ... as both a reflex of the classic black servant figure in the visual arts of the eighteenth century and a representation of [Charles] Baudelaire's 'Venus noire.'"<sup>461</sup> As in Delacroix's *Women of Algiers* (1834), Manet's *Olympia* (1863) and Frederic Bazille's *La Toilette* (1870), in Pienaar's *I Want To Tell You Something* the black woman recalls the "practice of depicting 'negresses' ... the representation of 'fallen' women ... as allegories of Africa".<sup>462</sup> In these visual texts, the black woman has no speech to protest against the white male gaze that controls her. She is objectified and muted as a "silent native".

According to Oguibe,

the native whose silence is an objectifying projection – what we may refer to as *significant* silence. For though the silence is not literal, it is nevertheless made real since, beyond the preferred narrative – that specified rhetoric that reiterates palatable constructs of otherness – the native's utterances are not speech. They occupy the site of the guttural, the peripheries of sense, the space of the unintelligible...<sup>463</sup>

The black woman's silence, which is rendered through Pienaar's modes of appropriation and representation, devalues her *being*. She ceases to be herself and becomes a marginalized black *other*, an object of exotic fascination, massaging the desire of the Afrikaner artist. Her job is to perform for Pienaar's pleasure, rather than providing the central experience only understood by the inflicted pain. Pienaar

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<sup>461</sup> Sander L. Gilman, (2002), *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>462</sup> Stephen Eisenman, (2002), *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>463</sup> Olu Oguibe, "Art, Identity, Boundaries: Postmodernism and Contemporary African Art" in Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor (eds.), (1999), *Ibid.*, 23.

underwent the surgery injected with anaesthesia. He ignored if not defied the significance of the ritual, which is premised on enduring *pain*: the willingness “to endure pain” is a condition required of the initiate, as it is associated with “individual worth or value”.<sup>464</sup> Disregarding the significance of pain as the underlying requirement of the *ulwaluka* in the construction of male identity – a pain that also in Western philosophy or thought is considered to be “an ideology of territorial self-definition”<sup>465</sup> – Pienaar might be considered to experience the *touch* or *stroke* of the black woman handling his pink genitalia. Supposedly, the sensation must have amused and tinkled Pienaar’s imagination, under anaesthesia. Sue Williamson’s remarks after Pienaar’s circumcision performance are relevant: “The fact that the artist [Pienaar] is two steps away laughing and joking and clearly quite O.K. does nothing to dispel the cold queasiness induced by this [foreskin cutting off video] sequence.”<sup>466</sup> It is therefore unavoidable to perceive pleasure based on sexuality in Pienaar’s work, in fact racial sexuality at its most organized artistic indulgence.

The freedom to choose after the collapse of apartheid in 1994 and specifically the subsequent abolishment of the Immorality Act, which was designed to prevent any sexual contacts between the black and white races during apartheid, seem to have come at no better time for the Afrikaner artist, Pienaar. I am reminded of Lewis Nkosi’s writing in the 1960s in which he explains that the Afrikaners, during apartheid, live with “a sense of sexual guilt” from their desire for the black body. Hence it was “[a]lso understandable, though somewhat ironical, [...] that more

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<sup>464</sup> Lumka Funani, (1990), *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>465</sup> Elian Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 161.

<sup>466</sup> Sue Williamson, “Peet Pienaar at the Brendon Bell-Roberts” *Artthrob*, No. 38 (2000).  
<https://www.artthrob.co.za/00oct/reviews.html#bbr>

Afrikaners than English South Africans have been found transgressing [the Immorality Act] law prohibiting interracial sex... As Can Themba used to say, perhaps the [apartheid] sex laws [were] there to protect the blacks from the sexual appetites of white people rather than the reverse.”<sup>467</sup> Arguably, democratic South Africa no longer prohibits the white Afrikaner artist’s “sexual appetites” for the black body, making it vulnerable. The organized artistic sexuality in Pienaar’s work has historical precedents in European art, as can be observed in Gilman’s comment: “By the eighteenth century, the sexuality of the black, both male and female, becomes an icon for deviant sexuality in general...the black figure appears almost always paired with a white figure of opposite sex.”<sup>468</sup> It is this historical reference of racial and sexual binarism—a black figure paired with a white figure of the opposite sex—in Pienaar’s work that replays European colonial vices. The ordering through which the marginalized subject is brought into *otherness* overtly reflects social and cultural hierarchies.

Pienaar argues that the doctor has power that is vested in her hand with the dagger (scalpel) that cuts the white male’s foreskin: “[t]he [black woman] doctor would have my dick in one hand and a scalpel in the other. I think I would be the vulnerable one.”<sup>469</sup> There is a probability in Pienaar’s statement but anyone critically aware of racist politics, a person who comprehends the circumstances in which race and racism operate in South African professional work, would *agree* that Pienaar is talking *nonsense*: the black professionals’ performance at work is conditioned to meet “higher standards” of deliverance in order to keep their (medical) jobs. In fact, the

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<sup>467</sup> Lewis Nkosi, (1965), *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>468</sup> Sander, L. Gilman, (2002), *Ibid.*,

<sup>469</sup> Michelle Matthews, “Snipping flesh for art’s sake” in <http://michellematthews.co.za/2000/10/24/snipping-flesh-for-arts-sake/>

medical profession as an *accessible* and *normal* career to black South Africans is recent. For a black doctor to mutilate a white male in a public arena would be a crime and a scandal. Chabani Manganyi's remarks are resonant in democratic South Africa: "When one considered that it is primarily because of apartheid that numerous professionals are often bogged down in lengthy trials, it should come as no surprise that questions on the meaning of what one is trying to do professionally under the circumstances should arise."<sup>470</sup> It is also apparent that, in Pienaar's performance artworks, the black doctor is put to the *test*: needing to prove herself and to represent other black doctors, to gain the "trust" of white men and women. As Fanon would say, "if the physician [Negro doctor] made a mistake it would be the end of [her] and all of those who came after [her]".<sup>471</sup> This *test* reveals the racial consciousness of white supremacy in South Africa: lingering mistrust, disrespect and lack of white peoples' confidence in black professionals and leaders. Why and how long will black professionals have to prove their intelligence and ability to gain "trust" from the white race? Under the *test* to gain white trust, the black woman doctor is invited to perform on unequal terms. She performs according to directives defined by Pienaar. As Oguibe might say, she is the "consumable Other who, [is] stripped of authority and ...opened to the penetrative dominatory advances"<sup>472</sup> of a white Afrikaner artist.

A third problem with Pienaar's intent is to advocate that, "[t]he whole event would be broadcast live on the Internet, members of the public would be charged [at least \$1] to access the site. After the performance, my foreskin would be auctioned

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<sup>470</sup> Chabani Manganyi, (1991), *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>471</sup> Frantz Fanon, (1967), *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>472</sup> Olu Oguibe, (1999), *Ibid.*, 23.

live via the Website [and imagine how much money will I make!].” This is a disquieting capitalist goal as the work exploits the cultural *other*<sup>473</sup> through adoption and excretion appropriation, one which is evident of having no regard of the significance and value of both ulwaluko ritual and black woman medical doctor. Of critical concern is Pienaar’s appropriation of the Xhosa circumcision ritual, reducing it to a commodity by taking it out of its proper cultural context and deliberately auctioning his foreskin on the Internet whilst evicting all that he considers unnecessary for his actual or ultimate objective. The practice associated with the removal of the foreskin is very significant in the Xhosa male circumcision ritual: the foreskin’s fate is only known by its owner, it must disappear either by being swallowed by its owner or buried under the ground in a place only known to the owner. In auctioning his foreskin on the Internet, Pienaar not only twists and violates this tradition but also reduces the ritual to a commodity for financial gain. In fact, he *exploits* the *other*’s culture and skilled labour. To borrow Robert Nelson’s argument, accordingly Pienaar’s “appropriation is fundamental to modern advertising and to the abstracting and expropriating strategies of capitalism itself, which [Karl] Marx attempted to describe in *Capital*... [that is] appropriation being the equivalent in the cultural sphere of capitalist expropriation of labour in the economic sphere.”<sup>474</sup> Given the expropriation of the black woman’s labour and Xhosa ritual for capital gain in the economic sphere, then, what does Pienaar’s motive tell us about Albie Sachs’ concern: “We live in such a terribly competitive society, and the money factor plays a big role. The temptation

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<sup>473</sup> While *ulwaluko* circumcision ritual among the Xhosa speaking people is in a crisis and faces possibilities of either being stopped or modified (modification) due to health problems and its life threatening effects, why does a white male artist who does not practice the ritual appropriate and reduce it to artistic representation, particularly as a commodity?

<sup>474</sup> Robert S. Nelson, (1996), *Ibid.*, 119.

for sensation is a real one that corrupts artists – it brings you attention and sells work and to me it's one of the terrible corruptors of contemporary society.”<sup>475</sup> What else could be farther from Sachs' pointed observation when it comes to artworks of the likes of Pienaar?

Another problem to note is that Pienaar's performance art piece sentimentalizes and reduces the African culture and the black body into visual re-enactments that become a spectacle. The problem with “spectacle”, as Guy Debord argued, is that substance of a subject or something “that once was directly lived” becomes “mere representation”,<sup>476</sup> especially when its (original) meanings, forms and traces are adopted and excreted through what Welchman calls *digestive incorporation* and *violent gratification*.<sup>477</sup> In this respect, Pienaar's artistic intention, especially its critical meaning becomes secondary to his personal craving for money. All the deliberated meanings written in his proposal, everything with his performance art piece is reduced to spectacle, and most disappointingly into a commodity. In choosing the Internet to auction his foreskin, Pienaar has turned his severed foreskin into a commodity by packaging it into a product for sale, whilst also consciously or unconsciously referencing if not retrieving violent colonial history that saw Sarah Bartmann's genitalia and brain removed from her corps and bottled in a glass jar, for scientific experimentation and museum display in Paris. Thus, I argue that he undermined any criticism or criticality that the work was primarily supposed to provoke: stimulate awareness of the politics of identity pertaining to race, gender, sex,

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<sup>475</sup> Brenda Atkinson, and Candice Breitz (eds.) (1999), *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>476</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 12.

<sup>477</sup> John Welchman (2003) and (2009), *Ibid.*

class, for instance.

The Internet as a medium for global communication, distribution and marketing, becomes a convenient asset, a viable vehicle for Pienaar's commodity trade. With its capacity to erase geographical distance, connecting various people, the Internet fuels globalization and advances capital exchange. Globalization and capital exchange are accessible and dominated by a privileged minority, those with education, knowledge, money, computers and information technology. So, Pienaar enters this Internet world to connect and interact mostly with his own kinds: those with access that are dominantly white. This is a similar case with galleries and museums still dominantly white-owned and utilized in South Africa. He participates in a domain in which the majority of the very Xhosa people whose ritual he appropriates and exploits for fame and financial gains are inaccessible. In a (Marxist) sense, while the means of producing the work are dependent on appropriated and exploited (black) subjects, their ownership and profit are the appropriator's gains. Hence, Pienaar's appropriation of the Xhosa circumcision ritual and the use of the black woman medical doctor for her skill and labour are exploitative mechanisms for his gains: money, fame, and polemic.

### ***Zwelethu Mthethwa and Beezy Bailey's Ticket To The Other Side***

To fully comprehend and further complicates the issue of appropriation in the context of post apartheid contemporary art in South Africa, I bring in a case from the other side of the dichotomy, that is two examples of work one of which involves a black artist who is implicated in the same practice of appropriation. The exploitative appropriation, worth discussion even briefly here, is also evident in collaboration

project *Ticket To The Other Side* (2001-2003) by Zwelethu Mthethwa (b. 1960) and Beezy Bailey (b. 1962). A photographic project indicative of racial and gender appropriation and representation, *Ticket to the Other Side* is a curious project, one similar to Pienaar's *I Want To Tell You Something*, as it plays with and recuperates colonial tendencies and advances notable for patriarchal disrespect and violation of black women. A brief articulation of what *Ticket To The Other Side* supposedly forwards and prompts us to consider in its offering is apt, following what I provide as a critique of its problematic appropriation and thereafter concludes this chapter.

*Ticket To The Other Side* is a performance project made of a series of photographs shot at different locations in Cape Town. In these photographs, Bailey impersonates black women by painting himself black, dressing up in a range of clothing and modelling in various poses whose visual outlooks are a deceptive black woman that embodies multiple characters: domestic worker, nanny, housewife, porn queen and mistress. In the popular fashion of Mthethwa's colour photographs, this phony woman is shot in township and suburban house interiors and exteriors, where she inhabits surroundings with furniture, cars and advertisement billboards whose function is to compliment and contrast her image as well as her performed acts. What these photographs of these staged scenes that Mthethwa's camera frames, captures and fixes in moments in time seem to forward is a curious range of concerns. In their compositional arrangements, intensive striking colours and illuminating quality light, they become a passageway for aesthetic appreciation and commentary, as they open up into panoramas and circumstances of social, cultural, race, gender, and economic disparities prevailing in South Africa (See Figures 24-26).

The focus of these photographs seems to be the predicament of black women, whose position in society varies in particular with regard to gender and class disparities. This is so given that the majority of black women are circumscribed to vocations in domestic labour and inertly contained within the boundaries of township dwelling, despite the collapse of official apartheid and the advent of democracy in 1994, an exciting and a challenging transition or dispensation which is somewhat enabling a wanting number of black women to move up class hierarchies in South Africa. Notwithstanding, what remains glaring in democratic South Africa is continuing oppression, abuse and exploitation of black women, whose bodies are sustainable sites of subjugation by white men, white women, and black men; thus they suffer the *triple jeopardy*. This predicament is indicative of their continuing struggle to move away from the periphery towards the centre, where they are in enabling positions to repossess subjectivities that would restore their dignity and recognition – politically, socially, economically, educationally, and culturally. Indeed, they have to control their own bodies and possess authority over their identities.

The foregoing argument might seem to be what Mthethwa and Bailey's *Ticket To The Other Side* solicits, adding to questions about the politics of body and identity given the racial, gender, sexual and class construction underpinning this project. Driving *Ticket To The Other Side* would seem to be questions regarding who has control over the body and identity? Are they fixed and stable racially or sexually? If these are some of the questions Mthethwa and Bailey provoke, would it be straightforward to read the inherent irony embedded in the very title *Ticket to the Other Side* to reflectively enunciate an examination of the move from one side to the

“other” transforming the body and identity? Is the conversion of Bailey – a white man into a black woman – not a subversion of masculinity, even if symbolically? Does this alter ego not destabilize dogmatic notions of identity (racially and sexually) as fixed and comfortable traits: demonstrating that identities are (temporary) constructs that are embedded in performance or performativity?

I make these suppositions not oblivious to the fact that *Ticket To The Other Side* is subject to quarrels given the appropriation of the black woman’s body by a white man and a black man. For, who constructs and performs who is very questionable when it comes to the politics of representation and license to represent others? *Ticket To The Other Side* is therefore not free from being criticized as reinforcing the continuing racial and patriarchal license over the black woman’s body. In fact this project both speaks to and recuperates tendencies notable with colonial and racial practices such as white actors wearing blackface makeup in theatre and cinema, for example. Audrey Thomas McCluskey articulates these racial practices in writing:

Under the guise of ‘entertainment’, white actors took to the screen in blackface makeup. They reflected society’s fascination with blackness by ridiculing black life, but also revealed a deep attraction to what it offered. While such notions have migrated and evolved into different formulas over time, film has retained its ability to assault and damage, and has helped to prolong the nation’s racial fantasies.<sup>478</sup>

It could be also argued that these two men are taking advantage of the black woman as a subject at the bottom echelon in the racial and gender hierarchy. They are colonizing, raping, and penetrating her body; and for appropriating and reconstructing her body they demonstrate her vulnerability, notwithstanding testifying to the relegation of black women’s bodies as objects for use and abuse. In fact, Mthethwa

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<sup>478</sup> Audrey Thomas McCluskey, *Imaging Blackness: Race and Racial Representation in Film Poster Art* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 1.

and Bailey's project gives evidence to the argument Sandra Jackson, Fassil Demissie and Michele Goodwin make: "In the popular media black women continue to be portrayed as loose and sexually available."<sup>479</sup>

What makes *Ticket to the Other Side* rather more curious is to note *black male* artist Mthethwa's collaboration with a white male artist Bailey in a problematic appropriation of black women's images, bodies, experiences and desires. I hereby charge Mthethwa not because I expected him to be that different from a white male artist but rather to underscore the fact that black men (including white women and even other black women) also partake in the violation of black women (bodies). I make this charge in view of the argument that, while both black men and black women have suffered under white (male) domination, black women have and continue to also suffer under patriarchal practices of black men. Not only in the domesticity of households, professional workspaces and political institutions, for example, but also in the domain of visual representation.<sup>480</sup> So disconcerting is that, at the time when black women are supposedly occupying some of the key visible and authoritative positions in private and public institutions, we also witness the violation of their bodies. Of course this is a continuing violence that in most cases goes unreported and without confrontation even though it takes place in public sites, through visual representations

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<sup>479</sup> Sandra Jackson, Fassil Demissie and Michele Goodwin (eds.), "Introduction" in *Imagining, Writing, (Re)Reading The Black Body* (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 2009), xv.

<sup>480</sup> Stuart Hall makes a significant observation that black feminist critics Michelle Wallace, Angela Davis and bell hooks, in the American context, "have pointed out how the black resistance to white patriarchal power during the 1960s was often accompanied by the adoption of an exaggerated 'black male macho' style and sexual aggressiveness by black leaders towards black women". Stuart Hall (ed.), in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: The SAGE Publications Ltd, 1997), 272. In the South African context, following are some of the feminists that have posited similar critique: Pumla Dineo Gqola, "Contradictory Locations: Blackwomen and the Discourse of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa", *Meridians 2*, No. 1 (2001); Nomboniso Gasa (ed.), *Basus'iimbokodo, bawel'imilambo / They remove boulders and cross rivers: Women in South African History* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2007); and Shireen Hassim, *The ANC Women's League: Sex, Politics and Gender* (Johannesburg: Jacana Press, 2014).

such as *Ticket To The Other Side*.

The second example to bring in here which is as illustrative of the problematics of appropriation other works discussed above is Bailey's *Joyce Ntobe*. Noted also should be that Bailey has a history of appropriating black subjects for the production of his art projects. Prior to his appropriation of a Xhosa male initiation ritual of *ulwaluko* and his collaboration with Mthethwa in *Ticket To The Other Side*, he produced linocuts and sculptures under the pseudonym Joyce Ntobe, a name representing a black woman he considered his alter ego. These artworks were exhibited in Cape Town and Johannesburg in the early 1990s. In 1992, a series of three linocuts by Joyce Ntobe were submitted to the Cape Town Triennial, and were instantly purchased by the South African National Art Gallery, a purchase Bailey claims to have never occurred with his own artworks. Bailey construed this to be problematic, because the purchase of works by Joyce Ntobe whilst his rejected revealed the racial and gender bias from the National Gallery.<sup>481</sup>

Two points are worth noting here. One is that, we can detect in Bailey's protest a white male feeling deprived by affirmative action, such being one of the instances whites consider a sort of reverse racism when cultural, economic and political institutions in the 1990s began to prioritize black subjects that were historically disadvantaged. Consequently, not only did some white people falsify their identities by appropriating black names or identities as front for access to and acceptability in the post-1994 South African dispensation; they also claimed their African-ness.<sup>482</sup> The

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<sup>481</sup> See Beezy Bailey's statement: <http://www.beezybailey.co.za/art-item/joyce-ntobe/>

<sup>482</sup> For arguments on white claiming to be African see for example, Gerald L'Ange, *The White African: From Colonization to Liberation* (Jeppestown, SA: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2005); Helene Strauss, "From Afrikaner to

appropriation of black subjects by white artists such as Bailey and Pienaar partake, directly or indirectly, in this discourse of exploiting some sense of African-ness for ends that are self-serving, let alone the underpinning racial or racist impulse of their artistic projects.

Two, when Bailey revealed that Ntobe was his alter ego, the National Gallery rejected the prints that were bought instantly and thus a heated controversy ensued and made Bailey's intent and rationale for his alter ego a success (somewhat) in supposedly exposing the racism of the art institution, particularly in its desperation to collect artworks of black women artists. Arguably, Bailey accomplished his objectives but doing so through appropriating a black woman's name, what also is known as *identity theft*, which made him no less in performing the very racism and gendering he was challenging and exposing. Both the act of inventing and naming a black woman for his art project is indicative of white privilege, which enables if not gives him right to the fore of white artist's license over the black woman's body. Again, white patriarchal racism is at play in such art projects, and Mthethwa's collaboration with Bailey makes it more apparent that black men are also complicit to the oppression, exploitation and violation of black women and their bodies.

In effect and to conclude, Bailey's and Mthethwa's *Ticket To The Other Side* are art and Bailey's *Joyce Ntobe* projects perform racial gendering, thus their appropriation is as problematic as Pienaar's *I Want to Tell You Something*. These art projects, arguably, are a propagation of black women's image, body, experience and

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Africa: Whiteness and the Politics of Translations in Antjie Krog's *A Change of Tongue*" in *African Identities*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2006), 179-194; Sally Matthews, "Becoming African: Debating Post-Apartheid White South African Identities" in *African Identities*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2001), 1-17.

aspiration that reveal workings of appropriation for sensation, drama and exploitation. They are an exploitative appropriation that is also for artistic status and financial profits given that these artworks enter commercial gallery circulation and markets.

This chapter criticized the problematic appropriation and representation of African cultures and the black female body by white and black male South African artists. On the one hand, this problematic appropriation is indicative of European colonial practices that trap white South African artists in the rhetoric of the past while on the other hand black and white male South African artists collaborated on visually abusing and exploiting black female subjects through appropriation and in representation. My intention was neither to advocate the “right of the native” and black women to self-representation nor to censor (white and black male) artists from appropriating the cultures and bodies of *others*. Rather my underlying premise was to critique problematic appropriation in contemporary South African art.

CHAPTER 4  
“ARE WE ALL POSTRACIAL YET?”<sup>483</sup>:  
REFLECTIONS ON POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

Since the official end of the apartheid regime in the early 1990s that ushered the dawn of a multi-racial democratic South Africa calls for embracing of a postracial<sup>484</sup> society have been on the rise. In this chapter, I discuss such calls for *post-identity*, *post-race* and *post-black* in contemporary South African visual arts, as exemplified by an essay authored by the white South African art historian Liese van der Watt.<sup>485</sup> Whilst sharing the importance of such a call, the chapter interrogates it through a critical reading of selected artworks by two black South African artists, Churchill Madikida and Thando Mama. Such critical reading demonstrates the shortcomings of abstract calls that do not take into account the “afterlife” of race in the context of the post-apartheid regime and its racialized structure. My premise is that, call such as van der Watt’s diverts attention away from pressing problems, which include marginalization and exclusion of black art producers from opportunities and privileges enjoyed by white art producers in art institutions. A best place to begin this chapter is to read and reflect on van der Watt’s propositions and thereafter discuss exemplary artworks that contradict her propositions. This helps us further elucidate the problematic of transcendental calls that tend to ignore the very material bases of racial

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<sup>483</sup> This question is with reference to David Theo Goldberg’s *Are We All Postracial Yet?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

<sup>484</sup> I have retained David Goldberg’s use of *postracial* without the hyphen.

<sup>485</sup> Throughout this chapter I write *post-identity*, *post-race* and *post-black* with hyphen in Liese van der Watt’s original use.

oppression as it intertwined with capitalism and its historical essence as a white supremacist project.

In his recent meditation on the idea of the post-racial David Theo Goldberg contends that postraciality has assumed another form of revisionist racism but incarnated in the prefix post. In Goldberg's elaboration, the postracial is not the demise of race, but its afterlife as the context of post-apartheid South Africa clearly exemplifies: "the postracial is to the racial as the postcolonial is to the colonial. It is not the end of racial determination, just as postcoloniality did not signal the colonial's end. Rather it is a different mode by which the racial is lived out."<sup>486</sup> Reinterpreting the postracial in such a way allows us to see post-apartheid for what it is—a space in which blacks are still living the structural disadvantages of racialized capitalism, and the black body continues to experience racial oppression differently, as forms of oppression and exploitation shift from "overt" discrimination to "covert" ones. In the contemporary art world, we may not see overt forms of discrimination against black artists or cultural workers, yet they continue to be marginalized within public and private art spaces—be they art schools, museums, galleries or auction houses. Even with minor changes serving tokenism or window-dressing, the structural inequalities typical of decades of the apartheid regime continue to privilege white artists, curators, museum administrators, gallerists and other cultural brokers to the detriment of their black counterparts.

In her essay, *Towards 'Adversarial Aesthetics': A Personal Response to Personal Affects*, van der Watt discusses the shifting state of identity, by invoking four

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<sup>486</sup> Ibid.

notions: *post-identity, post-race, post-black and post-ethnicity*. The latter is given less attention and thus appears that van der Watt considers the other three notions more important and useful to articulate the transgression of normative understanding and conceptions, even ideals, of identity politics. What seems pressing for van der Watt is the expediency or convenience of the notion post-identity for unlocking the constraint domain that makes it impossible to recognize and comprehend the limits and the *failure* not only of identity but also of subjecthood in contemporary South African visual arts. Both identity and subjecthood, for van der Watt, are constructs predicated on fiction. In fact, she considers identity fictional. Thus, there is a need for “going beyond” fixations that have locked identities within binary categories that were constructed by apartheid. As she writes,

[A]partheid, with its frenzy of prohibitive laws and regulations, was a desperate attempt to simplify, reduce and discipline identity into submission. With its focus on race and segregation, apartheid, but also the liberation struggle in South Africa, managed “to mask complex configurations of identity” while “an over-simplified moment of rainbow nationalism” has tried to do the same in the post-apartheid era.<sup>487</sup>

Apparently, even political movements such as African National Congress, Pan African Congress, South African Communist Party, Black Conscious Movement and United Democratic Front, which pursued “the liberation struggles against (the Afrikaner National Party’s) apartheid,”<sup>488</sup> according to van der Watt, have failed to rupture binary categories marked by race and identity. The appeal to non-racialism and democracy by ANC and UDF, for example, appears meaningless and unrewarding if unfulfilled, to van der Watt. For these political efforts have failed to foster an understanding of identities as “fluid”, “complex” and “multiple”. In fact these

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<sup>487</sup> Liese van der Watt, (2004), *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>488</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

liberation movements fell short to comprehend that identities should be “formed through active self-definition now, rather than through perpetual resistance and mobilization.”<sup>489</sup> In this sense, we might construe that, for van der Watt, post-apartheid South Africa no longer needs politics of resistance and mobilization, even if oppressive and exploitative practices continue to both haunt and circumscribe democratic South Africa. This therefore suggests that *collective* practices are no longer necessary, what is useful is the definition and construction of identities in terms of *individuality*. Thus, for her, in democratic South Africa, “we [should] celebrate our multiple identities, our freedom to define who we are” in an understandable sense that “our identities are openly fluid and complex”.<sup>490</sup>

Furthermore, if van der Watt is not proposing termination of the concept identity (and race) she rather recognizes its supposed if not desired dying moment in writing: “The liquidity of this concept [identity] – the many ways in which it spills over boundaries and seeps out of categories – bespeaks not simply its complexity but, more than that, *signals perhaps its end*.”<sup>491</sup> What seem to be at stake in her argument are sentiments indicative of post-modernism. Here we are reminded of Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *end of the grand narrative*, an argument van der Watt establishes in another essay in which she explains the term post-identity “to describe the way in which many contemporary South African artists’ work is informed, but no longer governed, by their identity positions.”<sup>492</sup>

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<sup>489</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>490</sup> Ibid.

<sup>491</sup> Ibid. Italics my emphasis.

<sup>492</sup> Liese van der Watt, “The Opposite of Everyday: Wim Botha’s Acts of Translation” in *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, No. 22/23, 2008, 122.

Jean-Francois Lyotard defined “*post-modern* as an “incredulity toward metanarratives”, which implies a discourse that champions great disbelief of homogenizing gestures and practices in Western civilisation and culture, and serve as a legitimating force.<sup>493</sup> In the context of South Africa, the advent of democracy in 1994 marked the end of an oppressive meta-narrative, an official collapse of the apartheid regime that *politically* subjugated all other narratives during its brutal rule. Democratic South Africa presents a moment to interrogate narratives that were constructed, imposed and stabilized by the apartheid regime. Such interrogation takes on board those narratives that were also born due to resistance against apartheid, especially Black Nationalism and Black Consciousness Movement, for example. In simple terms, two of the opposing narratives in the history of South African politics have been whiteness and blackness, thus Okwui Enwezor has proposed for democratic South Africa that, “what needs interrogation is usage of any fixed meaning of blackness as an ideology of authenticity, or whiteness as a surplus enjoyment of superiority.”<sup>494</sup> It is with regards to this interrogation of whiteness and blackness that van der Watt seems to call for post-identity. Having argued for “exiting whiteness”,<sup>495</sup> which in Carli Coetzee’s summary is “in service of a non-racial future where race does not figure in any of the apartheid sense of the word”,<sup>496</sup> van de Watt goes after blackness; thus in her essay *Towards Adversary Aesthetics*’ she calls for *post-black*.

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<sup>493</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennigton and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxv.

<sup>494</sup> Okwui Enwezor, (1999), *Ibid.*, 389.

<sup>495</sup> Liese van der Watt, *The Many Heart of Whiteness: Dis-investing in Whiteness Through South African Visual Culture* (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, State University of New York, 2003).

<sup>496</sup> Carli Coetzee, (2013), *Ibid.*, 68.

Her call to move beyond if not undo both whiteness and blackness are framed under the notion of *post-identitarian*, as she explains:

Despite the usual vagueness of affixes pre- and post-, post-identity brings with it a certain vacuity that is, for once, enabling and productive. It makes space for uncertainty and incompleteness, it opens itself up to constant mutation. Like the family of “posts” to which it belongs ... post-identity carries within it a question and a search [as] it signals a departure, but no arrival.<sup>497</sup>

It is this space of uncertainty that the concept of “post-identity” wants to capture, acknowledging a certain irritation with the inadequacy of identity, while celebrating the provisional liberation that is embedded in that affix, “post”. Terms like post-black, post-race, post-ethnicity and post-identity are symptomatic of a cultural impasse that targets identity as the main culprit. These are diagnostic terms that, admittedly, bring no ready cure. More than anything else, the affix “post” signals a disjuncture with the world in which we live and describes an intellectual mindset impatient to articulate alternative ways.<sup>498</sup>

It is the space of uncertainty, where rapture manifests to destabilize identity in the process of a constant becoming, that the concept of post-identity undertakes to capture and frame. In developing her definition of post-identity, van der Watt makes reference to arguments made by Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks and Paul Gilroy who “are calling not simply for an end to blackness (or whiteness for that matter), but for a rejection of race in total.”<sup>499</sup> She finds Seshadri-Crook’s theory of “adversarial aesthetics” useful as it “will throw racial signification into disarray”, in particular that such “a concept ... asks us to see differently, think differently and signify differently.”<sup>500</sup> In Gilroy’s argument, van der Watt finds compelling the “insufficiency” of the painstaking work put into the “construction” of “the idea of race”, an idea that “is ethically indefensible.”<sup>501</sup> Thus her conclusion is that,

Both Gilroy, who foresees a utopian state of “planetary humanism” where race will no longer matter, and Seshadri-Crooks, who proclaims “an adversarial aesthetics” that will subvert racial

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<sup>497</sup> Liese van der Watt, (2004), *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>499</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>500</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>501</sup> *Ibid.*

looking, describe a world already changed to its very fibre, but it is the journey to that point that is captured by the term “post-race”. Like post-identity, it expresses the desire to move on and to think differently, without necessarily proclaiming an arrival.<sup>502</sup>

Van der Watt is also drawn into Judith Butler’s “writings on identity as performative and conclusive,” as she explains: “like Butler’s theorization of performative identity, post-identity does not describe what we are, but what we do and what we become, recurrently. In addition, post-identity expresses a desire to move on from notions of identity and acknowledges the difficulty of that search.”<sup>503</sup> At first glance, such theoretical formulations are sound, as their propositions are important with regards to the need to “search” for (new) ways “to see differently, think differently and signify differently” about identity and race. This is particularly important in line with van der Watt’s desire for a free-race or non-racial society “where race will no longer matter”.<sup>504</sup> In fact, her desire is not a novelty, for instance, recalling arguments made by black political thinkers and activists such as Albert Luthuli, Nelson Mandela and Steve Biko during apartheid. Luthuli stated, “I stress that the question of ‘color’ and ‘swamping’ will not be relevant ... in a non-racial democracy” and so Mandela expressed in his Rivonia trials speech, “It is not true that the enfranchisement of all will result in racial domination. Political division, based on color, is entirely artificial and, when it disappears, so will the domination of one color group by another.”<sup>505</sup> Biko also argued that, when all racially different people live in a society without institutionalized racism that serves interests of a white minority at the expense of the black majority, when “the history of the country may have to be written ... we may

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<sup>502</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>503</sup> Ibid.

<sup>504</sup> Ibid.

<sup>505</sup> Cited in Michael McDonald, (2006), Ibid., 111.

[then] live in ‘a country where color will not serve to put a man [and a woman] in a box’.”<sup>506</sup> Reiterating the future of non-racialism, Steve Biko further wrote: “the ‘Black Consciousness’ approach would be irrelevant in a colorless and non-exploitative egalitarian society. It is [however] relevant here because we believe an anomaly situation is a deliberate creation of [white] man.”<sup>507</sup>

In light of Biko’s comment it is discernable that, blackness was (and is) never permanent or immortal but transient and expedient, a deliberate political identity and liberation project that at some point would come to an *end*. But such an end of blackness would and should only be the case in a normal situation where lives of the majority of black people are no longer defined by oppression, exploitation and inequality notable with poverty, unemployment, improper housing and lack of health facilities all giving evidence to the graphic racial disparities that are in no way compared to the quality life enjoyed by most whites and the recent tiny group of blacks in democratic South Africa. Only in such a normal situation the end of blackness would be considered, let us say, in terms of post-ism discourse, as exemplified with the problematic notion *post-black* originating from the United States of America, a notion van der Watt<sup>508</sup> borrowed from curator Thelma Golden (who coined the term in conversation with artist Glenn Ligon).<sup>509</sup>

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<sup>506</sup> Steve Biko, (2004), *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>507</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>508</sup> Liese van der Watt, (2004), *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>509</sup> Thelma Golden, *Freestyle* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001), 14.

In spite of being cautious or suspicious,<sup>510</sup> van der Watt nevertheless applies this catchy-phrase not simply to frame South African art of black artists but rather to condemn or attack views uttered by black artists<sup>511</sup> in the video documentary, *The Luggage is still Labelled: Blackness in South African Art* (2003) by artist Vuyile Voyiya and art historian Julie McGee.<sup>512</sup> In fact, *The Luggage* is one of the primary reasons that prompted the discussion on post-identity.<sup>513</sup> Van der Watt noted this, considering it as *a case in point* for her essay, given that on the one hand it “showed that a very real perception exists that art and educational institutions are still besieged by racist prejudice in South Africa, leading to a situation where access to education, art collections and curatorial and critical positions remain largely restricted to whites.”<sup>514</sup> On the other hand, she argues that the video “also manages to reduce identity to essence. In this way, subtleties of identity are completely flattened.”<sup>515</sup> Another notable criticism of the video came from Mario Pissarra, who, like van der Watt, acknowledges but haughtily undermines the exclusion and marginalization of blacks from art institutions in South Africa.<sup>516</sup> Unlike these white critics, black art and

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<sup>510</sup> “While there is reason to be suspicious of Golden’s catchy phrase—how can one be post-black if one identifies as black, and if that blackness structures one’s position in the world?—the term was significant for articulating a desire to move beyond identity politics based in blackness.” Liese van der Watt, (2004), *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>511</sup> Among those interviewed on camera are Peter E. Clarke, Lionel Davis, David Koloane, Garth Erasmus, Zayd Minty, Mgcineni Sobopha, Berni Searle, Lallitha Jawahirilal, Gabisile Ngcobo, Moshekwa Langa and Graham Faulken including whites Marilyn Martin, Gavin Younge and Lloyd Pollock.

<sup>512</sup> *Luggage is still labelled: blackness in South African art*, a film by South African artist Vuyile C. Voyiya and American art historian Julie L. McGee, 2003. 60 minutes. Sound Color DVD format. Features PAL and NTSC standards on alternate sides of the disc. Video 000574 AFA. OCLC 52761698

<sup>513</sup> Edited by Sean O’Toole, a supplementary section titled “Weighing ... and wanting” featured four essays discussing some of the issues generated by *The Luggage is still Labelled* in *Art South Africa*, Vol. 2. No. 2 (2003), 32-41.

<sup>514</sup> Liese van der Watt, (2004), *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>515</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>516</sup> “It proceeds from the premise that the film strongly expresses the alienation, frustration and marginalization that many black artists feel. However it queries the implications and value, particularly within the current socio-political context of theorizing “blackness” as an oppositional force to “whiteness”, and of essentializing racial identities instead of deconstructing them [...] However it can be argued that the film is profoundly depressing, a catalogue of grievances mirroring an unsatisfactory situation, and short on offering solutions other than mobilizing “blackness”

cultural organizer Zayd Minty reflected on the racist prejudice and racial exclusion, which are instrumental in not only marginalizing but also frustrating black artists in South African institutions of higher learning and training. In describing contents of the video *The Luggage*, Minty writes:

Showcasing primarily black voices speaking about their marginalization and frustration with the art establishment, the video calls for institutions to be self-reflective and address the lack of voices in their ranks. A re-examination of art history is proposed, particularly the way the discipline has been constructed and taught in South African universities. The development of a canon of (black) South African art is emphasized as an essential step in uncovering the richness of the country's heritage.<sup>517</sup>

Similarly, black scholar Dagmawi Woubshet argued that:

The film interrogates the many ways black artists remain disenfranchised. Issues brought out include: the meagre representation of blacks in the various fine art institutions (as students, lecturers, critics, gallery owners, etc.); the meagre representation of their works in museums and galleries; and the ways in which art history and criticism, as an academic discipline, reifies Western thought and practice. These issues, needless to say, seriously challenge an emphatic, collective voice one readily finds in South African art criticism.<sup>518</sup>

The points Minty and Woubshet make are known facts in South African visual arts, as also acknowledged by Pissarra and van de Watt. What is however curious in these reflections is the racial divide between black and white critics and scholars, a divide evident in what they opted to emphasize or prefer to preclude, undermine. Black critics Minty and Woubshet pressed on the racial problems and unchanging nature of art institutions that excluded, marginalized and frustrated black artists while white critics Pissarra and van der Watt mentioned institutionalized racism in passing and rather deliberated on attacking and debasing black artists' commentaries as well as

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against "whiteness". Many of the problems raised have been with us for a long time, but as the series of opening quotes confirm, they have not been adequately addressed." Mario Pissarra, "Decolonise the mind" in *Art South Africa*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2003), 38.

<sup>517</sup> Zayd Minty, "Finding the 'post-black' position" in *A Decade of Democracy: South African Art 1994-2004* ed. Emma Bedford (Cape Town: Double Storey, 2004), 112.

<sup>518</sup> Dagmawi Woubshet, "Staging the rainbow nation" in *Art South Africa*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2003), 35.

theorizing post-identity, post-race and post-black. In this light, I want to argue that, both Pissarra and van der Watt diverted attention away from the actual problems and needs of black artists, and in particular the black community at large, at the very same time they confused primary concerns of black artists who protested against the circumstances dictating *what it means* to be black regarding racial prejudices and discriminations against their human rights instead of *what it is* to be black in terms of identity and identification. What is blackness is of less concern and nor a primary preoccupation in the mind of many black artists in particular and black people in general, which van der Watt faulted in her criticism of blackness in order to forward her call for post-identity and post-race and post-black.<sup>519</sup>

I should further argue that, the pronouncement that identity is a construct is already established. It is a known phenomenon that the identity black is a construct, one produced in relation to white identity, as was the case with the identity (white) colonizer constructed in relation to the (black) colonized. As Frantz Fanon captures this aptly in writing, “what is often called the black soul is white man’s artefact.”<sup>520</sup> In his essay, *The Fact of Blackness*, Fanon further points out that, “For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man.”<sup>521</sup> Yet the reverse is not the case: for there is no reciprocity between blacks and whites. Fanon’s argument is exemplified by the comments black artists utter regarding their marginalization, exclusion and discrimination by white dominated institutions. I

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<sup>519</sup> “Despite the usual vagueness of affixes pre- and post-, post-identity brings with it a certain vacuity that is, for once, enabling and productive. It makes space for uncertainty and incompleteness, it opens itself up to constant mutation. Like the family of “posts” to which it belongs ... post-identity carries within it a question and a search [as] it signals a departure, but no arrival.” Liese van der Watt, (2004), *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>520</sup> Frantz Fanon, (1967), *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

should also note that what these black artists' comments reveal is not a problem of an individual but rather of a collective; also a problem that is structural and institutional. In Fanon's argument, such the problem of black subjects is an "alienation" that "is not an individual question" but rather "sociogeny", one that is rooted in "social and economic realities."<sup>522</sup> Re-iterating this argument, later in his book, Fanon writes that, "we are driven from the individual back to the social structure. If there is a taint, it lies not in the "soul" of the individual but rather in that of the environment."<sup>523</sup>

It is such racial alienation based on and operated by institutional structures and within a particular context, which black artists and critics are revealing in and about the film *The Luggage*. These oppressive structures and contexts are initiated, produced, operated and maintained by people, whites to be specific. In fact, white people are not simply representative of these structures in the sense of operating, performing and exercising their practices, objectives and values all of which becoming institutional culture. Thus, to merely acknowledge instead of engaging these (human) structures that breed or exercise racial alienation, marginalization and frustrations of black artists, is what concerns me here, for it is not merely an oversight on the part of white critics but rather an act, consciously or unconsciously, indicative of a common tendency predicated on a deliberate avoidance to dealing with institutionalized racism, whose consequences involved breeding and nurturing inequalities evident in social, cultural, educational and economic arrangements that are central in the livelihood and wellness of black people in South Africa.

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<sup>522</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>523</sup> Ibid., 213.

This tendency should be read as a strategic discourse that writes out colonialism and apartheid as *post* or *bygone* regimes, which *ended* at the advent of South African democracy in 1994, lead by black ANC politicians. What also gave grounds to this tendency were artificial strategies and symbolic notions geared towards building a democratic nation. Take for example, Archbishop Desmond Tutu's coined metaphor of a 'Rainbow Nation', which was endorsed by the first democratically elected black South African President Nelson Mandela who painted a utopian picturesque of South Africa.<sup>524</sup> Supplementing the 'rainbowism' metaphor was the popularised all-pervasive slogan 'Simunye: We Are One', which later was turned to 'Simunye: One Time', daily aired on national television channels, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). Not only were diverse identities, different cultures and differential experiences that are indicative of hierarchies and inequalities collapsed into *one-ness* but also conflicts, contradictions and oppositions were compressed to singularity. South Africans of all shapes, sizes and stripes were converged to unity or one-ness.

To harmonise and conciliate the differences and conflicts that threatened a peacefully aspired *new* and democratic South Africa, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was initiated in 1996. Its objectives, premised on moral mechanisms, were also to heal the wounds of the violent apartheid, which was a shameful past in democratic South Africa, a new nation to be built through non-violent process free from vengeance. Such ideals and developments were concerned with

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<sup>524</sup> "Each of us is as intimately attached to the soil of this beautiful country as are the famous jacaranda trees of Pretoria and the mimosa trees of the bushveld - a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world." Quoted in Kathryn Manzo, *Creating Boundaries: The Politics of Race and Nation* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1996), 71.

reconciliation, reconstruction and development. To cater for and protect not only this reconciliatory process but also all different subjects, identities, communities, cultures and values, the South African Constitution of apartheid, one effectively used for brutal ruling, was *revised* and fused with ANC's Freedom Charter, for relevance to the present and future of the new nation and was officially endorsed in 1996. This Constitution therefore ensured "universal suffrage and equality before the law" as it subscribes to "the Declaration of Human Rights [which] protects the individual from discrimination on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity or descent, skin colour, sexual orientation, religion, beliefs, culture or language."<sup>525</sup> This *new* Constitution also officially recognizes eleven different South African languages: Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, sePedi, seSotho, seTswana, siSwati, tshiVenda and xiTshonga. Even a national anthem was revised, by combining the apartheid version *Die Stem van Suid-Afrika / The Call of South Africa* with *Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika* (God Bless Africa), the latter a political song sung during apartheid as an act of insubordination.

The instrumental importance of these processes and procedures were to forge different and diverse cultural identities into a unifying nation-state, in this way configuring collective identities to form a fresh breed of what Benedict Anderson would call an *imagined community*. In Anderson's theory, this sort of nation-state is "a community stretching through time, with its own past and future, across space,

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<sup>525</sup> Elirea Bornman, "The Individual and the Group in the Social, Political and Economic Context: Implications for South Africa" in *Identity? Theory, Politics, History*, eds. Simon Bekker and Rachel Prinsloo (Pretoria: Human Science Research Council, 1999), 61.

embracing inhabitants of specific territory”.<sup>526</sup> Anderson has also argued that, such a constructed nation-state tends to force together if not gloss over contradictions, hierarchies and inequalities between different identities and subjects.<sup>527</sup> Anderson’s theorizing of the nations also speaks to apartheid South Africa, during when different and opposing identities and communities did not equally share the vision and benefits of the Afrikaner nation-state. Although a different moment, post-apartheid South Africa has not radically overturned both the make-up and consequences of the apartheid regime. Not only the present moment is haunted but is structurally conditioned by inequalities and hierarchies owing to colonialism, apartheid and capitalism. In democratic South Africa very notable are persisting contradictions, conflicts, hierarchies and inequalities between and across subject-identities. Quality of life and livelihood between the poor and rich, black and white is rife. Thus the problem with categorization of discrepant identities and subjects into a collective of differences under metaphors such as *rainbow nation* and *simunye: we are one* have dangerous consequences in their reductive projection and organization of the complexities and messiness of particular situations that South African is (and) becoming.

Insightfully, Pumla Gqola has argued that the “rainbowism” discourse “foregrounds racial variety even as it does not constructively deal with the meaning thereof”. In this way “power differentials” within, across and in relation to different

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<sup>526</sup> See Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1995), 70.

<sup>527</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imaged Communities: Reflections on the Origins of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1989).

identities and subjects are harmonized, if not evaded.”<sup>528</sup> In the context of visual arts and culture, Woubshet makes a similar argument that, “an effort to stage a thriving, rainbow nationalism ... often eschews and sugar-coats a racially polarized and racist discourse that continues to proliferate in South Africa.”<sup>529</sup> For Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael, the kind of representation forwarded by the rainbow nation metaphor is predicated on “polite proximities, about containment.”<sup>530</sup> And for Natasha Distiller and Melissa Steyn, “the picturesque solution suggested by the image of the ‘Rainbow Nation’ becomes available as a tool to market the ‘new South Africa’ to itself, and to international tourism. In the process, on going tensions and inequalities are painted over by a colorful palette.”<sup>531</sup>

It is also important to reflect on the implications of the TRC, particularly its surprising turn in giving grounds and some peculiar agency to white apartheid perpetrators and beneficiaries who claimed their own subjection and suffering during apartheid, as victims, like blacks. As Mamhood Mamdani argued “The TRC invited beneficiaries to join victims in a public outrage against perpetrators ... So, beneficiaries too were presented as victims.”<sup>532</sup> In this way, their apartheid benefits that include wealth and material properties were safeguarded, legally under the new Constitution, a democratic document that preserves the historically persisting whiteness or colonial apartheid status quo. Meanwhile blacks were persuaded to

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<sup>528</sup> Pumla Dineo Gqola, “Defining People: Analysing Power, Language and Representation in Metaphors of the New South Africa” in *Transformation*, No. 47 (2001), 98-99.

<sup>529</sup> Dagmawi Woubshet, (2003), *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>530</sup> Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael (eds.), “Imagining the Present” in *Senses of Culture: South African Culture Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 6.

<sup>531</sup> Natasha Distiller and Melissa Steyn (eds.), “Introduction: Under Construction” in *Under Construction: ‘Race’ and Identity in South Africa Today* (South Africa: Heinemann Publisher, 2004), 1-2.

<sup>532</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, “The Truth According to the TRC” in *The Politics of Memory: Truth, Healing, and Social Justice* eds. Ifi Amadiume and Abdullahi An-Na’im (London: Zed Book, 2000), 182.

understand their shared victimization thus forgive both apartheid perpetrators and beneficiaries. As such, colonialism and apartheid remain undone in post-apartheid South Africa as disparities between whites and blacks persist to reflect how whites continue to enjoy benefits of “apartheid as a regime of violence that dispossessed the majority of means of livelihood, just as surely as it laid what the basis for enriching [them as] a privileged minority.”<sup>533</sup>

Yet, psychological damages and lack of supportive infrastructure to counsel and heal such damages added to the continuing struggle of blacks for socio-economic and material needs. According to Chabani Manganyi, the commission failed to even “recommends that a national mental health program of small to medium scale be established to deal meaningfully with the trauma associated with mental health needs. Instead, the commission remained rooted in the language of the enabling Act and concentrated primarily on reconciliation and the political stability and wellbeing, of the emerging democratic order.”<sup>534</sup> It is worth noting that the TRC also failed to subject *art institutions* including involved individuals in its processes of reconciliation: hence excused their work for the apartheid regime, which discriminated against blacks.<sup>535</sup>

The TRC including the symbolisms or slogans of *Rainbowism* and *Simunye* undermines the discrepancies of post-apartheid South Africa as a space conspicuous

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<sup>533</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>534</sup> Chabani Manganyi (eds.), (2004), Ibid., 53.

<sup>535</sup> As Okwui Enwezor notes: “Just as educational and civic institutions (schools, universities, libraries, museums, etc.) which formerly discriminated against blacks did not have to give testimony to the TRC, the post-apartheid museum shrouded in ambiguity. In fact none of the principle institutions necessary for the survival of apartheid were dragged into the public square of the TRC’ show trial.” Okwui Enwezor, “The Enigma of the Rainbow Nation: Contemporary South African Art at the Crossroads of History” in Sophie Perryer (ed.), (2003), Ibid., 29.

with *transition*<sup>536</sup> from colonial apartheid to post-colonial apartheid. This transition makes South Africa “a context for change,” as Manganyi calls for attention to the “‘drama in the middle’, the space between the beginning of the transition and the desired end, represented by the expectation of the people”<sup>537</sup> rather than interests of individuals.<sup>538</sup> In such context, “we need to come to terms with the fact that the past is still with us in all its ugliness. This is so because, despite superficial appearances to the contrary, racism is still deep seated and difficult to eradicate.”<sup>539</sup> As such, the ‘drama in the middle’ is the messy state of a country in crisis, a country rooted in a deep wound that remains too problematic to be glossed-over or sugar-coated.

It is in this context that van der Watt’s theoretical call for post-identity, post-race and post-black should be understood and engaged, especially its avoidance of contending with the drama in the middle and its preclusion to attend/tackle problems of racial inequalities in and inaccessibility to art institutions that remain dominated by a white bastion. Instead, her call not only undertakes to bypass the work required in addressing racial inequalities but also performs a regulatory practice of *policing blacks*: as if saying “Stop Acting Black!”<sup>540</sup>, in so doing equally saying stop making visible and known racial oppression, inequalities, exclusion and marginalization all affectively demeaning to blacks. It is with this thinking that Njabulo Ndebele makes a

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<sup>536</sup> This transition should be “formally recognised as a potent force in its own right at the very heart of [South Africa’s] momentous changes.” It is critical “that the phenomenon of transition should be recognised as an important framing circumstance for the ongoing transformation of South African society.” See Chabani Manganyi, (2004), *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>537</sup> *Ibid.* 3.

<sup>538</sup> This extends one of the TRC’s problems: “it was so preoccupied with a highly individualised notion of truth and responsibility that it failed both to focus on apartheid as a form of power and to underline the victimhood of the vast majority of South Africa.” See Mahmood Mamdani, (2000), *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>539</sup> Chabani Manganyi, (2004), *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>540</sup> Tlhalo Sam Raditlhalo, “An Indefensible Obscenity: Fundamental Questions of Being in Kopano Matlwa’s *Coconut*”, 31-32 in [https://www.academia.edu/4696140/An\\_indefensible\\_obscurity](https://www.academia.edu/4696140/An_indefensible_obscurity)

poignant argument in writing, “Once you have denied the human reality of the oppressed, you can do practically anything you like with them. An essential condition to their continued oppression is their symbolic non-existence.”<sup>541</sup> What Ndebele’s argument illuminates is the manipulation of blacks through theoretical enunciations that deny and silence black utterances, self-identification or self-identifying; a point Biko strongly argued in his biting critique of white liberals in writing: “Not only have the whites been guilty of being on the offensive but, by some skilful manoeuvres, they have managed to control the responses of the blacks to the provocation. Not only have they kicked the black but they have also told him how to react to the kick.”<sup>542</sup>

The call for post-black, in some way, resembles this white tendency to manipulate and instruct black people how to be and become, *post-black*. While van der Watt’s theorizing exposes the instability of identity and in so doing, rupturing the essentializing of identity, it proves problematic. Simply because, it fails to take cognizance of the reality that in a racially mixed and multicultural society such as South Africa it is impossible for any essentialism about identity to exist. Even those identities that romanticize their supposed authenticity contradict themselves, given that they are always already informed and tailored by the sheer encounter with their *others*, intimately or indirectly.<sup>543</sup> The obsession on criticizing the essentializing of identity has proved unproductive if not misplaced, as it fails to take cognizance of the simple reason that history has taught us that people, cultures and identity develop

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<sup>541</sup> Njabulo Ndebele, (2006), *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>542</sup> Steve Biko, (2004), *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>543</sup> See Okwui Enwezor, (2004), *Ibid.*, 28.

through contact, exchange and cross-fertilization, and that no human group has ever been kept purely immune from intercourse with others.<sup>544</sup>

Arguably, for example, colonialism and apartheid in South Africa failed to completely restrict people of different races from interacting and mixing, despite the racial and ethnic segregation of space. Even after the demolition of renowned integrated socio-cultural spaces such as Sophiatown and District Six, a culture of resistance and subversion and mixing continued in spite of apartheid intensifying. Otherwise, how do we explain the hybrid nature of individuals and cultures that embody multiple identities and sensibilities as exemplified by those who speak more than one language, whose dress aesthetics and food tastes are mixtures of European, Asian, American and African cultures, not to mention their oscillation between different ethnic groups and cultural regions, practicing more than one religion. More so, the ever-expanding mixed race known as “coloured” people,<sup>545</sup> who not only occupy the middle zone, but have no certain point of location, always unsettled and unsettling across racial, cultural and class groups in South Africa. Similarly with “coloureds”, both blacks and whites share hybrid qualities even if they repress or deny them.

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<sup>544</sup> For instance, as mixtures of European, Asian and African variations, Afrikaners or Boers are a typical example of hybrid formation in South Africa despite their painstaking efforts in their history to claim white purity that would qualify their affinity with Europe.

<sup>545</sup> “Coloured” refers to people of mix-races especially between whites and blacks that the apartheid regime officially colour-coded as such. This group tends to be seen in terms of both race and class forming the buffer-zone between black and whites. Yet, it is neither homogeneous nor singular, but heterogeneous and dispersed across different races, ethnicities, classes, and geographic or cultural regions in South Africa. Three nodal view points have been established in one of the recent debates on “coloured” identity in South Africa: (1) a deconstruction of coloured as a political, sociolinguistic category in relation to colonialism and apartheid, and a concomitant rejection of the term; (2) a reclaiming of the term as an identity through the argument that there is no inherent politics attached to it; and (3) a reclaiming of coloured as an identity accompanied by political organisation on the basis of this identity.” See Rachel C. Prinsloo and Cheryl de la Rey, “Processes of Reshaping, Reclaiming and Renegotiating Identity in South Africa” in Simon Bekker and Rachel Prinsloo (eds.), (1999), *Ibid.*, 75.

### *Tracey Rose's Ciao Bella*

I should reiterate that my main concern here is also the context, one informed and operated by institutionalized structures that give rise to unfavorable conditions for black artists, a context in which their experiences and aspirations are informed. Artworks of black artists reflectively engage such a context in ways that identities are problematized rather than simply embraced, and reduced to essentialism. Take for example Tracey Rose, one South African contemporary artist, whose work deals with questions and experiences pertaining to colored identities in South Africa. Rose's work reveals if not contests conspicuously the incoherence, instability, uselessness and usefulness of such identities. Rose has assiduously confronted identity in her work. Using her own body and experience, in ways that implicate other South Africans, Rose negotiates the unstableness, fluidity, plasticity, palatability and disconcertion of identity regarding race, gender, sex and class. She centers her own body at times clothed while other times nude in ways that forward personal and autobiographic elements. Always exploring various strategies of visualizing, Rose uses photography, video and performance.

Rose is a hybrid, a colored woman, a South African citizen; yet, she is none of these identities. Speaking of the strangeness of her colored hair, she contends: "a fusion of black and white but not quite. Not black enough to be shamefully treated not white enough to be pampered."<sup>546</sup> She is someone, something, and anything she can possibly invent herself into becoming as she centers herself assertively in her work of art both as a subject and as an object. But her objecthood is strategically subversive

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<sup>546</sup> Tracey Rose, "Untitled" in Brenda Atkinson and Candice Breitz (eds.), (1999), *Ibid.*, 211.

always testing and shifting established notions of how black women have been and continue to be objectified in art. For, Rose, centering herself in her own art functions as claiming her visibility and recognition as well as reclaiming space that she continuously reinvents through performative playfulness. To borrow from Salah Hassan, *self-insertion* defines Rose's use of her own body in her work to establish subjectivity over the objectifying ethnographic gaze. Such subjectivity is a conscious strategy to produce different meanings from those of colonial apartheid procedures on black (women) bodies.<sup>547</sup>

An extended project of Rose's self-insertion is her significant series *Ciao Bella* (2001), a complex discourse of unsettling identity or rather identities. In a satirical and playful manner, the series is a mixture of role-plays and multiple-characters ranging from fashionable smart sexy to over-sexy stripper-like girls embodying recognizable historical female figures such as *Venus Baartman*, *Regina Coeli*, *Bunnie* and *Lolita* (See Figures 28-30). Rose dresses herself as all these different figures—historically scorned, dehumanized, appreciated, celebrated—in order to push her hybrid figure to a point at which she turns identity upon its head, in this way mocking even race itself. Such creative mockery is rapturous especially in the manner Rose performs some of the characters: wearing whiteface and blackface, dressed up in different costumes, posing in front of various settings such as notable sites, sitting on latest model cars, standing in front of fire-brigades vehicle. Various identities and boundaries—i.e. masculinity, femininity, class, materiality, architecture and fashion—are contested.

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<sup>547</sup> Salah Hassan, "<Insertions>: Self and Other in Contemporary African Art" in *Authentic/Ex-Centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art*, eds. Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe, (Ithaca: Forum for African Arts, 2001).

In *Ciao Bella* Rose thrives to stretch boundaries that demarcate and regulate the physical body, mental and emotional states, even its appearance. She questions expectations assigned to identities while re-mapping the landscape that restricted and located South Africans. *Ciao Bella* lends itself as space of uncertainty and incompleteness, as it opens itself up to constant mutation.<sup>548</sup> Rose is well aware that identity cannot be fixed nor can it fix an individual. In fact, identity is not a problem as much as the context that gives birth to and shapes identities. Context is of concern in particular where social organization structurally circumscribes individuals. Thus Rose's work, in particular her performances, establish their meaning as events or activities within a place or space, wherein experiences of *situated-ness* is of criticality. Rose renders her situated-ness in South Africa as an experience of shift and changes, innovations and reinventions. *Ciao Bella* lends itself as one of the creative spaces of the *in-between* as Homi Bhabha would say: "'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself."<sup>549</sup> Or in Kellie Jones's profound explanation:

Rose uses the space of the "inter-zone" to explore cultural practices previously shut down and turned off and to contest boundaries and containment as ways of both making and perceiving culture. Her practice and that of others working in the postapartheid visual landscape asks: Is multiculturalism enough, is pluralism enough, is hybridity enough, for new forms that are being brought into existence? Do these categories keep us locked inside of certain expected formations? Are they addressed only to "the butterfly collection of alterity"?<sup>550</sup>

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<sup>548</sup> Liese van der Watt's notion of "post" might be relevant in this case although its validity is haunted by David Goldberg's propelling question: are we *all* postracial yet?

<sup>549</sup> Homi Bhabha, (1994), *Ibid.*, 1-2

<sup>550</sup> Kellie Jones, "Tracey Rose: Postapartheid Playground" in *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art*, No. 19 (2004), 30.

Multiculturalism, pluralism and hybridity, in the context of South African visual arts, have been considered to occur in those sites in which blacks and whites have always interacted and mixed, sites John Peffer described as *grey areas*,<sup>551</sup> a term also used to title the book, *Grey Areas: Representations, Identity and Politics in Contemporary South Africa*<sup>552</sup> which argued for the contention of the politics of race, identity and representation. Yet, dynamics of power relations between blacks and whites, men and women, heterosexuals and homo/bisexuals, for example, are also operative within these grey areas, noting different levels of education and class hierarchies all informed by pervasive workings of race and racism. In fact, Biko was quite pointed in reading such *grey spaces* to be “...the black-white circles [that] are almost always a creation of white liberals.”<sup>553</sup>

Another argument I would like to make is the questionable *timing* of van der Watt’s call for post-identity. It pops up just when black subjects are beginning to gain visibility, recognition and significance – personal liberties which colonial and apartheid regimes officially condemned, repressed, even erased. This post-identity call reminds one of the timing and implication of discourses such as *the death of the author* or *end of history* which took place just at the juncture when historically marginalized and excluded groups such as women, lesbians, gays, the colonized and people of color were beginning to assume positions of authorship and to re-write their own histories, to enact their own subject-hood and subjectivities, to exercise their desires. These subjects and groups have been and are continuously fighting for

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<sup>551</sup> John Peffer, (2009), *Ibid.*, 34-40.

<sup>552</sup> Brenda Atkinson and Candice Breitz (eds.), (1999), *Ibid.*

<sup>553</sup> Steve Biko, (2004), *Ibid.*, 23.

liberation, recognition, equality and human rights against dominations, violence and exploitation exercised by white males, patriarchs, imperialism, colonialism, apartheid and capitalism. Driving the struggle against these regimes was to gain the same if not more freedoms, equal rights and accesses to the privileges that whites have possessed. Not to be (like) whites, but to gain grounds to make *visible*, and thus recognizable and valid, that which their white oppressors rendered invisible and invalid. In the South African contemporary context, it is therefore simplistic and in fact problematic of Okwui Enwezor to misuse Fanon's argument that *blacks are envious of whites*<sup>554</sup>: in such a context of racial and gender inequalities, exclusions and frustrations, blacks are rather earnest to participate in and contribute to all societal spheres that include various institutions where whites continue to dominate; institutions battling with inherent racism and sexism, among other exclusionary problems. In South Africa, the official collapse of apartheid allowed those enabling and supportive conditions for the recovery and pursuit of self-definition and self-actualization; to make official what history made unofficial, as Edward Said might say, "include what was once forcibly excluded"<sup>555</sup> from the imperial (or apartheid) texts.<sup>556</sup>

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<sup>554</sup> Okwui Enwezor, (1999), *Ibid.*, 383.

<sup>555</sup> Edward Said, (1994), *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>556</sup> This proposes not retrieving defunct or self-defeating identities mystified by colonialism and apartheid, nor is nostalgia of primordial cultural identities; but rather an act of self-reinvention, of course, performative in retrieving relevant qualities from the past, mixing them with current ones in the process of becoming. Such is undoing colonization and apartheid.

### ***Visibility and Difference: Making Invisible Black Visible***

In an interview, artist David Koloane argues: “Claiming art is also reclaiming space.”<sup>557</sup> Koloane’s point is relevant as it speaks to what democratic moments afford the subaltern subjects. It is a moment for historically disenfranchised yet liberated subjects to write themselves and their own narratives in ways that are recognizable with their histories, identities and desires. This does not exclude historically privileged (white) subjects to rewrite their own (and *others*’) narratives anew. It rather indicates that, as expected in post-colonialism, the post-apartheid or democratic moment offers blacks to re-write their *own* (including others’) *stories* in ways that shift away from white domination, which controlled, deformed and dictated *history of others*. It is a political and cultural shift in the sense of Steve Biko’s *I Write What I Like*. This re-writing of black subjects in visual arts would be *impossible* to realize or unrecognizable without visualizing recognizable qualities or characteristics associated with black subjects. Thus, the *visibility* of black identities, experiences, needs, desires and rights cannot be recognized without identifying, re-presenting and invoking their racial and cultural differences (or differentiation) in a context in which they have been rendered invisible, often violently forced to exist in the dark margins where they must neither be seen nor heard but be what Ralph Ellison in context of United States calls *Invisible Man*. Such a call for black visibility is not predicated on black exclusivity or distinct arrangements that situate black subjects in their own spaces of existence (as apartheid segregation did with Bantustans), as such continue their production of otherness. Rather, it centers and prioritizes black subjects, making them a focus.

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<sup>557</sup> David Koloane and Ivor Powell, “In Conversation” in *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*, ed. Clementine Deliss (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery), 265.

In his reading of Frantz Fanon about *the fact of blackness*, Homi Bhabha provides an insightful explanation in writing, that “visibility ... gives force to the argument that the skin, as a signifier of discrimination, must be produced or processed as visible.”<sup>558</sup> Producing black skin as visible in representation is therefore giving force to black presence and recognition, exposing discrimination and inequalities that require redress, which black subjects continue to endure. It should be noted that, there is nothing wrong with *difference* provided they are not premised on and structured according to (racial, ethnic, gender, sexual) hierarchies, prejudices as colonial and apartheid regimes instituted. Very mindful of Fanon’s inquiry that blacks are “overdetermined from without” in the way their “appearance” is construed,<sup>559</sup> this undertaking supposes no static or fixation of (black) individuals on skin tone more than varieties or differences of cultures, experiences, aspirations, desires, histories of and by races, genders, sexes, etc. Like fruits or vegetables or other animals, human beings are different and their difference is not of natural differentiation for the production of prejudices and hierarchies and inequalities. These differentiations are discriminatory traits constructed and produced by prejudiced human beings. I make the forgoing argument in light of Linda Alcoff’s assertion: “When I refuse to listen to how you are different from me, I refuse to know who you. Without understanding fully who you are, I will never be able to appreciate precisely how we are more alike than I might have originally supposed.”<sup>560</sup> Yet such recognition (in representation) is limited if it fails to take into account the historical context, wherein questions of socio-

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<sup>558</sup> Homi Bhabha, (1994), *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>559</sup> Frantz Fanon, (1967), *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>560</sup> For an elaborate argument see Linda Martin Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 2006), 6.

economics and material ownership requiring redistribution, feature. As Alcoff argues, “No significant transformation of identities can happen in the absence of redressing the disparities of wealth and resources.”<sup>561</sup>

Debates or critiques of identity are problematic when exercised without factoring persisting disparities of wealth and resources and those socio-economic institutions that purport such disparities. In her call for post-identity, post-race and post-black, van der Watt excludes or avoids the material conditions effective in the everyday experience of people in social spaces and particularly in art institutions. In this way she does not attend to the impact that the allocation of material resources and economic opportunities has in moving identity beyond essentialism. She in fact fails to consider the fact that it is whites that seem to resist moving beyond their fixated position of privilege into a different mental and material position in society. Of course, how would they do that voluntarily? Thus, they occupy the peripheral position, indicative of their resistance to a transformative shifting away from identities afforded by historically oppressive regimes and identities that are not protected by The Constitution of democratic South Africa. In other words, material comforts and economic privileges assumed by white beneficiaries of colonialism and apartheid are never problematized as being the preconditions of what inform and condition the identities of both black and white South Africans. Thus, arguably, it is not enough to expose the instability of identity and misleadingly argue for the rupture of the black identity or blackness as essentializing when none of this is the case in the specific artwork by black artists, whose work I turn to in what follows.

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<sup>561</sup> Ibid., 10.

### *Churchill Madikida's Struggle of the Heart*

It is important to note van der Watt's shortcomings in her rather problematic framing and application of *post-identity*, *post-race* and *post-black* theory on black South African artists. This is more evident in her discussion of Churchill Madikida's (b.1973-) video piece, *Struggle of the Heart* (2003). In this video piece, Madikida is a performing subject that is recorded eating mielie pap (See Figure 31), a white porridge regarded as a staple diet common with the majority of black South Africans, especially those with less financial means who survive at the bottom level of socio-economic hierarchies in class stratum. Mielie pap is also a basic diet ate by Xhosa male initiates during their period of exclusion in their initiation process from boyhood to manhood. In fact, *Struggle of the Heart* is a video loop of Madikida performing a curious scene of being a Xhosa male initiate, who instead of swallowing the mielie pap is simultaneously chewing and spitting it out of his mouth. By the look of his facial expression in castigating the white porridge, Madikida reveals a great sense of misery and discontent. For putting such a performance, Madikida is interpreted by van der Watt to demonstrate "a failing of identity".<sup>562</sup>

Van der Watt's interpretation seems probable at first glance, but a careful and reflective reading will reveal that the work is not as simple as demonstrating a failing of identity. There is more going on in the video and Madikida's engagement with identity is complex in particular when read in relation to comments he makes about his ideas, experience and concerns involved in what constitute the work. The context wherein the work is produced and with which it engages is important. These factors

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<sup>562</sup> Liese van der Watt, (2004), *Ibid.*, 49.

are evident in Madikida's affirmative explanation of what informed *Struggle of the Heart* with respect to the construction of his identity:

I'm not really dealing with the tradition itself, I am dealing with identity. I'm dealing with issues that have to do with culture and technology...in the sense of civilization being advanced. People now are looking to undermine where they come from, and when they do that—I still believe that tradition is worthwhile—they're undermining my beliefs.<sup>563</sup>

It is evident that Madikida is critically engaging with the construction of his identity not only within the confine of its historical reference to the African tradition of male initiation. His engagement also takes into account how the construction of his identity is predicated on cultural developments informed by new technologies, thus he talks about it in the sense of civilization being advanced by modernity and modernization. In this regard, tradition in the case of Xhosa male initiation is not something archaic and frozen in primordial past, it is rather something that evolves and is affected by and also affect modernity and modernization. Believing in the worthiness of tradition in particular as the bearer of heredity and ancestry, Madikida has a problem with people who (intend to) undermine it and its significance in contemporary society. Thus assertively he considers people who do so to be “undermining his beliefs.” It is important to note that Madikida is neither absolute nor essentialist about his identity; he is rather aware of its hybridity and limits, as well as the implication of challenging its shortcomings, as he tells:

I grew up with all these mixed identities—my mother is “colored”, my father is Sotho...I chose to become Xhosa because I believed in that sense of community, I believed that their way of life is right...And now that I'm questioning that...there is that boundary created...there is a gap between myself and them.<sup>564</sup>

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<sup>563</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>564</sup> Ibid., 85.

Taking for granted these factors, as articulated by Madikida and played out in *Struggle of the Heart*, van der Watt's argument regarding *post-identity*, *post-race* and *post-black* falls short. American art historian Steven Nelson has cautioned van der Watt's theorizing of South African art in terms of post-identity, in particular her attempt to situate such art "within current theoretical debates that problematize 1980s and 1990s identity politics" in the West generally and United States of America in particular. For Nelson, the problem with van der Watt's argument rests on the fact that "post-identity reaffirms identity" and the notion "post-black" as was applied to the *Freestyle* exhibition "foreclosed any possibility to discussing the actual artwork" on show whilst it rather re-centered "not some abstract notion of race, but blackness."<sup>565</sup> Van der Watt's application of post-identity and post-black to Madikida's work performs exactly the problem of not paying attention to the artist's work (whilst also shifting away attention from questions of institutional racism that inform both whiteness and blackness).

Having argued against the reduction and rather for the complexity of understanding identity van der Watt is however too quick to reduce Madikida's video to a failing of identity. Even Madikida's explanation of the "gap" created between him and his people because of questioning the male initiation ritual cannot be simply reduced to the "failing of identity". Such a gap speaks to tensions and conflict within or of the hybrid and diverse people that make up Madikida's community, as such illuminating on the contradictions that constitute contemporary society in which he works and lives. Yet, of critical importance is to take account of Madikida's situated-

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<sup>565</sup> Steven Nelson, "Post-South Africa?" in *Personal Affects: Power and Poetics in Contemporary South African Art*, Volume II, ed. Sophie Perryer (New York and Cape Town: Museum for African Art and Spier, 2004), 17.

ness in a transitional or transforming context reflective of contradictions and possibilities of self-invention and self-actualization. It is a context in which human subjects are subjected to experience various forms of crisis.

Thus the gap that Madikida talks about could also be read in terms of crisis, a predicament of cultural and social practices that subject identity and its initiation rituals of construction to undergo reflection, examination and introspection. In moments of transformation it is inevitable that any identity will be affected and thus subjected to re-evaluation and re-contextualization for relevance. It could be abandoned and thus new forms of identity are invented either to replace those that are no long useful for purposes of social, cultural and political continuity of individuals and collectives. Whatever, be it a revision of old or an invention of new cultural identities, which meet the needs of contemporary conditions, it is very important to underscore the need for cultural rituals as protean or as an enzyme for the sustenance of human psyche and emotion. For these reasons, the cultural practice of male initiation is important to Madikida in particular for self-assertion, as he states: “I can stand up for my belief—which I did by participating in those [Xhosa] rituals.”<sup>566</sup>

Another way of reading and interpreting what might be implied by the gap, beyond Madikida’s immediate communities, is to consider racial relations between black and white subjects in post-apartheid South Africa. For example, black (and white) artists are very aware of themselves and their racial-*others*, how social, cultural, economic and geographical arrangements structure them in a South African context. I am considering this gap in terms of apartheid leftovers, persisting consequences of

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<sup>566</sup> Interestingly, Churchill Madikida’s comments are in an interview in the same publication with Liese van der Watt’s essay: Sophie Perryer (ed.), (2004), *Ibid.*, 85.

segregation and contradictions, inclusion and exclusion, rich and poor, haves and have-nots. Attesting to this gap is the fact that many black artists continue to live in the shanty townships while white artists live in suburbs and cities. This gap is also made evident by the comments on racial exclusion and white domination of art institutions, as expressed by black art practitioners in the video *The Luggage*. In spite of the small changes taking place in democratic South Africa, whiteness continues to reign supreme in the field of culture and visual arts, as van der Watt herself admits in writing: "...a very real perception exists that art and educational institutions are still besieged by racist prejudice in South Africa, leading to a situation where access to education, art collections and curatorial and critical positions remains largely restricted to whites."<sup>567</sup> Even art historian Anitra Nettleton declared the art history discipline to being Western in a South African context, adding to having very few if no black students and scholars studying it at South African universities.<sup>568</sup>

It might not be far fetched to also read the *white* mielie papa Madikida disgustingly masticates and spits out as a comment on the persisting practice of the Xhosa ritual in an unfavorable modern context. It is a context whose overwhelming conditions are indebted to the missionaries, colonialism, apartheid and modernization – all informed by *whiteness*, explained by Melissa Steyn as “a modernist construction, central to the colonization project, and achieved through the exorcism of everything “black,” particularly African, from white identity.”<sup>569</sup> It should be recalled that missionaries condemned African ritual practices and beliefs as pagan and barbaric

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<sup>567</sup> Van der Watt, (2004) *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>568</sup> See Anitra Nettleton, “Art Historians”, *Artthrob*, No. 74 (2013), <http://www.artthrob.co.za/03oct/feedback.html>

<sup>569</sup> Melissa Steyn, “*Whiteness Just Isn’t What It Used To Be*”: *White Identity in a Changing South Africa* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 150.

while colonialism and apartheid created conditions that were devastating to the wellbeing of Africans and their cultural practices. Dispossession of African land and forcing Africans into cheap labor through epistemic violent laws<sup>570</sup> were effective enough in destroying meaningful lives of Africans in South Africa. Thus Madikida's *Struggle of the Heart* should also be seen to speak of the struggle in the social space of the everyday experience and the need for cultural meaning and ideals of not only Xhosa men or initiates, but also the majority of black South Africans who contest for the visibility, recognition, appreciation of their cultural identities. It is a continuous struggle for a better and meaningful living, doing so against problems rooted in a persisting history most favorable to whites.

### ***Black Artists and Male Initiation***

Madikida's work, *Struggle of the Heart*, is part of a discursive body of work other black South African contemporary artists are producing in their various creative approaches and registers. Examining African male initiation rituals, some of these artists are Mgcineni Sobopha (b.1967-), Siphon Hlati (b.1963-), Colbert Mashile (b.1972-) and Kemang Wa Lehulere (b.1984-). Their works interrogate the relevance, significance and implications of male initiation in contemporary society. Some of their themes include but are not limited to different forms of African-ness such as Xhosa and Sotho manhood, maleness and masculinity. Treatment of the male initiation subject varies, as some works are visually intense and shocking while others subtle

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<sup>570</sup> For a chronology of Apartheid Acts against blacks, see <http://www.sahistory.org.za/politics-and-society/apartheid-legislation-1850s-1970s>

and poetic in representations or commentaries.

Take for example, Sobopha's *Blanket* series (2001), which is explicitly revealing of the trauma imposed on and experienced by the black male body. The work presents the black male body exposed and vulnerable. In his *Ritual Y2K* series (2003-2004), Hlati appropriates postage stamps in order to offer a less obvious narrative of the circumcision ritual. His images are carefully executed and detailed. It is as though we peer through a round lens to see what is on the other side, the side where boys are transformed into young men. Mashile's work veers toward abstraction although there are discernable figures crafted in human shapes that resemble or signify or represent initiates and their penises, sticks and huts. Some of Mashile's work comes across as depicting moments of seclusion particularly observing the conceptual way in which some figures appear to be like a group of young men dressed in modern casual dress, with their head looking down and initiates dressed in traditional attire, with their bodies painted white. In a video piece title *Lefu la Ntate* (2005), Wa Lehulere explores conceptual and abstract ways of dealing with his own experience, especially highlighting two aspects during the moment of his own experience when he entered into and exited from the seclusion period. One aspect is the singing that accompanies the procession to and from seclusion while the other is the performance of circumcision, removal of the penis foreskin conceptually rendered through the burning cigarette against a vocal music.

Not only black visual artists have sought to engage with cultural rituals and traditional practices that are central in the construction of their individual and

collective identities. There are also black creative writers who are producing novels<sup>571</sup> and television series<sup>572</sup>, adding to research theses and dissertation<sup>573</sup> that investigate the history, origin, meaning, value, significance and problems pertaining to African male initiation, manhood, patriarchy and masculinity.

More revealing about the importance of African male initiation is that, recently the South African Government together with Provincial Governments, traditional leaders and healers in regions such as Eastern Cape, Northern Province and KwaZulu-Natal have established initiation schools. Of note, such collaborative initiatives in KwaZulu-Natal have approved an adoption of male circumcision ritual for young Zulu boys as a possible prevention for sexually transmitted diseases, in addition to establishing another form of transforming boys to men. It has been argued that, such an initiative together with other government regulated male initiation schools around the country highlights the importance of African male initiation as part of the processes that contribute towards nation building, molding of individual and collective (of course African male) identities. Such initiatives are also indicative of the recuperation and extension of male initiation ritual to those African groups such as Zulus that were forced by missionaries and colonialism to abandon their rituals.

Although much attention tends to be placed on the circumcision phase of the ritual—due to negative outcomes that affect young men’s health, sexuality, emotions

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<sup>571</sup> One example is Thando Mgqolozana, *A Man Who Is Not A Man* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009).

<sup>572</sup> One example is *Pantsi Komthunzi Wentaba* (2011) written by Sthida Nkweni director by Micky Dube and produced by South Africa Broadcasting Company.

<sup>573</sup> Two examples are Thembinkosi Goniwe, *Ritual: A Graphic Interpretation of the Tension and Conflict Between African (black) Traditions and Contemporary Urban Culture in the Nyanga Community* (Unpublished MAF Dissertation: University of Cape Town, 1999) and Mgcineni Sobopha, *Skin, Scars, Blanket and Blood* (Unpublished MAF Dissertation: University of Cape Town, 2003).

and psyche, and resulted deaths—there are measures that now are actively concerned with continuous wellbeing-ness and socio-culturally becoming of young African men and African society. These developments are predicated on the belief that it is the education the boys receive during the rite of passage that teaches them about responsibility, respect, dignity, good behavior and survival skills. Such education is also important for the cultural knowledge, heredity and ancestry of Africans, in particular taking into account Madikida’s comment that people need to know “where they come from”. Cabral’s notion of return to the source and Madikida’s comments regarding his cultural background, particularly recalling Fanon’s reading of the damaging effects caused by colonialism on African culture: “Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. This work of devaluing pre-colonial history takes on a dialectical significance today.”<sup>574</sup> The resulted damage of this cultural history is articulated in the popular expression that, *a people without history are like a tree without roots*, or in Biko’s words: “A people without a positive history is like a vehicle without engine.”<sup>575</sup>

With the foregoing it is important to emphasize the point that, critical examinations of African male initiation rituals in creative ways as undertaken by artists like Madikida can not be simply reduced to demonstrate a failing of identity, as van der Watt does in her unblinking urge for post-identity and post-black. It is sensible somehow to consider such artists’ creative engagement with and reflection on the

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<sup>574</sup> Frantz Fanon, (1963), *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>575</sup> Steve Biko, (2004), *Ibid.*, 32.

construction of the black male as part of the continuing *struggle* that cannot be extracted from the broader social, cultural, economic, health and education problems confronting democratic South Africa. This struggle is visually articulated in Madikida's other works, especially *Virus* (2005), which deal with HIV/AIDS in South Africa.

### ***Madikida's Virus***

In *Virus*, Madikida gets more personal while participating in the broader national campaign against the devastating threat the virus has brought to human life. Personal in that losing his sister due to the effects of the virus motivated this work, thus he incorporated his sister's face including those of people with HIV/ AIDS. In so doing, Madikida situates *Virus* within the context of problems that terrorize the human body and communities (See Figure 32). In challenging "science and health organizations" that in his observations "seem to hide behind statistics - this work is about bringing the reality of the people behind the numbers closer to the viewer." Madikida brings human dimension to the popular treatment of this virus as the work itself centers human faces within its visual domain (See Figure 33). In the video piece, faces of black people occupy the central focus of the image, but pushed further back into the vanishing point where they disappear into the blur-sphere signifying death. Madikida inserts these faces within a matrix of distorted, disfigured and fitting surrounding patterns that in their bloody red colors against the black background are both distasteful and pleasant to look at. Within this visual matrix the black faces appear engrossed and entrapped in their defeat by the HIV/AIDS virus, another

struggle hitting very hard on black communities in (South) Africa. HIV/AIDS is part of South Africa's post-apartheid struggle threatening the democratic moment supposed to be of triumph and celebration. Some of the major factors contributing to the exacerbation of HIV/AIDS in black communities are poor and crippling socio-economic conditions, in addition to the lack of quality education and proper health facilities. These conditions are important to factor in any discourse concerned with politics of identity, race, blackness and whiteness, because without factoring them any sound theoretical formulation would run short if not problematic, ineffective or inapplicable.

***Thando Mama's (un)hea(r)d and We are afraid***

Thando Mama is another artist whose work helps to illuminate the shortcomings of any rush to defining contemporary South African art and experience in terms of post-identity, post-race and post-black. If, as I have just discussed above, Madikida's *Virus* speaks of what threatens and have already taken lives of many black (South) Africans, Mama's works *(un)hea(r)d* (2002) and *We are afraid* (2003) express the *situated-ness* of black people in a troubled environment. It is situated-ness that is also revealed in Madikida's *Struggle of the Heart*, the condition under which black subjects are negotiating their identities, experiences and desires in contemporary South Africa.

Mama's *We are afraid* is a grainy black and white video piece, which on a monitor screen shows a pixelated image that is difficult to see clearly what action is taking place, although through a closer inspection as the narrative unfolds it is possible

to observe the artist's self-portrait unblinkingly staring directly at the camera (See Figure 35). His stare confronts the spectator while sound frequencies echo as disturbing interferences in ways that intensify the uneasiness of the coarse black man in the picture frame. What is so powerful about this video piece is Mama's voice uttering the following disturbing words: "...many people believe the world seems to have forgotten about Africa." There is also another haunting voice, whose tone sounds like that of a (little) girl saying "We are afraid", what comes across as a verbal declaration of which Mama has titled this piece.

The centering of the artist's self-portrait is an important autobiographical strategy in Mama's work. It draws attention to the artist as subject, content and form, in this way, making the self the material or matter on which to focus. A similar conceptual strategy is exercised in *(un)hea(r)d*, a video piece in which his portrait takes up the screen monitor while whispering sounds in code-switch between English and Xhosa languages to augment the technological force of the projection (See Figure 34). In this video, Mama has created a visual play in which his face takes up most of the monitor screen, and invitingly appears and disappears in ways that it is visually *seen* and *unseen* as we are looking at through some manipulated zone of darkness or shadows. Not only is Mama playing with conceptual frame of references in order to reveal and conceal his face but also is equally forwarding the politics of visibility and invisibility, as such persuasively subjecting us to engage or reflect on the politics of identity in light of identification and dis-identification (Reference). It is this politics that the title of this video frames and invokes, for Mama seems to invite us not only "to imagine differently what "darkness" does to preconceptions and perceptions of

(his) identity”<sup>576</sup> as Rory Bester reads *(un)head(r)d*. Mama also invites us to consider what it means to be a (mind in a) *head* that is *unheard*, of course *unheard* because of being a black subject which has been despised, undermined and exploited by regimes of whiteness.

In both *We are afraid* and *(un)head(r)d*, arguably, audio brings to question language as a medium of communication and carrier of culture, more so its defining, dividing, repressive and exclusionary mechanisms. Both these works bring to light the difficulty of being black in a world devastated by colonial/apartheid consequences. *We are afraid* might be read as Mama’s reflection on violence experienced by black people and in this way the work refers to anxiety, terror and hostility. The predicament of being a black African in this age of capital globalization is precarious and of uncertainty, thus Gabi Ngcobo’s reading of Mama’s video is resonant: “we are afraid because we know that history tends to repeat itself.”<sup>577</sup> Ngcobo’s elaboration on reading *We are afraid* is equally pointed in quoting Ashraf Jamal who writes: “We live with the terrible unease of not having began”.<sup>578</sup> What seems to underscore the anxiety articulated by Ngcobo and Jamal is implicated in Frederic Jameson’s (1981:102) most often quoted phrase that “History is what hurts”<sup>579</sup>, particularly to black subjects who have been at the receiving end of ruthless violence of slavery, imperialism, colonialism, apartheid, and capitalism.

This violence is neither a bygone practice nor a past experience knowing its

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<sup>576</sup> Rory Bester, *Thando Mama* in *Flow*, ed. Christine Y. Kim (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2008), 83.

<sup>577</sup> Gabi Ngcobo, *Local is Lekker and Global is Reputable: From South Africa to the World* in Christine Y. Kim (ed.), (2008), *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>578</sup> Quoted in Gabi Ngcobo, (2008), *Ibid.*, 59

<sup>579</sup> Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a society Symbolic Art* (London: Methuen, 1981).

subtle and revised modern forms that continue to be a haunting specter in the present moment so problematically defined as post-apartheid and post-race, not to mention post-identity and post-black at the very moment we hear nothing about post-white in South Africa. I make this argument in light of Carli Coetzee's encouraging account about how the notion of *accented futures* could be useful "ways of thinking that are aware of the legacies of the past, and do not empty out the conflicts and violence under the surface. Accented thinking and accented conversations will often, perhaps typically, appear conflictual and overly insistent on difference and disagreement." For Coetzee, "...it is precisely those discourses that acknowledges the asymmetrical legacies of apartheid, and draw attention to the enduring effect of violent past, that can bring about the long ending of apartheid."<sup>580</sup> Whilst, in our different and disagreeable as well as similar and agreeable ways, we continue to work to bring about the long ending of apartheid, the persisting predicament of black subjects who unrelentingly endure for meaning, purpose, selfhood, visibility, recognition and value cannot be neglected nor overlooked, not least by perceptual discourses such as post-race and post-black. In fact, again Coetzee makes an important argument,

The value of this accented sense of an ending is that it requires a regard for the past and a responsibility to seek out that about which one chooses not to be ignorant. It is an understanding of the sense of the ending of apartheid as an activist task in which there is work to be done: precisely the work towards this ending. In other words, it is not enough to uphold the ideal of nonracialism through merely stating it ('apartheid has ended'). That position requires constant work; and work that will require a high degree of tolerance for disagreement and discord. This activist work – which includes academic writing and teaching, but is not only that – is a way of countering discourse of failure and disappointment, and of reversing a potential paralysis and silence.<sup>581</sup>

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<sup>580</sup> Carli Coetzee, (2013), *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>581</sup> *Ibid.*

Works by Mama participate in this discursive practice of ending apartheid, but doing so through reflective imagination that “chooses not to be ignorant” and nor pretentiously espouse “nonracialism” when institutionalized racism remains visible and active in South Africa’s social, cultural and economic organizations. The South African context in which black subjects have yet not regained their selfhood and human-being-ness from colonialism and apartheid cannot be underestimated, especially taking into account its devastating effects in fracturing and destabilizing black people, forcing them to occupy marginal positions, sites of invisibility and non-recognition where they have to constantly live in fear, as Mama’s title indicates: *We are afraid*.

Mama’s *We are afraid* and *(un)head(r)d* are important in making us reflect on and engage with the predicament of black subjects. Such reading is possible owing not only to what the titles of these artworks infer or signify, but also to how Mama’s works that centralize in their picture frame an image of a black man within a space surrounded by fragmented and distorted sound-bits. The works are a combination of visual and sound effects that amplify their aesthetic ambiance that is at once fascinating and at the same time contemplative of the situated-ness of the black man. There is something uncanny yet revealing in and about not simply the loneliness but rather the deliberate self-isolation of the black figure in the videos. Looking at Mama’s video pieces, particularly considering this deliberate self-isolated black male figure, I am reminded of the Black Consciousness Movement’s phrase, *black man you are on your own*,<sup>582</sup> whose explanation by Daniel Magaziner is apt: “...the phrase

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<sup>582</sup> See Steve Biko, (2004), *Ibid.*, 100.

reflected not only autonomy from white interference, but also "confidence ... dignity and self-respect." It was an important "philosophical statement about self-identity and responsibility" in particular that blacks "were not only aware of how apartheid conditioned their lives, but, in spite of the system, that they were determined to stand strongly on their own."<sup>583</sup> This philosophical phrase continues to speak to the predicaments of black people who find themselves marginalized and excluded from the center and art institutions in contemporary South Africa.

The visual characterization of the black male figure in Mama's videos would seem to be also referencing if not in conversation with Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*, especially noting the black figure who occupies the gritty if not dark isolated spaces. Two arguments are important to make here. One is to read this isolation as a result of a brutal society that has forced and continues to force black men and women to operate in the marginal space wherein darkness and doom have to define, condemn and trap them within what Frantz Fanon reflects on in writing:

On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprison me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself and object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood.<sup>584</sup>

Fanon's reflections are exactly the very problem Ellison confronts in his novel, a problem Charles W. Mills argues to be his "famous trope of invisibility" and that which "relies on the notion of a peculiar class of bodies that appear and only to

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<sup>583</sup> Daniel Magaziner, "Black Man You Are On Your Own: Making Race Consciousness in South African Thought" in *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 42. No. 2 (2009), 222.

<sup>584</sup> Frantz Fanon, (1967), *Ibid.*, 112.

disappear.”<sup>585</sup> In articulating further the predicament of black bodies in racist context, Mills makes reference to Lewis Gordon, who

employs Sartrean ideas of embodied consciousness to explore how, in an “antiblack world,” the white Other determines that black presence becomes absence, so that one is seen as the unseen: “He is not seen in his individuality. To see him as black is to see enough. Hence to see him as black is not to see him at all.” One’s non-white body excludes one from full membership in the white body politic.<sup>586</sup>

Another argument is that, to live and operate in, as well as resist and free themselves from the dark hole of their violently imposed constructed inferiority, black subjects have to be constantly mindful of and exercise Fanon’s prayer: “O my body, make me always a man who questions!” More so, black subjects have to continuously remember and affirm themselves in the way Ellison narrates the last words of a grandfather to his son: “Son, after I’m gone I want you to keep up the good fight...our life is a war...”<sup>587</sup> The older man’s message is poignantly important because, whilst the black man is rendered invisible he is however never insignificant and without a political, social, cultural, economic and human cause, as the struggle for freedom, equality and justice attest. In other words, black subjects not only protest about their oppression and exploitation; they also pronounce and proclaim their subjecthood, subjectivity and agency, as Ellison does in opening *Invisible Man*: “I am an invisible man [...] I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids - and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.”<sup>588</sup>

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<sup>585</sup> Charles W. Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essay on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1998), 116.

<sup>586</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>587</sup> Ralph Ellison, (1965), *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>588</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

### *The Politics of English Language in Africa*

It is apt here to consider Mama's engagement with language in terms of critical theorizing and reflections provided by Frantz Fanon and Ngugi wa Thiong'o on the *duality* of the black African as a result of colonialism. In his essay, *The Negro and Language*, Fanon argues that the black person is constituted of "two dimensions" and "self-division": "One with his fellows, the other with white man. A Negro behaves differently with a white man and with another Negro."<sup>589</sup> For Fanon the black person that "adopts a language different from that of the group to which he [or she] was born is evidence of a dislocation, a separation."<sup>590</sup> Building on Fanon's argument, Ngugi talks about colonial alienation, which considers that the black African does not only stand outside of himself to look at himself<sup>591</sup> but must also embody a split-persona: "like separating the mind from the body so that they are occupying two unrelated linguistic spheres in the same person."<sup>592</sup>

This dichotomy of the black-self is indebted to oppressive regimes such as colonialism, apartheid and capitalism. Notwithstanding that even under democratic governance in South Africa and specifically in the art world, dictatorship of a white bastion and its cultural sensibilities and economic prerogatives continues to create and promote conditions that are not favorable for the existential development and uses of indigenous languages and names. It was for this reason that Ngugi's call for decolonizing the mind went as far as questioning the absurdity regarding the inappropriate domination of white European names of places and streets in an African

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<sup>589</sup> Frantz Fanon, (1967), *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>590</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>591</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "The Language of African Literature" in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 443.

<sup>592</sup> *Ibid.*, 451.

country, during his Steve Biko Memorial Lecture at the University of Cape Town in 2003. Describing Ngugi's critical comments, Xolela Mangcu considers this colonialism as dominance over "African memory...addressed in the garb of European terminology."<sup>593</sup>

The whispering sounds in code-switch between English and Xhosa languages in Mama's work speak to such dichotomy or fracturing whose cruel outcome is the duality of the black African subject. In the context wherein socio-economic regimes dictate choice of communicative language for survival, the African is compelled to be bilingual or multilingual. In fact, the African cannot survive without being bilingual or multilingual: he *must* negotiate both his mother and foreign languages; it is not simply a symbolic negotiation but equally practical in the socio-economic realm of the everyday life. Disappointingly, it remains a fact that a plus ninety-five percentage of white South Africans do not speak indigenous languages as compared to many blacks that speak more than three languages in addition to English (and Afrikaans).<sup>594</sup> Here I am thinking of white art historians and anthropologists who are experts and authorities on indigenous African arts, artifacts and rituals without knowing and speaking languages of the very indigenous people (i.e. Ndebele, Venda, Xhosa, Zulu, etc.,) whose cultural practices and productions they research, write about and teach at our institutions of learning. I make this argument taking cognizance of the fact that

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<sup>593</sup> Xolela Mangcu, *Biko: A Biography* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2012), 28.

<sup>594</sup> "In linguistic, cultural and historical terms, they are generally divided into the Afrikaans-speaking descendants of mainly Dutch, German and French settlers, known as Afrikaners, and the English-speaking Anglo-Africans who share an Anglophone background (mainly of British and Irish descent). South Africa's white population is divided into about three-fifths Afrikaans-speakers (approx. 60%), with English-speakers constituting the remaining two-fifths (approx. 40%). Approximately 1% of the white population speak another language, most notably Portuguese. White South Africans are by far the largest European-descended population group in Africa." See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White\\_South\\_African](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_South_African)

language grants access and command regarding the ability to decipher, analyze, articulate, interpret and critique any subject in its historical context and contemporary evolution. As Fanon aptly explains: “A man [or woman] who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language.”<sup>595</sup> How then, for example, are white South Africans able to comprehend the cultural worlds of black people whose languages are not in their possession?

Another important point to note regarding such whites is not only their failure to reach out to their black *others*; it is also how they have become trapped in the limitation of monolingual speakers. Arguably, subjects who “inhibit two or more languages not only escape the single-mindedness of monolingual view of the world but revel in the pleasure of knowing”<sup>596</sup> that monolingual speakers are exposed to not comprehending ideas, identities, experiences and aspirations that are foreign to them. Not to speak the language of others make it impossible to understand them, because language is key to knowledge and understanding cultures and worlds of others. Sarah Nuttall makes a pointed argument that, for subjects who inhibit one language is impossible to escape the single-mindedness of monolingual view of the world because they operate on the risk of “not “getting it”, as well as of knowing how language can fail us.”<sup>597</sup>

In the videos, *(un)hea(r)d* and *We are afraid*, Mama’s use of Xhosa and English languages speaks of South Africa’s racial fragments and discrepancies, as the work invites the question: how can South Africans understand each other if language

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<sup>595</sup> Frantz Fanon, (1967), *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>596</sup> Sarah Nuttall (eds.), *Beautiful Ugly: African and Diaspora Aesthetics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 17.

<sup>597</sup> *Ibid.*

remains a racial factor? In some way, Mama's use of these two languages illuminates the fact that the transforming subjects are mainly black people, and speaking English for them affords access to the white world or makes themselves accessible to whites, hence enabling communication within spheres that are linguistically favorable to and structurally dominated by whites. It should be noted that this transformation neither makes these blacks equal to nor the same as whites other than rendering them serviceable to the white world, whiteness. As Ndebele poignantly argues about how blacks are subjected to communicative function of English in South Africa:

From this point of view, the functional acquisition of English, in a capitalist society such as ours can further reinforce the instrumentalization of people, as units of labor. So it is conceivable that the acquisition of English, precisely because the language has been reduced to being a mere working tool, can actually add to the alienation of the work force.<sup>598</sup>

What complicates further this language predicament for blacks is that, if they refuse to speak the foreign tongue, how can whites *hear* them and how would communication for social, political, economic organization of democratic South African society be conducted? Impossible, without the sacrifice of blacks, a sacrifice which becomes the continuing subjections of the black majority to being subjects and object of and for others instead of being with others! In this context, particularly with respect to Mama's use of bilingual expressions notable with code switch between isiXhosa and English in his work, I am reminded of Gloria Anzaldua's argument that:

Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate.<sup>599</sup>

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<sup>598</sup> Njabulo Ndebele, (2006), *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>599</sup> Gloria Anzaldua, "How To Tame a Wild Tongue" in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, eds. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), 207.

It would seem that it is mostly if not only black/subaltern subjects that are subjected, in fact compelled, to both speak their mother tongue and foreign languages, even if they do so in the hybrid or creole sense demanded by Anzaldúa above. In both small and the big scheme of things in our society, whites seem free from such language subjection, and comments made by the likes of Mario Pissarra, in criticizing *The Luggage is Still Black*, are very curious:

Culture and ethnicity also surface with [Gabisile] Ngcobo and [Mgcineni] Sobopha. Interestingly they rightly castigate whites for a lack of interest in learning “their” language, but how many of the “blacks” in the film [The Luggage] are also guilty of not speaking Zulu and Xhosa? Is this less of a problem?<sup>600</sup>

Pissarra makes an important point about the fact that *other* blacks, which include Coloureds and Indians, for example, should not be excused from criticism that charges whites for not speaking indigenous languages such as isiZulu and/or isiXhosa. In fact, there are blacks that don't speak Xhosa, as the young black women artist Ernestine White expresses in her artwork, *I do Not Speak Xhosa* (2002). What is rather curious in Pissarra's comments is a white male South African, the beneficiary of apartheid, who does not want to take responsibility for his own failure to have not learned to speak any African language. Instead of accounting he shifts attention away from himself (including other whites) by dragging *other* blacks into the sphere of his failure wherein his failure could be shadowed or masked in the course of being shared by *other* blacks. Observed here is how the white man performs the act of self to being with the other, of course doing so for convenience. Arguably, Pissarra's attitude is indicative of unrelenting practices of institutionalized racism, the white arrogance

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<sup>600</sup> Mario Pissarra, (2003), *Ibid.*, 39.

most revealed through whites that refused “to step out of their ‘comfort zones’”, to relinquish their cultural rootedness in the white world while living in a black dominated country and continent. In doing so, these whites disallow themselves not only the opportunity to be challenged by and learn from black South Africans, a point Ndebele makes in his essay *A Call to Fellow Citizens: Freeing the White*

*Community*.<sup>601</sup> In another essay, *Iphi'ndlela*, Ndebele writes,

...white South African will be called upon to make great adjustments to black needs than the other way round. This is an essential condition for a shift in white identity in which ‘whiteness’ can undergo an experiential transformation by absorbing new cultural experience as an essential condition for achieving a new sense of cultural rootedness. This is why every white South African should be proud to speak, read, and write at least one African language, and be ashamed if they are not able to.<sup>602</sup>

These sorts of whites refuse to be challenged by and learn from Biko’s argument that:

For one cannot escape the fact that the culture share by the majority group in any give society must ultimately determine the broad direction taken by the joint culture of the society. This need not cramp the style of those who feel differently but on the whole, a county in Africa, in which the majority of the people are African must inevitably exhibit African values and be truly African in style.<sup>603</sup>

Even when Pissarra tells us about the importance of learning to speak African languages and understanding African histories, his utterance is only a probability, if not a flattering desire; what I want to call *posturing intent* that might not ever happen taking into account the many (fifty) years of his life living in South Africa, not to mention the last twenty one years of democratic governance:

For us artists and people working in the arts engaging with Africanness means more than “Africanizing” our image by incorporating superficial symbols such as masks and patterns. It means making a great effort to learn about the arts of this continent, from the earliest times to the present. It means prioritizing learning about African histories and learning African languages.<sup>604</sup>

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<sup>601</sup> Njabulo Ndebele, *Fine Lines from the Box: Further Thoughts about Our Country* (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2007), 44-48.

<sup>602</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>603</sup> Steve Biko, (2004), Ibid., 26.

<sup>604</sup> Ibid., 40.

It makes one wonder how possible it is for Pissarra and the likes to prioritize to engage with and learn histories and languages of the (second largest) continent in the world when they have not yet done so within their own immediate national surroundings, South Africa, let alone provincial regions such as Western Cape where dominant indigenous language is isiXhosa? Pissarra's *posturing intent* follows on white artist Brett Murray's artwork titled, *I Must Learn To Speak Xhosa* (2000), a curious artwork in particular, reading it as a public announcement whose inherent intent remains not simply sarcastic or ironic but is also another sort of posture, a gestural act that is nothing other than an empty if not false resolve. I make this argument in light of the fact that learning to speak African indigenous languages for whites is neither a requirement nor necessity, and, arguably, if white South Africans were seriously or genuinely dedicated to speaking African languages they would be already doing so especially those who are born and have lived in South Africa more than a quarter of century. I make this argument thinking of Biko's comment that, "For the 20-year old white liberal to expect to be accepted with open arms is surely to overestimate the powers of forgiveness of the black people. No matter how genuine a liberal's motivations may be, he has to accept that, though he did not choose to be born into privilege, the black cannot but be suspicious of his motives."<sup>605</sup> Yet, we are aware that white South Africans are born and grew up socialized in a South Africa in which they have neither regard and respect nor appreciation and identification with black people and their cultures. Whites have regard and appreciation for black people's land and its resources, at the same time they perceive black people as useful bodies and tools, so

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<sup>605</sup> Ibid., 71-72.

instrumental in generating and maintaining their own comfort and privilege. And thanks to colonialism and apartheid and capitalism all regimes that have made it possible the master-servant, superior-inferiority, ruler and ruled, have and have-nots power relations. In this context there is neither mutuality nor reciprocity between blacks and whites but subjection of blacks to being subject-object for and not with whites in the world.

### ***Being Black in the World: Du Bois's color line and Fanon's fact of blackness***

Thus the white South African curator Emma Bedford makes an important point in arguing that Mama's work has W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon references, particularly in exploring the "ramifications of being black in the world".<sup>606</sup> Although Bedford does not specifically point out these "ramifications", in this way, does not (or rather avoids to) *name* them, they patently recall Du Bois's<sup>607</sup> argument that *race* ("color line") was the *problem of the twentieth century* and Fanon's critique of pervasive *racism as the fact of blackness*. Analyzing Mama's video *Back to Me* (2002), Woubshet, like Bedford, reads the work in light of Du Bois and Fanon. But Woubshet provides a rather complex reading in particular Mama's use of a single line extracted from the Hollywood movie, *A Time to Kill* (1996), which is based on a novel with the same title. The line reads: *when you look at me you don't see a man, you see a black man*. "Though brief," according to Woubshet, "it's a *mise-en-scene* that

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<sup>606</sup> Emma Bedford (ed.), *A Decade of Democracy: South African Art 1994-2004* (Cape Town: Double Storey, 2004), 82.

<sup>607</sup> "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Classic, 2005), 10.

immediately recalls the classic Du Boisian (“she refused my card peremptorily with a glance”)/Fanonian (“Look, a Negro!) moment of asymmetric recognition. The excerpt goes: “when you see me you don’t see a man, you a black man.”<sup>608</sup>

Apparently, an understanding of and reference to Du Bois’s and Fanon’s theoretical critiques would concur that they were neither ambiguous about the asymmetric recognition nor shied away to call white racism by its proper name. Of course, naming racism and its consequences is a difficulty that troubles liberal politeness of many South Africans and it is a fact that institutionalized racism instigates almost everything that underscore the make-up of modern, democratic South Africa and its human relations, whether one speaks of gender, sex, class, social, educational, or economic practices and inequalities.

With the foregoing arguments I hope this chapter has demonstrated problems and shortcomings of the call for post-identity, post-race and post-black. For this notion ‘post’ as discussed in light of other posts such as “post-colonial” and post-apartheid” forwards the implication that colonialism and apartheid are of the past, as such brushing aside consequences of these oppressive regimes on matters of economic, political, social and cultural devastations and inequalities that persist in the present.

Thus it is apt to close this chapter with Gabi Ngcobo’s quotation:

As much as “post-” operates as a “space-clearing gesture,” Kwame Appiah has remarked, it is important that we do not lose sight of the fact that the “post-” moment is still marked by unevenness. Many still do not possess the tools to recognize the spaces, let alone clear them. We can never be “post” in the same way. We need to work very hard to narrow the gaps existing between the “posts”. We can achieve this by ensuring that public institutions exist in the interest of the public at large, and not only for those who have been validated by the marked for being “post-” in line with its select, supposedly transformative, discourses.<sup>609</sup>

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<sup>608</sup> Dagmawi Woubshet, “Image and Imagination: Notes on Postmodernism” in *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art* No 22/23 (2008), 133

<sup>609</sup> Gabi Ngcobo, (2008), *Ibid.*, 61.

## CONCLUSION

### POSTCOLONIAL DESIRES IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICAN ART

As soon as I *desire* I am asking to be considered. I am not merely here-and-now, sealed into thingness. I am for somewhere else and for something else. I demand that notice be taken of my negating activity insofar as I pursue something other than life; insofar as I do battle for the creation of a human world—that is, of a world of reciprocal recognitions.

Frantz Fanon (1969)<sup>610</sup>

The preceding chapters have engaged themes of history, humanness, identity politics and cultural appropriation in contemporary South African visual art around the 1990s and 2000s. In discussing these themes, as tackled by artists and scholars, I have discussed as well as interrogated the predicaments of black subjects on multiple levels. I have started with pointing to their continual wrestling with the unremitting propensities of disenfranchisement and dehumanization that trace their history to slavery, imperialism, colonialism and apartheid. I have also pointed to the expanded range of subject matter, whose subtlety and nuances show the complexity and wonders of black ideas, experiences and aspirations. Consequently I have interrogated the creative approach used by black artists in dealing with such expansive subject matter and more so the continuing struggles for inclusion, visibility, recognition and dignity in the domain of visual representation.

To frame the work of these artists I used the notion *postcolonial imagination*, which articulates their reflective engagements with the *enduring transition* from the long ending of apartheid to the beginning of democracy in South Africa. This notion also designates the shift from a *culture of resistance* to that of *liberated expressions* which demonstrate novel aesthetics and tackle complex subject matters. It speaks to

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<sup>610</sup> Frantz Fanon, (1967), *Ibid.*, 218.

Gavin Jantjies' observation about "the production of works that signaled changes in the attitudes of artists to their role in culture" during the closing decade of the twentieth-century.<sup>611</sup> Postcolonial imagination, in this regard, underscores the visionary articulation of artists whose work is primarily concerned with contemporary experiences and desires of marginal or subaltern subjects that negotiate what Chabani Manganyi calls *being-black-in-the-world*.<sup>612</sup>

Compelling about the artworks of these artists is the persuasive manner in which they articulate subjectivities and the agency of black subjects at a contemporary juncture marked by uncertainty and indeterminacy. Their preoccupation is a critique and subversion of *thingification* or *thingness*, a colonial dehumanization of black people approached in ways that do not fall into the problematic of *surface representations* and *superfluous spectacle* but reveal *imaginative explorations*, the *inventiveness of treatment*, the *sharpening of insight*, and the *deepening of consciousness*.<sup>613</sup> At the core of their quest is black subject-hood, a human quality of assertiveness and perseverance within the fraught context of an unfolding post-colonial apartheid in need of perpetual interrogation. It is a quest concerned with the evolving meanings of black people's cultural identities and livelihoods in a society with an unpredictable yet shapeable future.

What underpins postcolonial imagination is a transformative engagement with the predicament of black subjects wrestling with what it means to be human and alive in a shifting-present, one haunted by the past whilst carving an undetermined future.

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<sup>611</sup> Gavin Jantjies in Thembinkosi Goniwe, Mario Pissarra and Mandisi Majavu (eds.), (2011), Ibid. 43.

<sup>612</sup> Chabani Manganyi, *Being-Black-In-The-World* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1973).

<sup>613</sup> Njabulo Ndebele, (2006), Ibid.

This fluctuating and fragile contemporary milieu could be thought in terms of Homi Bhabha's *in-between*, "the moment of transition where space and time produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion."<sup>614</sup> Such are "interstices" where "differences" meet, collide, overlap or intercourse in the production of hybridity; they are spaces inherently marked by "a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction in the 'beyond': an exploratory, restless movement" of the "here and there, on all sides, *fort/da*, hither and thither, back and forth."<sup>615</sup>

It is also a perpetual transition from and through which *desires*<sup>616</sup> are manifest and actively operate. Here I am working with the basic comprehension of desire as an inextricable play between *yearning* and *need*, both of which are predicated on, if not informed by, the recognition of a *double-bind-ness* of postcolonial subjects. On one level, desire implies what the postcolonial subjects *do not have*, that something is absent and thus their lack of it. On another level, it is that which they *long for*, the need to acquire or possess what is essential for their being and becoming in the (democratic) world.

To comprehend desire in this regard is to perceive the postcolonial subjects' double-bind-ness as a particular subjectivity embodying two phenomena that are not oppositional but hold and feed on each other through a dialogical interaction. Such is a dialectical maneuver with which desire is charged, an unrelenting force inherent with *lack* and *crave*, both of which are necessary for an action that is instrumental to

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<sup>614</sup> Homi Bhabha, (1994), *Ibid.*, 1-18

<sup>615</sup> *Ibid.*, 1

<sup>616</sup> For an articulation of desire see Eugene Goodheart, *Desire and Its Discontents* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

activate the demand for visibility and recognition, equality and justice in the post-colony.

Desire, as a politicized concept and an existential experience, is therefore expediently instructive for understanding the colonial and apartheid regimes which have had an effect on political domination and socioeconomic exploitation, and whose profound yet brutal objective was the dehumanization of black subjects. Despite their brutal impact, these regimes also produced a variety of *new* subjects and *alternative* positions, in this way instigating crucial conceptions and perspectives about peculiar constructions of identities, histories, individual/collective desires. Thus it could be argued that (most but not all) postcolonial subjects, in their varying sensibilities and operations are, if not responding to, the consequences of the *thingifying* regimes.

Yet, not all postcolonial subjects enjoy equal advantages and privileges given the structurally organized racial hierarchies and asymmetries that are in place in democratic societies. These inequitable conditions are reminiscent with *colonial desires* and *violent pleasures* that were exercised and relished by the colonizer over, above and at the expense of the colonized (even though the latter pursued their own but brutally suppressed and legally restricted desires under colonial apartheid).<sup>617</sup> In this context, historically and contemporarily, the plight of black subjects has not changed much noting the pervasiveness of whiteness, argued by Lewis Gordon as a

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<sup>617</sup> See Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995) and Anne McClintock, (1995), *Ibid*.

systematic white “Being” that stands “in the way of human being or a human way of being” black in an *anti-Black racist and colonial world*.<sup>618</sup>

It is against this anti-black-racism which Frantz Fanon argues in the epigraph, invoking *desire* as an agency with which to demand recognition that could occur through a conscious opposition and reconfiguration of the imposed construction of black subjects as dehumanized otherness. Fanon demands a reciprocal recognition between the self and other, a demand for mutual acknowledgment that destroys the binary opposition between the oppressors and oppressed, dominant and dominating whilst unambiguously and unapologetically advancing the liberation of being black in an *anti-black* world.

For Steve Biko, after Fanon, such desire and recognition were premised on performing *Black Consciousness*, the *envisioning* of the black *self-hood* in the form of *self-emancipation* and *self-definition*.<sup>619</sup> Black subjects, accordingly, have to operate in radical ways that resist and subvert both the *colonial desire* and *white gaze*, at the same time demanding and cultivating their own desires, those that, through decolonization, become realizable in the actual aftermath of colonial apartheid. The various edicts for a “new African”,<sup>620</sup> “new men”<sup>621</sup> and “a new person in a new society”<sup>622</sup> are characteristic of postcolonial desires. What underpins these various yet converging modernist edits is a desire for a *decolonized* African subject in the radical

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<sup>618</sup> Lewis Gordon, *What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2014), 19.

<sup>619</sup> Steve Biko, (2004), *Ibid.*

<sup>620</sup> Ntongela Masilela, (2013), *Ibid.*, xvii.

<sup>621</sup> Frantz Fanon, (1963), *Ibid.*, 36-7.

<sup>622</sup> Njabulo Ndebele, (2006), *Ibid.*, 71.

transformative sense that is futuristic in light of its objective to simultaneously undo colonial apartheid and produce liberated postcolonial subjects.

Adam Amkpa posits an apt explication of “postcolonial desires”, implying, on one level, “the act of imagining, living, and negotiating a social reality based on democracy, cultural pluralism and social justice” as well as “an act of refusal to assume the passive, static, essentialist identity of the “Other” as “it draws upon the resources of non-formal citizenship to fuel a perpetual act of becoming.”<sup>623</sup> On another level, postcolonial desires are concerned with “the aspiration to overcome the legacies of colonialism by imagining alternative universes anchored in democratic cultural pluralism. Such postcolonial aspiration transcended temporal locations to encompass varied moments of consciousness for progressive change.”<sup>624</sup>

These are desires that underpin creative and scholarly works discussed in previous chapters. Johannes Phokela, in chapter two, rewrites art history by inserting black subjects that are excluded into colonial master narratives whilst staking claims to the painting tradition with which (such dominant) art history is visually written or inscribed. In chapter three, Zwelethu Mthethwa’s humanizing mission is not only about restoring the dignity and pride but also unearthing and rendering visible the agency of black subjects surviving in the margins of modernity. Both undertakings by Phokela and Mthethwa are indicative of desires’ dual procedure: recognition of lack/absence and need/earnestness to address such pressing probations. Even the contention regarding identity politics, as in the case of Peet Pienaar’s appropriation and performance of the Xhosa male initiation ritual brings to view the Afrikaner’s

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<sup>623</sup> Awam Amkpa, *Theatre and Postcolonial Desires* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 10.

<sup>624</sup> *Ibid.*, 16

desire of the *other*'s cultural meaning and value in chapter four. In the case of Liese van de Watt's call for post-identity, post-race and post-black in chapter five, we observe the earnestness to move away from potential dangers implicated in the essentialism of identity. Van der Watt's call is a longing for *seeing differently*, *thinking differently* and *signifying differently*.

Postcolonial desires are a common thread underpinning the work of Phokela, Zwelethu, Pienaar and van der Watt. As in Bhabha's notion of the 'beyond', their work is inherent with desires of moving beyond binaries of oppressor and oppressed, visibility and invisibility, inclusion and exclusion, self and other, black and white or blackness and whiteness. They are also concerned with the moment of the aftermath moment, the move beyond colonial apartheid, beyond inhumanity, beyond a single history, beyond the fixation on race, beyond essentialist identities. Themes of history, humanness and identity in their work, although engaged differently, are corroborations of postcolonial desires to oppose and subvert that which they consider problematic, at the same time invent something novel, new subjectivities. Their quests are pursuits for change through explorations of postcolonial imagination.

## FIGURES



Figure 1: Johannes Phokela, *Roman Charity*, 2002.  
Oil on canvas, 25 x 28 inches.



Figure 2: Johannes Phokela, *Candle Bathing*, 1998.  
Oil on canvas, 40 x 48 inches.



Figure 3: Johannes Phokela, *Land of Cockaigne*, 2000.  
Oil on canvas, 48 x 59 inches.



Figure 4: Zwelethu Mthethwa, *Interior Portraits: Pregnant Woman*, 2000.  
Color print, 25 x 34 inches.



Figure 5: Zwelethu Mthethwa, *Interior Portraits: Pregnant Woman*, 2000.  
Color print, 25 x 34 inches.



Figure 6: Zwelethu Mthethwa, *Interior Portraits: Mother and Child*, 2000.  
Color print, 25 x 34 inches.



Figure 7: Zwelethu Mthethwa, *Interior Portraits: Mother and Child*, 2000.  
Color print, 25 x 34 inches.



Figure 8: Zwelethu Mthethwa, *Interior Portraits: Untitled*, 2000.  
Chromogenic print, 70 x 95 inches.



Figure 9: Zwelethu Mthethwa, *The Brave Ones*, 2010.  
Digital c-print, 49 x 66 inches.



Figure 10: Zwelethu Mthethwa, *The Brave Ones*, 2010.  
Digital c-print, 49 x 66 inches.



Figure 11: Zwelethu Mthethwa, *The Brave Ones*, 2010.  
Digital c-print, 49 x 66 inches.



Figure 12: Zwelethu Mthethwa, *Common Ground*, 2008.  
Chromogenic print, 59 x 76 inches.



Figure 13: Zwelethu Mthethwa, *Common Ground*, 2008.  
Chromogenic print, 59 x 76 inches.



Figure 14: Zwelethu Mthethwa, *Common Ground*, 2008.  
Chromogenic print, 59 x 76 inches.



Figure 15: Zwelethu Mthethwa, *Quartz Miners*, 2008.  
Chromogenic print, 32 x 41 inches.



Figure 16: Zwelethu Mthethwa, *Coal Miners*, 2008.  
Digital c-print, 59 x 76 inches.



Figure 17: Zwelethu Mthethwa, *Coal Miners*, 2008.  
Chromogenic print, 59 x 79 inches.



Figure 18: Zwelethu Mthethwa, *Contemporary Gladiators*, 2008.  
Chromogenic print, 59 x 76 inches.



Figure 19: Zwelethu Mthethwa, *Contemporary Gladiators*, 2008.  
Digital c-print 32 x 41 inches.



Figure 20: Zwelethu Mthethwa, *Sugar Cane*, 2006.  
Digital c-print, 25 x 34 inches.



Figure 21: Zwelethu Mthethwa, *Line of Negotiation: Sugar Cane*, 2006.  
Digital c-print, 33 x 42 inches.



Figure 22: Peet Pienaar, *I Want To Tell You Something*, 2000. Video still.



Figure 23: Beezy Bailey, *The Xhosa Initiate*, 1999.  
Louis Botha statue dressed in Xhosa initiate's clothing.



Figure 24: Zwelethu Mthethwa and Beezy Bailey, *Ticket To The Other Side*, 2003.  
Color print, 32 x 41 inches.



Figure 25: Zwelethu Mthethwa and Beezy Bailey, *Ticket To The Other Side*, 2003.  
Color print, 32 x 41 inches.



Figure 26: Zwelethu Mthethwa and Beezy Bailey, *Ticket To The Other Side*, 2003. Color print, 32 x 41 inches.



Figure 27: Tracey Rose, *Ciao Bella: Venus Baartman*, 2001.  
Lambda photograph, 47 x47 inches.



Figure 28: Tracey Rose, *Ciao Bella: Regina Coeli*, 2001.  
Lambda photograph, 46 x47 inches.



Figure 29: Tracey Rose, *Ciao Bella: Bunny*, 2002.  
Lambda photograph, 46 x 47 inches.



Figure 30: Tracey Rose, *Ciao Bella: Lolita*, 2003.  
Lambda photograph, 47 x 47 inches.



Figure 31: Churchill Madikida, *Struggle of the Heart*, 2003. Video Stills.



Figure 32: Churchill Madikida, *Virus I*, 2005.  
Lambda print, 42 x 41 inches.

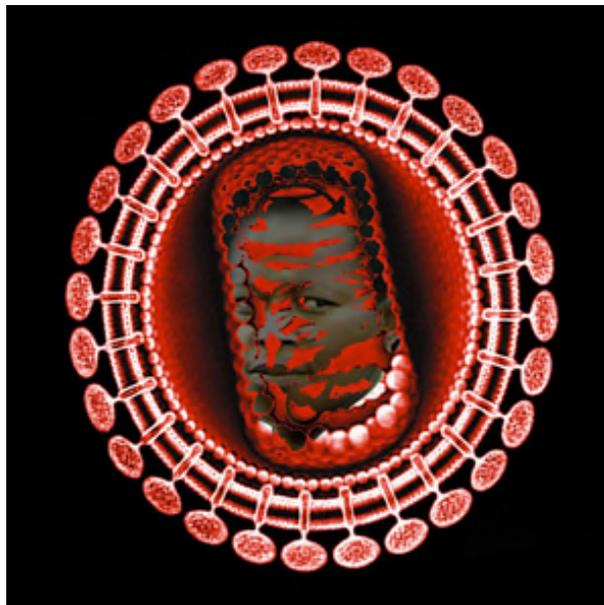


Figure 33: Churchill Madikida, *Virus V*, 2003.  
Lambda print, 42 x 41 inches.



Figure 34: Thando Mama, *(un)hea(r)d*, 2001. Video still.



Figure 35: Thando Mama, *We are afraid*, 2003. Video still.

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